Widespread support for Los Angeles teacher strike as unions seek to block statewide struggle

Our reporters
11 January 2019

Students, parents and other workers expressed their support for Los Angeles teachers, who are determined to walk out for improved wages and to oppose the drive to dismantle public education. More than 33,000 teachers, librarians and nurses were set to strike Thursday before the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) pushed back the strike deadline, saying teachers would strike on Monday if no agreement was reached.

Backed by powerful corporate interests that are pushing for the privatization of public education, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), led by former investment banker Austin Beutner, is refusing to budge on its demands to further erode teachers' wages and health benefits, increase class sizes and use standardized testing to scapegoat teachers and replace "failing" schools with for-profit charter businesses. In the face of this, the UTLA has consistently retreated, dropping the teachers' most pressing demands, including opposition to the expansion of charter schools, and repeatedly stalling when it comes to strike action, despite an overwhelming strike mandate by teachers.

Educators throughout the state are champing at the bit for a struggle. On Wednesday night, hundreds of parents and students packed a school board meeting in Oakland to oppose plans to close nearly one-third of the district's schools, even as public money is siphoned off for charter schools. Teachers throughout the state have expressed solidarity with LA teachers, with support growing for a statewide strike like the ones that occurred in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states last year.

These sentiments have struck fear in the offices of the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT), whose highly paid executives spent much of last year traveling from state to state trying to smother strikes and prevent them from coalescing into a national strike in defense of public education. Expressing fear that a Los Angeles strike could spark a broader strike, AFT President Randi Weingarten (annual salary $514,000) tweeted, "This is not about a strike wave—this is a specific fight for the kids & public schools of LA."

The Democratic Party, which controls every lever of political power in Los Angeles and California, is relying on the UTLA to smother opposition to the Democrat's austerity measures, which have left California 43rd out of 50 states in per-pupil spending. Rather than provoking teachers by granting the school authorities an injunction to prevent a strike, a Los Angeles county judge has upheld the union's legal right to strike on Monday. This underscores the fact that the Democrats are counting on the UTLA either to cancel the strike altogether or to let it proceed and end it as soon as possible.

At a press conference Thursday, UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl announced the union's intentions to come to the bargaining table on Friday with an "open mind," even though Beutner has not budged an inch. He again urged teachers to look to the state Democrats, including new governor Gavin Newsom, to defend their interests.

"We have finally qualified for the 2020 ballot the schools and communities first initiative that would bring $5 billion to public education by closing the corporate loophole and Proposition 13. There's a movement to address state funding in California and we need Austin Beutner to be a part of it," the UTLA president declared. As Caputo-Pearl was making these claims Thursday, Governor Newsom released his first proposed budget, which included no additional funding for public schools aside from what is already constitutionally mandated.

The state, like LAUSD, actually has budget surpluses, but the Democrats are withholding funding to deliberately create a fiscal crisis, which in turn can be used to impose draconian cuts. Although they are sitting on nearly $2 billion in reserves, district officials claim teacher pensions and health care obligations are driving the district into insolvency. On this basis, Beutner has insisted there is no money to meet teachers' demands for improved wages and increased hiring to address staff shortages and overcrowded classrooms.

To conduct a real fight, Los Angeles teachers must take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file committees at every school and in every community. These committees should appeal to workers throughout Los Angeles to organize mass picketing, including of all charter schools, to stop Beutner's strikebreaking plans. Teachers should appeal to all support staff to join the strike in defiance of the orders to scab by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and other unions. Parents and students should be rallied to support this fight. At the same time, appeals should be issued to teachers in Oakland and across the state to prepare a statewide walkout to defend public education.

Reporters for the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to teachers,

© World Socialist Web Site

students and other workers in Los Angeles about the critical issues in this battle for public education.

"Of course, I support the teachers!" Anna Estes, who retired from LAUSD after 36 years of teaching said. "I'm taking care of my mom, 96, who was also a teacher. Retired teachers in LAUSD get full medical for life and also a two percent raise for life. We fought for that in the 1979 strike!"

