

Los Angeles teachers angered as union delays strike again

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Los Angeles teachers, who were set to strike on Thursday, reacted with anger and frustration over the decision by the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) to postpone their strike despite the intransigence of school district officials and nearly 20 months of fruitless negotiations, state mediation and fact-finding.

UTLA officials announced the union was delaying any strike at least until Monday, January 14, and that they would resume talks with Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Superintendent Austin Beutner on Friday in an effort to work out a deal to avert a walkout altogether. This follows the climbdown on Monday, when UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl announced that the union was dropping six major demands related to teachers' opposition to charter schools, standardized testing and other schemes used to privatize education.

Maria, an adult ESL teacher, told the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter*, "I heard the union is giving up on the charter school issue. I didn't like that at all. That's just the beginning of giving up on everything. Charter schools—that's big, really big. I taught at a charter school, and the only ones that it will be better for will be the people who are making money on charters. I'm disgusted with that."

Referring to the union postponing the strike, she added, "There's goes the next thing. This tells me that the union is going to give up on a whole bunch of other things. I don't like it at all."

In a press conference on Wednesday, Caputo-Pearl tried to justify the latest surrender by claiming that the postponement was necessary to give parents more time to prepare for a strike, even though the entire city was anticipating a strike on Thursday and parents are solidly behind the teachers.

"We felt it was important to provide clarity to the city

and people affected if we have to strike, especially to the parents doing planning. We want to assure all of our members who are so invested in this fight to protect public education that this little delay does not in any way indicate a lack of resolve," Caputo-Pearl claimed.

The UTLA president made a pseudo-legal argument, claiming the union had no choice but to tread lightly given that the school superintendent has sought an injunction against the union based on the bogus claim that it had not given a ten-day notice for a strike. No court has backed this claim. "This delay," Caputo-Pearl said, "was because we want to be prudent and smart about our union and our organization. We've done everything legally throughout the process of bargaining, and we're trying to continue to do that." He then reiterated that the union had not lost its resolve and cynically claimed it was even more resolved to defend teachers' needs.

Counting on the capitulation of the union, the LAUSD superintendent did not even bother to show up at negotiations on Wednesday. His surrogates made clear, however, that they would not budge from their offer of a paltry three percent wage increase over each of the next two years, which is contingent on cuts in health care for new teachers and would not seriously address the chronic shortage of librarians and other staff. The district officials are also demanding an increase in class sizes to 39 students in elementary schools and 46 in secondary schools, with the power to unilaterally raise class sizes even more.

The response of the union has been to delay and delay again. The UTLA's Facebook page was filled with angry comments by teachers who were angered of the continued stalling.

Many said that the new date showed a sign of weakness, while others complained that the union's

move had left them confused and not knowing what was happening. Others asked why the union was saying it was delaying the strike for legal reasons when the courts had not even ruled on the strike yet. The overwhelming majority stated that they were ready to strike right now, denouncing Beutner and privatization. Teachers from Ohio, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Washington and others posted their support, along with Los Angeles parents.

In his press conference, Caputo-Pearl repeated his false claims that the Democrats in Los Angeles and the state capitol in Sacramento could be relied on to defend teachers and public education. He went out of his way to praise Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti, who he said was working behind the scenes to help the teachers, and the recently sworn-in governor, Gavin Newsom. In fact, Newsom has pledged to maintain the “fiscally prudent” policies of former Democratic governor Jerry Brown, who carried out some of the deepest school funding cuts in state history.

The UTLA president praised the toothless Democratic-backed ballot initiative for 2020, which would slightly increase capital gains taxes, claiming that this would increase funding for public education. He went on to absurdly propose that Beutner, a former investment banker, “use his contacts as a multi-millionaire to form a committee of wealthy property owners that say, ‘I want a fair tax on my property in order to fund our schools.’”

It is clear that the UTLA and its parent organizations, the NEA and AFT, are trying to do everything they can to prevent a strike in the nation’s second largest school district, which could quickly erupt into a statewide strike that would challenge the union’s allies in the Democratic Party, which controls the entire state government. The Democrats have carried out decades of budget cuts, while handing billions in tax cuts to the rich, reducing the state from one of the best in the nation for school funding to 43rd out of 50 today.

On Wednesday, angry parents and teachers attended a school board meeting in Oakland, some 300 miles north, where the school board has announced that it will close 24 schools, roughly a third of the total, and slash hundreds of jobs to close a budget deficit. Like Los Angeles, Oakland officials are opening for-profit charter schools, which drain funding and students from the public schools, even as they close public schools.

There is a powerful sentiment for a unified struggle by teachers throughout California, the US and even internationally. Teachers in Virginia and Indiana are planning mass protests, and educators in the Netherlands announced a mid-March strike.

To unify the struggle against austerity and the dismantling of public education, teachers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands. The *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* urges Los Angeles teachers to form rank-and-file strike committees in every school and community. These committees must organize teachers independently of the UTLA and mobilize teachers, parents and students to wage a genuine strike. LA teachers should link up with teachers and support staff in Oakland and other cities and fight for a unified struggle across the country.



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