

Strike looms in Los Angeles as struggles by educators set to continue in 2019

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The new year is set to begin with teachers around the world determined to reverse decades of attacks on jobs, working conditions and the right to high quality public education. Fearing the continued escalation of the teacher rebellion of 2018, the *US News and World Report* and other corporate media outlets are already warning that “2019 could bring more of the same.”

All indications point to an even more explosive series of struggles. Following a powerful rally of 50,000 educators, students and parents in Los Angeles on December 15, more than 30,000 teachers are scheduled to walk out January 10. A walkout in the second largest school district in the US would be the first since 1989.

“The issues facing LA teachers are part of a national calamity that has been taking place over the last 30 to 40 years,” said one teacher, Brett, to the *World Socialist Web Site*. True, indeed! The worldwide social counterrevolution against the working class, which was escalated after the 2008 global financial crash, has already propelled millions into struggle against social inequality.

- Thousands of French teachers and students have, since November, joined tens of thousands of workers and taken to the streets in yellow vests against the “President for the Rich” Emmanuel Macron. They have opposed national cuts in education and the rise of contract labor, calling for increased wages among educators, among many other social necessities.

- As the year begins, 45,000 para teachers in the east Indian state of Jharkhand are already on strike over mass layoffs and low pay in rural India. On December 24, they began a hunger strike in front of the homes of legislators to strengthen their fight for increased wages.

- On January 2, the Kenyan National Union of Teachers will strike. At issue has been Kenyan President Uhuru Kenyatta’s policy of “delocalization,” which has already forcibly transferred thousands of teachers from their home districts. The measures are linked to overall attacks on public education by Uhuru (worth over \$500 million and one of Africa’s wealthiest individuals) packaged under the

ubiquitous international appellations of “professional development” and “accountability.”

- Iranian teachers have held sit-ins in more than a dozen cities, in protests beginning in the summer and continuing through November. They described “painfully low wages” and the degradation of quality public education. Recent teacher strikes and struggles have gripped New Zealand, Pakistan, Cyprus, Sierra Leone, Tasmania and more.

In the US, the struggle in California takes the center stage, continuing the teacher rebellion sparked by the determined initiative of rank-and-file teachers in the coal fields of West Virginia earlier this year. That upsurge, which the unions sought to prevent and then betray, led to mass walkouts of educators in Oklahoma, Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky and the state of Washington.

Though these strikes were fought over identical issues, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) has kept teachers on the job even though their contract expired in June 2017. Despite—or in fact because of—a massive 98 percent strike authorization last August, the union continued to bottle up action with months of state-supervised mediation and fact-finding.

“In the LAUSD,” Brett continued, “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.

Poverty-level wages, soaring class sizes, lack of special education support, and lack of nurses and school counselors characterize California schools. The state now ranks 41st in conditions that help children succeed and earns a D+ in academic performance. In the 1950s, the state system was rated the *best* in the US.

The defunding of education in California has been a bipartisan effort prosecuted primarily by the Democratic Party. Except for one year, the state assembly has been in Democratic hands since 1970 with the state senate under

continuous Democratic control. The Democrats currently have a supermajority in both houses. Moreover, governors and state superintendents of public instruction have also been, in their majority, Democratic throughout this period. This mirrors the policy of the Democrats nationally with the Obama administration and his Race to the Top responsible for the greatest inroads on federal funding to education.

In league with the Democrats, the unions—the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and the UTLA—have subordinated teachers to brutal budget-cutting, damping down opposition and refusing to call strikes. As it was nationally, it was true in California. In the last decade, there have been fewer than nine strikes in the entire state as district after district has imposed concession contracts and increasingly starved schools of resources.

The plight of Los Angeles teachers, therefore, is mirrored throughout the state. After similarly working without a new contract for over a year, 2,300 Oakland teachers are threatening to walk out in January. Indicative of the boiling anger of educators in that district, at least five high schools wildcatted on December 10 calling a “sickout.” The union is asking for a meager 12 percent increase over three years and class-size reductions, whereas the state and school district want as much as \$60 million in new cuts.

David Byrd, an Oakland High School teacher: “The OEA is taking out more than \$100 a month from our paychecks and then they’re throwing it at politicians like the new governor Gavin Newsom. This state is what it looks like to have Democrats running everything and we have more homeless people than anywhere. This school district is exactly how the Democrats have made it.”

In another California district, teachers in Rocklin are working without a contract for 2018–19 and voted overwhelmingly in October to authorize a strike. They are demanding a 12.5 percent pay increase, smaller class sizes and increased preparation time for elementary school teachers.

Teachers throughout the state are increasingly raising the need for broadening their struggle and conducting a statewide walkout. The East Bay Coalition for Public Education, spanning up to 11 districts, will hold a mass rally on January 12 in Oakland.

Similar struggles continue to brew nationally. On January 28, educators across the state of Virginia will rally at the state capitol in Richmond to demand increased funding for salary increases and building/infrastructure needs. Per pupil spending by the state has declined 9.1 percent since 2008, leaving the state 40th in the nation in terms of state funding. Virginia is home to about 90,000 teachers.

None of these struggles can be successful in isolation. The

teachers’ strikes of 2018 demonstrated that the unions will do nothing but consciously sabotage these struggles. While the strikes were initiated by teachers themselves and, in the case of West Virginia, involved the direct defiance of back-to-work orders by the AFT and NEA, educators did not have independent organizations that could continue the struggle and fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class against both big business parties. This enabled the unions to reassert their control, shut down the strikes and impose deals that were thoroughly acceptable to big business, including funding meager pay raises through regressive taxes or cuts in other social programs.

The unions did everything in their power to prevent the statewide walkouts from going national and diverted teacher militancy into support of impotent ballot proposals like “Invest in Ed” and the Democratic Party in the midterm elections.

Run by highly paid Democratic Party operatives like Randi Weingarten (annual salary \$514,000), the unions are preoccupied with preserving their own corrupt relations with the government and big business by colluding in the implementation of corporate-backed “school reform” and expanding the unions’ franchise and dues collection revenue from the ever-growing charter school market.

As new and more audacious struggles begin to erupt around the world, teachers must reject the pro-capitalist and nationalist program of the unions and take matters into their own hands. The struggles of educators must be linked up together through the forming of independent rank-and-file committees which answer to teachers themselves. Teachers must expand their struggles both geographically and politically, actively joining with workers internationally to fight for a socialist alternative to capitalism, which is the root cause of social inequality, war and dictatorship. Only through a frontal assault on the entrenched wealth of the corporate and financial oligarchy will it be possible to free up trillions of dollars to secure the social right of high-quality schooling worldwide. From California to Tasmania, teachers around the world must champion this fight.



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