

“All the teachers across the nation should come out”

California, Michigan educators call for joint action with LA teachers

Our reporters
10 January 2019

School workers, teachers and students throughout the US support the demands of Los Angeles teachers for decent pay and benefits and for a massive infusion of funding to adequately educate children. Several teachers and support staff members spoke to the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*.

A secondary social science teacher, Anne, said, “I am a teacher in Sweetwater Unified High School District, the second largest secondary school district in California next to Los Angeles Unified School District [LAUSD]. We face similar conditions to those of the LA Unified teachers and, in fact, are in the midst of a massive budget deficit and mismanagement already significantly affecting the lives of workers and students.

“This is also a scenario that is nothing new to the public schools across the country. As teachers, we are a workforce that experiences on a daily basis the immense economic crisis in this country—the effects of poverty, homelessness, violence, hunger in the lives of many of our students and the difficulty of making ends meet on our own.

“The LA teachers’ strike represents the truly significant and continued frustration of workers and students within public schools. We cannot look to help from above, as both the Republican and Democratic parties, with the tireless aid of the unions, have shown for decades that their policies on education will continue to betray working class people and worsen the conditions within public schools. I fully support teachers striking in LA and encourage all workers within public education and beyond to join in this fight.”

Maria has been a food service worker in the Santa Ana Unified School District for 19 years. “I definitely support the Los Angeles teachers. We’re going through the same things here. The district doesn’t give us any more benefits. Our pay doesn’t meet our living costs.

“Food service workers are the lowest-paid workers in the district. With cost of living so high, a 1 percent raise, a 2 percent raise, even 5 percent raise is nothing. I’m going to the credit union today to apply for a loan because I can’t afford my bills. We are doing more work with less staffing. It’s the same here as in LA.

“The district is putting more and more pressure on

everybody. We work 6-1/2 hours a day, nine months a year. Recently, we were reclassified as salaried, and the Service Employees International Union [SEIU] didn’t even tell us. It was done without us knowing. That doesn’t mean we get more money. In fact, we’re getting less. When we clean up after the kids, we still have to finish even though it might take longer. And there’s no extra pay because we’re ‘salaried.’

“In my nearly 20 years, I’ve had three injuries, mostly from negligence on the district’s part. The first one was when the pallets were stacked so high that one of them fell on my shoulder. I had to have surgery. My second injury was in my ankle. I suspect the custodians were in a rush that day and trying to do their job, but one of them forgot to screw in a drain screen on the floor. So, I fell into the drain.

“I told my union president, ‘How would you like it if we were to go on strike and I’d tell the media we were on strike not because we can’t do our jobs safely but because you’re not doing *your* job?’ He just smirked. I told him, ‘How dare you smirk at us!’ So many of us have injuries. You wouldn’t think that people who work serving food to kids would get hurt. But the way they try to speed us up, it’s like we’re on a conveyor line.

“If you call your union rep to defend you, you’ll see them having coffee or going out to eat with management. We need people who are going to work for you, not against you. We’ve seen it so many times, and it’s a shame.

“I’m a member of SEIU. I used to pay dues of \$30 a month. Then it went up to \$40. Why do we pay for a union? It’s supposed to work for us, but they don’t.

“I think we should all go on strike together with the LA teachers. We’re all facing the same thing.”

Daniel teaches in San Diego and wanted to speak directly to educators in Los Angeles, “I am right next door to you guys, and I support your strike 100 percent. I have been teaching history for five years. Just like your students, we have many homeless students, others who live in poverty and come from migrant families. We face the same problems.

“Our unions down here have played a supporting role in our district’s corrupt actions. Our district leaders have been found

so corrupt, the state might take over this year. And this whole time our union was happily backing them, feigning ignorance. Our local union president is even [self-described as] ‘good friends’ with the district board. We have had teachers from the San Ysidro district, San Diego Unified District and even the elementary school district fight their battles alone, despite that some of these schools are right next to each other. Our unions said nothing about a joint strike to support any of them.

“Every month, I receive the NEA [National Education Association] monthly magazine with articles about Democratic candidates, about equity and about inclusiveness. Nothing is mentioned about the efforts of both Democrats and Republicans to privatize public education. The union also doesn’t say anything about getting rid of ICE in our neighborhoods, or building a struggle against the military recruitment of our students.

“I’d welcome a delegation of Los Angeles teachers to come to our schools and build a joint struggle. Many of our teachers speak Spanish as well, it’s within our reach to even contact teachers of the whole US, Mexico and Latin America to help meet our demands.”

“Marjorie,” a veteran of the 2015-2016 Detroit teacher wildcat strikes in the form of “sickouts,” also spoke to the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*. She asked that a pseudonym be used to protect her job.

“I know Detroit teachers and workers will welcome a strike in Los Angeles. I have been following its development. LA teachers are tired too. The same thing that happened to us is happening to them. The lesson of the Detroit sickouts is that if you stick together, you can get things done, but we can’t depend on the unions. Teachers know that, they say it all the time now.”

The Detroit sickouts were an escalating series of independent job actions coordinated by teachers on social media in defiance of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT). The actions gripped the Detroit Public Schools for more than eight months between 2015 and 2016 and were a precursor of the 2018 teacher rebellion. The sickouts were called to oppose crumbling and unsafe school buildings as well as years of takeaway contracts imposed by the union. In the end, the DFT, with the aid of American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten and staff, forced through a rotten deal. The 175-year-old district was shut down, rescuing Wall Street bondholders at the expense of the schools, teachers and students, and replaced by a new Detroit Public Schools Community District in 2016.

“LA teachers need to figure out a way to fight for themselves,” Marjorie said. “The lesson of the strikes throughout 2018 is that we have to join with other workers. We have to create our own political movement. We can’t wait for the unions or the Democrats or Republicans to save us.”

Noting that Detroit is controlled by Democrats like Los Angeles, Marjorie said, “There is no difference between

Democrats and Republicans. In Michigan, the emergency managers [placed in charge of the Detroit Public Schools for decades, imposing terrible inroads on teachers’ living standards and deliberately de-funding the schools] were begun under [Democratic Governor] Jennifer Granholm.”

Asked what should be done, Marjorie stated, “All teachers need to come out together across the nation. Charter school teachers, too. They’re not our enemies, they are exploited workers too. We need to all be out in force. The people in this country don’t want privatization; they don’t want Bill Gates running our educational system. Who is he? These oligarchs already control just about everything, education is one of the last things left.”

Turning to the situation in Detroit, the veteran educator commented that things today are worse than they were before the sickouts. “Things are horrible. They are throwing more and more tests in. We’re not told, they just appear. In October, one was announced and there was a pretest. Then, during the holiday, we get a robocall that today, when we return to school, there will be a post-test. We are urged to get our kids to take it because the test will count for 40 to 50 percent of our evaluations! This is constant.

“We literally have no time to teach because of all the testing. The union is not doing anything. The superintendent lies. Meanwhile, we have 60 percent of our kids who are ‘resource students’ [special needs] and we are told we must get a 50 percent improvement. They are forced to take the ACT, the SAT and we are responsible for their scores. It’s unfair to the kids, and it’s unfair to us teachers.”

Asked about the privatization scheme being advanced in Los Angeles under the nomenclature “portfolio schools,” Marjorie said, “Yes, we’re now getting A-F grading in Detroit. We are lumped in with the charter schools. The kids are asked to do surveys on us, to grade us, for this purpose. Privatization is a nationwide problem. The capitalists want to profit from education, and they don’t care who they demonize in order to do it. Capitalism has outlived itself.”



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