She spoke angrily about the UTLA dropping the issues of charter schools and over-testing. "The issue of charter schools is really important. My aunt went back to teaching at LAUSD after trying a charter school for two years. She ended up with a horrific stroke and never got over it. There's so much stress there.

"Testing is another big thing. Normally teachers use testing to help us figure out how we can explain certain concepts that the kids didn't get in other ways. The principals would always tell us, 'It's not about the scores.' And then they'd put a lot of pressure on us when students' scores weren't going up. Testing is the worst thing for the kids because it makes them always so stressed. We had to test every six weeks."

Although retired, Anna expressed strong solidarity with teachers should they strike. "If they call me in to sub during the strike, I will join the picket lines. I have too many friends and family who are teachers," she said.

"Strike, yes!" said John Farr, a maintenance worker for the school district, who agreed all school workers were part of a common struggle to defend education and jobs. "We need people to go on strike and support this fight for education. Teachers and us too."

Janae, a sales associate at Nordstrom's, said she supports teachers after seeing how much work they put in when she was a student not long ago. "We had some classes of 46 students, and we know they had a lot of difficult issues to manage. They shouldn't have to go through that. And this situation we are in now, with the Trump administration, the government and politicians are really coming down on education, teachers and everything. They have money for the things they want but won't give any of it for the things the rest of us need, like good schools."

Several students at Hamilton High School in West Los Angeles also spoke to WSWS reporters in support of their teachers. "Teachers work so hard and don't get enough pay to compensate for that," Shawna said. "It doesn't make any sense why the politicians, who got educated once, are preventing teachers from educating us. They are concerned more with war and themselves."

Jean, a young janitor at Fairfax High School, said, "I support LA teachers because it's wrong to have classrooms crowded with students. I've been in classrooms that don't have enough seats for everyone, and that leaves a lot of mess for us because teachers don't have the ability to keep after that with all the other responsibilities they have. We need to be paid fairly too. It's hard to live with our pay. Especially in LA."

Denise Dominguez has a daughter in the third grade at La Tijera Elementary School, a charter school in Inglewood, not part of the LAUSD. "Last year we had an issue like this in Inglewood. The teachers were fighting to keep their medical benefits, and a lot of them were fired. It affected our kids a lot.

"Just like at LAUSD, we're overcrowded. I thought that because we're a charter school, we shouldn't have this problem. I believe there should be a maximum of 20 kids in a class. My daughter's third grade class has 28 kids. How can one person handle that many kids and teach? Many teachers are so fed up with these conditions.

"I'm part of a group of La Tijera parents. I'm for uniting all of us in charter schools with public schools. I think we all should unite and support the LA teachers."

Julio works as a teacher assistant at an LAUSD elementary school, supporting students with disabilities. "There is a lack of health care in this system. We do need a lot more nurses. I worked at Hamilton five years ago, and even then we didn't have a nurse there full time. There are students with diabetes and sometimes we have serious emergencies."

Julio agreed that the teachers' struggle is far bigger than salaries, books, and classrooms, but also healthcare, immigration and other social issues. After a WSWS reporter raised the perspective that teachers are fighting a political fight against capitalism, he nodded and said, "Definitely. We have all these charter schools. Those are run by business, and the new superintendent, he is a businessman."

Another teacher who wished to remain anonymous said, "I've been a teacher for 20 years here and it's gotten much worse over that time. The size of class used to be 23-24, now it's 47. Over that time, they also cut custodial staff so now the school has gotten very dirty. I walk into my classroom and it's dirty, there was even rat feces in the room. I became a teacher because that was my dream, but now working as a teacher has become so hard."

Jaime, a math teacher at Hamilton, expressed frustration with the UTLA's strike delay. "I really don't like how the union pushed the strike back to Monday. We were all ready to go today. I'm not even sure if they'll have us strike Monday now. I'm still confused. On Sunday night, they could tell us something happened and that there's no strike, because of a deal behind doors or something."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site