

Mass demonstration by Los Angeles teachers

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17 December 2018

Tens of thousands of Los Angeles teachers and their supporters converged in a rally and march in downtown Los Angeles Saturday to demand better pay, smaller class sizes and increased funding for the 640,000 students in the second-largest school district in the United States. The demonstration, which involved up to 50,000 protesters, was the latest indication of the resumption of resistance by educators across the US who have been involved in the largest strike wave by teachers in decades.

More than 33,000 teachers and health and human service professionals in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) have been working without a new contract since their old agreement expired in June 2017. Like state governments and school districts across the country, LAUSD officials claim there is no money to meet the teachers' demands and have offered an insulting three percent annual pay increase to teachers who live in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in America.

Teachers voted by 98 percent in August to authorize the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union to call the first city wide strike since 1989. The UTLA has defied the strike mandate and tied up educators in months of state-supervised mediation and fact-finding. Anger among rank-and-file teachers is boiling over, however, and the UTLA has been forced to say it would call a strike sometime next month if no settlement is reached.

In addition to the teachers themselves, thousands of students, parents, retirees and other workers demonstrated at Saturday's March for Public Education. Many recognized the historically significant character of their fight, attending with children, friends and parents as well.

While several of the teachers' walkouts earlier this year, including West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona, occurred in states led by Republican governors and state legislatures, the entire political establishment in Los Angeles and California is run by the Democratic Party. Like their Republican counterparts, state and local Democrats in California have starved the public schools of funding, diverted public resources to for-profit charter schools and used standardized testing and other punitive teacher evaluation schemes to scapegoat educators for the inevitable educational problems produced by defunding education and the growth of poverty and other social ills.

Supporters of the *World Socialist Web Site* distributed a

statement by the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*, titled, "Los Angeles teachers and the fight for social equality." Teachers spoke to the WSWs about years of budget cutting and underfunding, which have left Los Angeles schools in a deplorable state. Classrooms are regularly overcrowded with 40 to 50 students often assigned to a single teacher. Due to shortages of school nurses, medical personnel must rotate among five or more schools, leaving others uncovered for several days at a time. Music and art programs are largely nonexistent in all but the most well-off schools.

"The issues facing LA teachers are part of a national calamity that has been taking place over the last 30 to 40 years," Brett, a teacher with 13 years who currently teaches 6th grade at Orchard Arts and Media Academy in the City of Bell, told the WSWs. "There has been a lack of public investment all across the board that really starts with education. The lack of respect for public education is glaring and tragic because it results in people suffering across this nation. We need to do more to support everyone because the inequality in our country, the gap between the rich and the poor, continues to widen."

"In the LAUSD only 40 percent of our students are obtaining passing test scores. This is because there is a lack of investment. The result is class sizes through the roof, and teachers who are getting demoralized. The corporate agenda is causing massive fissures throughout the country and it's not healthy for the well-being of our society," Brett concluded.

Tamara, a kindergarten teacher with more than 20 years' experience, described the impact of the social crisis on her students. "The demographics in LA have changed since I started working here. Today, students have far greater needs, mostly associated with increased trauma. At my site we only have a school nurse one to two times per week. My students are dealing with poverty, a scarcity of food and grocery stores near where they live.

"When they arrive at school, my job is far more than providing an education, but first and foremost taking care of their social and emotional needs. The meals they have at school are their only substantive meals throughout the day."

Tamara went on to speak about the general crisis of public education. "On a very basic level, there's more of an interest in money than in humans," she said. "When I think of [LAUSD superintendent and former investment banker Austin] Beutner, I become enraged. He's lived a life of privilege. How is

someone who has never spent a day of his life in the classroom a superintendent? It all comes down to commerce and business, which are placed above our students' needs."

Rudy, a physical education and health teacher, spoke about the global struggle by educators and workers as a whole against austerity and social inequality. "The struggle is not only nationwide. It's worldwide. They're trying to privatize everything. That's why when things go wrong, they blame us. Even though they created the problems in the first place."

Asked what he thought about the "Yellow Vest" protests in France and throughout Europe, Rudy said, "Workers in France are in the same situation as American workers. The rich always try to control the funding and divert it to themselves."

Several teachers at the Los Angeles demonstration wore yellow vests in solidarity with their class brothers and sisters in France.

The school district, which is made up of Los Angeles and 31 surrounding cities and communities, has the highest number of homeless students of any district in the state. More than 17,250 LAUSD students were recorded as homeless at the start of the prior 2017-2018 academic year. That figure itself was a fifty percent increase over the previous year and was the highest number of homeless students in district history.

Students and their families in the district have also been the victims of the crackdown and deportation of immigrants by Trump and the Obama administration before him. California has the highest number of undocumented immigrants in the US and Los Angeles teachers often find themselves instructing scores of students afraid that their parents and relatives could be arrested and deported at a moment's notice. LAUSD, like school districts around the country and in the Southwestern US in particular, has noted marked increases in absenteeism, particularly after the Trump administration began its crackdown on immigrants in 2017.

While teachers and their supporters expressed determination to fight, the union speakers at Saturday's rally did everything to promote illusions in the Democratic Party. UTLA president Alex Caputo-Pearl told teachers that "hope was in the air" not due to a mass movement from below but from "a historic school funding initiative on the ballot in 2020." The Democratic Party-backed initiative is similar to measures in other states that would modestly increase corporate taxes, which were either ruled off the ballot based on bogus technicalities, or, if passed, did little to reverse decades of defunding public education.

Caputo-Pearl also celebrated the recent elections of Democrats Gavin Newsom for governor and Tony Thurmond for state superintendent as advances for teachers. The UTLA's promotion of the Democrats exposes the antiworker character of the unions. California Democrats have used the governor's office as well as regular supermajorities in the state legislature to impose savage austerity and cuts to public education. With a public-school system that was once one of the best funded in

the country, the state now ranks 43rd in the nation in per-pupil spending. This is despite the fact that the state is home to 141 billionaires who are centered in Silicon Valley and Hollywood.

American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten also spoke at the rally, saying the national "union would stand with LA teachers, just like we stood with teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona." Teachers should take such statements as a warning. Weingarten (salary \$513,000) and her counterpart at the National Education Association, President Lilia Eskelsen Garcia (salary \$414,000), are both part of the top one percent of income earners in the US and thoroughly hostile to a mass movement of teachers and other educators against endless austerity measures, which have fueled the stock market bubble. The AFT and NEA have spent the last year trying to prevent the outbreak of strikes and where they have broken out to sabotage and shut them down as quickly as possible before they could coalesce into a national strike of educators.

The mass protests in Los Angeles, following on the footsteps of wildcat sickouts by Oakland teachers, demonstrated the growing determination of educators to fight. This is part of a broader movement of the working class throughout the US and internationally. To take this fight forward, however, teachers have to form rank-and-file committees in every school and community, independent of the unions, to link up the struggle of educators with far broader sections of the working class. The fight for living wages and full funding for public education is only possible if the working class conducts a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth and power of the corporate and financial oligarchy and both capitalist parties, the Democrats and Republicans.



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