

Union, Democrats use “fact-finding” ploy to block Los Angeles teachers’ strike

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Last August, angry Los Angeles teachers voted by more than 98 percent to strike the nation’s second-largest school district. The overwhelming vote followed nearly a year and a half of failed negotiations and more than a year in which the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) ordered members to work without a contract. The UTLA has still refused to set a strike date for 33,000 educators but instead triggered “fact finding.”

The UTLA kept teachers working without a contract throughout the spring’s walkouts in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky and Arizona, as well as during the recent strikes in Washington state—in line with the national policy of the American Federation of Teachers and National Education Association of isolating and betraying each struggle.

The UTLA is now preoccupied with preventing a walkout prior to the midterm elections. The union does not want any action that would expose the anti-working class character of the Democratic Party and undercut the turnout of voters for the Democrats. “The most important thing we teachers can do now is make sure that Gavin Newsom is elected governor of California,” UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl recently stated.

To that end, the union has now invoked “fact-finding,” a procedural runaround that will delay any possible walkout until after Thanksgiving at the earliest. The mechanism, established by Democratic Governor Jerry Brown in 2011, involves a state-appointed chairperson, supposedly a “neutral” arbiter, to assess the demands of both sides and submit a nonbinding report on the financial state of the district. Not only is this a thinly veiled delaying tactic to get past the elections and wear down public sector workers, it is designed to further water down the already pitifully inadequate demands of the union.

Teachers are livid over the defunding of public education and growth of the charter industry in Los Angeles, which have proceeded apace for years under a Democratic governor and Democratic-dominated State Assembly and Los Angeles municipal government.

“It seems clear talking to over 1,000 teachers in the district that the big issue for teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is class size, easily at the top of the list. It’s gotten out of hand,” said Elgin Scott, a teacher at Los Angeles’ Taper Avenue elementary school told the *Guardian*.

He explained that it is not uncommon for classes to have more than 30 or 40 students.

“The district says they’ll reduce class sizes, but a provision in the current contract gives them an out. All they have to do is claim financial hardship, show no proof and they make the class sizes what they want,” said Scott.

Los Angeles educators, like those around the country, are paying thousands of dollars out of their own pockets for essential classroom supplies including even paper and pencils. There is a lack of school resources including school nurses, counselors, psychologists and social workers in a district with very high levels of poverty and other social ills. LAUSD has one counselor for every 945 students and one nurse for every 1,224 students, according to most recent reports.

In the 1970s, California boasted among the top ten school systems in the nation. Today, with per pupil spending at about \$11,000 per student, it is ranked 46th out of 50. Considered one of the “big three” Democratic-controlled US states, this defunding of public education has been enacted with a vengeance throughout California. Moreover, the federal cuts to special education and Title I enacted by the Obama administration hit California especially hard. The state has the highest number of students, 2 million, living in poverty in the US, with 28.3 percent of Los Angeles’s children in that category.

During this period, the teachers’ unions suppressed any strikes and struggles. The last job action was a nine-day strike in 1989, almost 30 years ago. The role of the union has throughout been to double down on its support for Democrats. Last year, for example, the UTLA started a program known as PACE or Political Action Council of Educators. After years of artificially suppressing their wage demands, the union had the temerity to solicit donations from teachers for a special UTLA political fund, from \$8.33 per month for the “Bronze” package to \$45 per month for the “Diamond” package, to support Democrats.

Wages are a major issue for educators trying to live in one of the nation’s most expensive cities. The school district’s insulting final offer includes a 3 percent wage increase retroactive to 2017 with another 3 percent increase the following year “contingent upon the district’s financial

health.” Given the district’s current budget outlook, this would likely mean that that second 3 percent increase would never come to pass. For their part, the union is asking for a grossly inadequate 6.5 percent, barely above the offer.

Of course, the district, like virtually every municipality across the US, claims “there is no money” for public education, a storyline the “fact finder” will no doubt “find.” Nothing is further from the truth. The state, which if it were a country would be the sixth largest economy in the world, is home to 144 billionaires. The richest Angelino on the list, Elon Musk with a net worth of \$20 billion, could pay the school district’s yearly \$7.6 billion budget more than twice with billions left to spare.

Seeking to put pressure on teachers, Candi Clark, Chief Financial Officer of the Los Angeles County Office of Education, spoke at an emergency meeting of the LAUSD ten days prior to the strike vote. She demanded \$72 million in cuts this year and the same amount next year, threatening, “The fact is that LAUSD is not too big to fail, so it is up to all of us to resolve the district’s fiscal challenges.”

In a provocative apparent down payment on these cuts, the district announced the layoffs of more than 15 percent of district staff in early October, as part of a plan to eliminate \$43 million in administrative salaries. Those employees losing their jobs will be identified in January and be terminated in June. A similar number of administrative workers would lose their salaries the following year if the district gets its way. The district is being run by former investment banker Austin Beutner, who has stated that the schools will “go broke” if the district’s offer is rejected.

The county claims that the district will be on the verge of bankruptcy in two and a half years, while the union claims LAUSD has a current reserve of more than \$1.7 billion. Nonetheless, a significant decline in enrollment due to the growth of private charter schools has severely decreased the district’s annual revenues, to the tune of approximately \$600 million annually. Los Angeles has more charters than any other US school district. A portion of this decline is also due to the creation of pilot schools, which are charter schools entirely run by the UTLA itself.

Notably, most of the school privatization measures adopted throughout California have been spearheaded by Democrats. Gubernatorial candidate Newsom has received enormous amount of funding from some of the state’s billionaire and multimillionaire elite who run these private charter organizations. One of Newsom’s most prominent financial backers is Doris Fisher, co-founder of “the Gap” clothing stores and also the “Knowledge is Power Program” network of charter schools, a notorious for-profit chain. For its part, the union is not at all opposed to charters; it only seeks their “accountability” and an opportunity to gain new dues-paying members no matter how miserable their wages and conditions are.

Adding insult to injury, the union has made clear that teachers will not receive any money out of its strike fund should a work stoppage come to pass. A strike lasting longer than a month would also involve the cutting off of teachers’ health care benefits.

With the collective force of the capitalist state and the trade unions arrayed against them, Los Angeles teachers have no choice but to take the struggle into their own hands. No faith whatsoever should be placed in the UTLA, its highly paid leaders and its fake left apologists such as the International Socialist Organization or Labor Notes.

Instead, teachers should form rank-and-file committees, independent of the UTLA, and link together the struggles of all school workers—both union and nonunion. These committees should poll workers and outline real demands, including a 30 percent salary increase so that all school workers can live in the city in which they work without taking out payday loans or becoming Uber drivers. Not a single dollar more of state funding should be diverted from public schools into the billionaire-led charter school movement and tax cuts to Silicon Valley, Hollywood and other giant corporate interests.

These rank-and-file committees should bring together parents and residents and fight for free, high-quality public education for all, fully funded classrooms with small class sizes, the expansion of the arts and the hiring of a full complement of counselors, librarians and nurses for every school. The fight for these essential rights requires a break with the two capitalist parties of big business and their corrupt lackeys in the phony pro-capitalist unions.

The right to high-quality education for all children, black, white, native-born and immigrant—can only be won through a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate and financial elite and the socialist reorganization of society to meet human needs.

The mobilization of such a powerful contingent of teachers would rapidly gain the support of large sections of the working class, including Amazon and UPS workers, nurses, truckers, and many more throughout the US and the world.



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