

On eve of strike, union drops LA teachers' demands against school privatization

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Just three days before more than 33,000 Los Angeles educators are set to walk out in the latest battle by US teachers against the assault on public education, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union has announced that it is dropping six major demands for which teachers have been fighting, including a halt to the expansion of charter schools and an end to unlimited standardized testing and other corporate-backed schemes to privatize the public schools.

UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl made the announcement during a Monday afternoon press conference after meeting with officials from the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). He also said the union would be willing to delay the calling of a strike if a court ruled in favor of the district, which filed a lawsuit falsely claiming that the district did not have sufficient notice of a strike. After going to court Tuesday, the UTLA will resume negotiations Wednesday in an effort to avert a strike, Caputo-Pearl said.

Seeking to justify the union's capitulation, the UTLA president said the union did not want to be tied up in an expensive court battle over what issues could be legally negotiated within the confines of state labor law. "We have withdrawn six proposals because we don't want to fall prey to legal maneuvers by (District Superintendent) Austin Beutner, who has hired a bunch of high-priced lawyers to tell us we can't bargain these. So we've withdrawn them."

Stating that "we are limited on what we can legally bargain," Caputo-Pearl said the union had dropped issues "like unregulated growth of charters, like the \$600 million which is drained out of public district schools, like basic transparency. We just had the head of Celerity Charter thrown in jail for giving himself a half-a-million-dollar salary, and equity. We know that

many charter schools don't serve special education students to the same degree."

"All those issues," he admitted, "are essential to address for the future of public education in Los Angeles, but we will have to deal with them outside of bargaining."

The UTLA president said he hoped the Democratic Party-run Public Employee Relations Board would allow the union to extend bargaining to these issues. He added, "We are very happy that (newly elected state School Superintendent) Tony Thurmond said it is time to have a pause on charter growth and (Governor) Gavin Newsom has made similar statements."

Teachers must not allow themselves to be bound by what corporate-controlled courts and politicians like Newsom consider "legal" bargaining issues. The working class never won any basic right, including the right to public education, through legal maneuvers. Workers' social gains were won only through mass struggle, often in violation of reactionary laws. It should be noted that all of the strikes waged by teachers last year—in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states—were in violation of antistrike laws.

A warning to LA teachers must be made: the dropping of the most critical demands relating to the drive to destroy public education is a signal that the UTLA is preparing to betray them. This surrender takes place in the face of the arrogant and provocative actions of LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner, who has the backing of the Democratic Party establishment that controls every level of government in Los Angeles and California.

Beutner refused to budge an inch in Monday's negotiations and instead took the union's capitulation as a green light to double down. He is demanding that the district be allowed to increase class sizes to as high

as 39 in elementary schools and 46 at the secondary level, and even higher if other criteria are met. Beutner also steadfastly opposed teacher demands to hire new librarians, nurses and other personnel to address overcrowded classrooms and the chronic shortage of support staff. Instead, the district proposed that only one new staff member be added to each school, and rather than the additions come through the hiring of new personnel, they could include existing teachers and staff reshuffled from other schools.

In terms of wages, the district is still insisting that its proposal for a paltry wage increase of 3 percent in each of the next two years be contingent on cuts to health care benefits for new teachers.

Backed by powerful corporate interests, including billionaire Eli Broad, who are pushing for school privatization across the US, Beutner, a multimillionaire former investment banker, appears hell-bent on provoking a strike. Having taken the measure of the UTLA and the national teachers' unions, he is counting on their capitulation to deal a decisive blow to Los Angeles teachers. Such a defeat, in the nation's second largest school district, would set a precedent to accelerate the drive to privatize public schools around the country.

District officials have prepared for a strike for months. While initial reports said the district was hiring 400 substitutes as strikebreakers, the local NBC news outlet reported that the district has contracts with agencies including Charter Substitute Teacher Network and Maxim Healthcare Service for more than 4,400 substitutes. New software is also being employed to coordinate the strikebreaking effort, the *Wall Street Journal* reported Monday.

On Monday, teachers were told to send home to parents a letter written by Beutner outlining the school district's positions. Teachers had previously been warned to have no discussions with parents about the ongoing dispute. Beutner also sent a letter warning parents of disciplinary measures their children would face if they missed school.

In the face of these provocations, the UTLA has made it clear that it will not appeal to teachers in the existing 244 charter schools, including 1,000 educators in the union, to join the strike. Support staff such as school bus drivers, cafeteria aides and others are being instructed to continue working by the unions, including

the Service Employees International Union.

If teachers are going to begin to roll back the bipartisan assault on public education, they will have to mount an enormous fight and extend the strike to other districts, including Oakland. Teachers should reject all attempts by the unions to divert their struggle into futile maneuvers with the Democrats.

This underscores the urgency of organizing rank-and-file committees in every school and community to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UTLA, the National Education Association (NEA), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the other unions. The powerful strikes by teachers in West Virginia and other states in 2018 were initiated not by the unions, but by rank-and-file teachers in opposition to the unions. Tragically, however, educators did not have independent organizations prepared to extend the strike, and the NEA and AFT were able to reassert control and impose sellouts.

The national conspiracy against public education is now centered on Los Angeles. At the same time, there is enormous public support for a fight back to defend the right to high quality education. To take this forward, Los Angeles teachers must reach out to educators across the state, the US and internationally, and mobilize the broadest sections of the working class in a counteroffensive against both big-business parties and the corporate and financial oligarchs they defend.



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