

A fighting strategy for California teachers

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The courageous strike initiated by 33,000 Los Angeles teachers has won popular support and inspired educators and other workers throughout the US and the world.

A recent poll conducted by Loyola Marymount University found that nearly 80 percent of Los Angeles residents support the strike, while a local ABC News poll found nearly three-quarters of respondents said teachers are not paid enough and that class sizes are too large.

Broad sections of the population identify with the strike because teachers are not just fighting for themselves. They are fighting to defend the right to quality public education. Workers from all walks of life are inspired to see teachers fight back against the corporate and financial forces that have also attacked their own jobs and living standards.

After the initial exhilaration of the first few days on strike, teachers on the picket lines and on social media are beginning to hold discussions on what strategy is needed to take forward this historic fight.

There are two diametrically opposed paths opening up. The first is advocated by the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) and the national teacher unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA). The unions insist Los Angeles teachers must fight this battle alone. They claim that picketing and protests, along with appeals to Mayor Garcetti and Governor Newsom, will force Superintendent Austin Beutner and the district authorities to back down.

This is a prescription for a disaster, which will inevitably lead to some rotten compromise that abandons the teachers' demands for substantial increases in wages and school funding and an end to the expansion of charter schools. In fact, the UTLA withdrew the demands on charters and school privatization before the strike even began.

There is an alternative path. That is for teachers to form rank-and-file strike committees, independent of the UTLA and the Democratic Party politicians, to fight for an expansion of the strike throughout California and the entire country. Teachers in Oakland, who are facing the threatened closure of one-third of their schools, are organizing sickouts this Friday, independent of the union. Teachers in Denver, Colorado and Virginia are also preparing to strike.

Rank-and-file strike committees would call on workers to convert their support into active struggle by joining the picket lines to shut down all public and charter schools across the state. They would fight to unite LA teachers with every section of workers in struggle, from the federal workers being furloughed and facing payless paydays, to the General Motors workers fighting plant closures to prepare a general strike.

The logic of the struggle of teachers is bringing them into conflict with the capitalist system and the corporate and financial oligarchs who benefit from it.

While public schools and other essential services have been starved of resources, both corporate-controlled parties have found vast sums to stuff the pockets of the super-rich and to fund endless wars, bank bailouts and corporate tax cuts. California is one of the most unequal states in the US, home to the greatest number of billionaires and the highest poverty rate.

For decades, the unions have suppressed any resistance to the explosion of social inequality, saying that workers had no choice but to bow before the demands of the corporations and big business politicians for wage and benefit cuts and the gutting of essential services like public education.

But in 2018, the working class began to fight back, starting with the wave of teacher strikes in West Virginia and other US states and ending with the Yellow Vest protests in France. This has continued into

2019 with the two-day general strike by tens of millions of Indian workers, the wave of wildcat strikes by 70,000 maquiladora workers in Matamoros, Mexico and the Los Angeles teachers strike.

This eruption of the class struggle across the globe proves that the central division in society is not race, gender or sexual preference, but economic and social class.

Los Angeles teachers are in a life-and-death battle against the Democratic Party. Under Governor Jerry Brown, the number of charter schools in California rose to the highest in the nation (1,300), with over 240 in Los Angeles alone. Superintendent Austin Beutner is not only a former investment banker, he is a Democrat and a former official in the Clinton administration. During the last decade, the campaign by billionaire privatizers like Eli Broad was given a helpful hand by President Obama and his education secretary, Arne Duncan.

The new governor, Gavin Newsom, has insisted that he will continue to be “fiscally prudent” like his predecessor and has offered less than a pittance in new funding for public education.

UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl tells teachers they should be encouraged by the hollow statements of support from Mayor Eric Garcetti and Democratic presidential hopefuls like Kamala Harris, Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders. The UTLA president is only trying to pull the wool over teachers’ eyes. The fact is the Democrats, no less than Trump and the Republicans, are the tools of Wall Street and enemies of public education and teachers.

The snake oil salesmen in the UTLA claim that they are fighting against the attack on public education even as they collaborate with the very forces responsible. The UTLA is beginning bargaining under the mediation of Garcetti today, and the unions hope to announce a rotten deal and wrap up the strike by the beginning of next week.

A real fight can be carried out only if teachers take the initiative into their own hands. In every school and community—in Los Angeles, Oakland and throughout the state—teachers should hold meetings to discuss and debate a real strategy to win. Rank-and-file strike committees should be elected to formulate real demands, including a 30 percent wage increase, a 25-student cap on class sizes, a vast expansion of

funding and the immediate reconversion of charter schools into public schools.

Nowhere is the subordination of the social needs of the majority of the population to the profit interests of a tiny few more clearly demonstrated than in the assault on public education.

Los Angeles teachers have taken a powerful stand. The task now is to develop the organizational forms and political perspective to develop this struggle into a powerful counter-offensive of the entire working class against social inequality and the capitalist system that produces it.



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