

Los Angeles school officials hire strikebreakers as teachers prepare for walkout

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With a walkout by 33,000 teachers in Los Angeles, California set to begin on January 10, school officials are hiring hundreds of strikebreakers and have threatened to keep schools open during the strike. “We have hired substitutes,” Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Superintendent Austin Beutner declared Monday. “We have made plans as to alternate curriculums for days that there is a strike, but our goal is to make sure schools are safe and open, so kids continue to learn.”

The hiring of an estimated 400 substitutes is largely symbolic and will not keep the 600,000-student school district operating in the event of a walkout. Nevertheless, Beutner and other district officials, acting on behalf of powerful corporate and political interests in the city and the state, are throwing down the gauntlet to teachers. The political establishment, dominated by the Democratic Party, has no intention of acceding to the teachers’ demands for increased pay and school funding, let alone an end to the privatization of public education.

Beutner’s professed concerns for the well-being of school children is a fraud. Beutner is not an educator, but a highly-skilled Wall Street operator. In 1993, Beutner was tapped by the Clinton administration to manage a special USAID fund involved in the pillaging of state-owned assets in the former Soviet Union, enriching himself and other US investors while leaving behind a social catastrophe. He has been tasked with the same job in Los Angeles: the dismantling of the public schools and handing over its assets to charter school operators and other for-profit businesses.

The Los Angeles Unified District already has the highest number of charter schools (244) and students enrolled in these privately run, but publicly funded schools in the nation. The charter operations siphon off an estimated \$600 million from public schools every year. With Beutner’s “Reimagining LAUSD” plan, which will break up the district into 32 “networks,” teachers anticipate that school authorities will escalate their plans to use standardized

testing to close so-called “failing schools” and vastly expand the privatization of the nation’s second largest district.

At the same time, the insulting 3 percent wage increases offered by the school district would be contingent on slashing the health care benefits of future teachers.

A strike by LA teachers will immediately pit teachers against the Democratic Party, which has pursued corporate-driven “school reform” just as ruthlessly as the Republicans. That is why the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), which is allied with local, state and national Democratic Party, has kept teachers on the job for 18 months without a new contract and is desperately trying to reach a last-minute deal to prevent a strike. The union announced that negotiations will resume Monday.

Teachers must be warned: if the UTLA is unable to stop a walkout, it plans to follow the same pattern set by the Chicago Teachers Union in 2012 and the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT) unions during the statewide strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states earlier this year. In each case, the unions isolated embattled teachers and blocked a broader mobilization of the working class before signing sellout deals that ignored teachers’ demands.

In the case of the 2012 Chicago Teachers Strike, the betrayal of the nine-day strike paved the way for the shutdown of scores of public schools and a vast expansion of charters. In exchange for the union’s collaboration, Mayor Rahm Emanuel gave the CTU access to unionize charter teachers so it could collect union dues from these super-exploited educators. The CTU’s betrayal of the strike, moreover, emboldened the Obama administration and school officials around the country to accelerate their attacks on teachers and public education.

To prevent a repeat of such a disaster, Los Angeles teachers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UTLA by electing rank-and-file action committees, democratically controlled by educators

themselves, in every school and community. These committees should formulate their own demands, including a 30 percent pay raise, the hiring of thousands of nurses, aides and special ed teachers, the ending of punitive testing schemes and the reconversion of all charter schools into public schools. Trusted teachers should be elected to oversee all negotiations and contract votes and provide full reports to the membership.

Los Angeles teachers cannot fight this battle alone. Rank-and-file action committees should reach out to every section of the working class to organize mass picketing to shut the schools, including the city's charter schools, and spread the strike to educators throughout California.

Like their counterparts in Los Angeles, 2,300 teachers in Oakland have been working without a contract for more than a year and are pressing for strike action to oppose more than \$30 million in budget cuts, oversized classrooms and inadequate pay. Teachers organized wildcat "sickouts" last month in defiance of the union.

Teachers in Rocklin, near the state capital of Sacramento, voted in October for strike action but have been forced by their union to work without a new contract. Similarly, teachers in the city of Fremont in the Bay area are angry and ready to strike after the district offered a wage increase of less than one percent.

Teachers in the state of Virginia are also planning a statewide walkout later this month.

As the teacher strikes earlier this year have shown, there is enormous popular support for a real struggle to defend the right to high quality public education. Rank-and-file action committees should reach out to fellow teachers, oil and dock workers, Amazon workers, retail and service workers, and millions of immigrant workers in Los Angeles and around the state to prepare a general strike to defend the social rights of the working class.

The struggle to defend a living wage and public education is above all a political struggle. On the one side are the teachers and all workers, whose collective labor produces all of society's wealth. On the other, are the handful of billionaires and multi-millionaires who are looting society's resources and control both big business parties, Democrats as well as Republicans.

There is more than enough money to fund public education. California is home to more than 150 billionaires. A genuine progressive tax on the fortunes of the Silicon Valley, Hollywood and Big Energy moguls would net sufficient resources to substantially improve teachers' pay and benefits and school funding.

The unions have no intention of uniting teachers in a common fight against the domination of society by the super-rich. The annual salaries of AFT President Randi

Weingarten (\$514,000), NEA President Lily Eskelsen García (\$317,826), California Teachers Association Executive Director Joe Nunez (\$460,000) and CTA President Eric Heins (\$317,000) place them in the top one or two percent of income earners. This puts them on the other side of the class divide and the last thing they want is a radical redistribution of wealth that would affect their stock portfolios.

Far from leading a fight, the unions are promoting illusions in newly elected Governor Gavin Newsom, the political product of the moneyed San Francisco elite, including the Getty oil fortune. In 2010, the UTLA and statewide unions claimed public education would be saved through the election of Jerry Brown, who proceeded to carry out the most ruthless attacks on public education in a generation. Newsom will continue the same.

The struggle in Los Angeles is not just a local issue. It has national and international implications. A decade after the global financial crash, which was followed by the greatest transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top in history, workers in the United States and around the world are demanding social equality. Many teachers at the march of 50,000 educators and their supporters on December 15 were wearing yellow vests in solidarity with the class brothers and sisters in France who are fighting the "president of the rich" Emmanuel Macron. Teacher struggles are spreading in Kenya, India, Iran, New Zealand and Australia.

The *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter* will provide every assistance to teachers who want to build rank-and-file committees and link up their struggle with other educators throughout California, the US and internationally. We urge teachers to contact us today to take forward this fight.



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