

Los Angeles teachers battle privatization as union vies to be partner in LAUSD restructuring

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The strike by 33,000 Los Angeles teachers has brought to center stage the fight against the dismantling of public education by powerful corporate interests that enjoy the full backing of both big business parties. LA teachers are fighting not only to improve their wages, which have been frozen for a decade, but to beat back the drive to privatize public education, which has gone further in California than in most other US states.

While the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) has made rhetorical criticisms of the “billionaire privatizers,” the fact is the UTLA, like other unions across the country affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), long ago dropped any opposition to corporate-backed “school reform” and the expansion of for-profit charter schools, which siphon off funding and students from traditional public schools.

On the contrary, the chief concern of the AFT, NEA and their state and local affiliates has been to preserve and expand the financial and institutional interests of the union apparatus during this process of school privatization. This includes expanding the franchise of the unions into the charter school industry in order to gain access to a new source of dues income as the unions collude in shutting down public schools and laying off teachers.

On Thursday, the UTLA resumed talks with officials from Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) under the mediation of Mayor Eric Garcetti. UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl has presented the intervention of Garcetti and other Democrats, such as Governor Gavin Newsom and state school superintendent Tony Thurmond, as a gain for teachers that is bringing them closer to winning their demands.

While Garcetti has tried to distance himself from his

Democratic predecessor, Antonio Villaraigosa, whose failed bid for governor was backed by the California Charter Schools Association, Garcetti has also received contributions from billionaires Eli Broad and Michael Bloomberg.

During a press conference the first day of the strike, Garcetti said that, despite the rhetoric by the UTLA and LAUSD superintendent Austin Beutner, the two parties were close to an agreement but still differed on what role the union would play in Beutner’s “reorganization” of the school district. The plan, which is clearly backed by Garcetti, would break up the LAUSD into dozens of smaller districts, accelerating the replacement of traditional public schools with charter business operations.

The *Los Angeles Times* posted a revealing article Thursday, titled, “What would a deal to end the LAUSD teachers’ strike look like?” The *Times* education reporter wrote, “Already mistrustful of Beutner, the union is particularly anxious about his confidential reorganization plan for the nation’s second-largest school system. Garcetti said this strategic plan should become a vehicle for collaboration. Beutner should back up, the mayor said, and bring the union into the planning process. The union then should participate in good faith, not just to tear Beutner down, Garcetti said.”

This should be taken as a warning by every teacher: the UTLA is preparing to sell out the strike and agree to a deal that will pave the way for the faster destruction of public education. On the eve of the strike, the UTLA abandoned the teachers’ most critical demands opposing charter school expansion and endless standardized testing. Now the UTLA is preparing to give up the ship in exchange for being a partner in Beutner’s restructuring plan.

Far from leading any genuine struggle by teachers across the state, who would demand that schools be funded by attacking the private fortunes of California's 144 billionaires and other super-rich residents, the UTLA is preparing to join efforts by the Democrats to push through more regressive school taxes, which will hit working class and lower middle class residents the hardest.

As the *Times* article noted, "Current school board member Nick Melvoin, a Beutner supporter, and former board member David Tokofsky, who is closer to the unions, have independently suggested a middle path forward: linking long-term funding of the new positions to a campaign for a local parcel tax in 2020. 'A joint project like that, with the union, could help usher in a new era of partnership,' Melvoin said."

As far as the UTLA executives are concerned, striking teachers are little more than movie extras in their efforts to preserve their selfish interests at the expense of teachers. As the *Times* reported, "Caputo-Pearl has called on students, teachers and parents to remain on the picket line and show up for a rally Friday in Grand Park to send the bargaining team into what could be a full weekend of negotiations leading up to Martin Luther King Jr. Day."

But teachers are not pawns in someone else's chess game. They are fighting an historic battle to defend the right to high-quality public education for current and future generations.

This underscores the importance of the call by the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* for teachers to form rank-and-file strike committees to take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the UTLA. These committees should prepare teachers to reject any sellout deal and instead fight to expand the strike to Oakland and other cities in preparation for a statewide walkout and a general strike of all workers across the US. This is inseparably bound up with developing a new political strategy based on the fight to mobilize the working class in opposition to both big business parties and based on a socialist program.

The claim by Caputo-Pearl that Democrats like Garcetti, Newsom & Co. are "pro-teacher" and "pro-public education" is a cynical lie. Nowhere has this claim been exposed more than in California, where the Democrats have a lock on political power and have long spearheaded a ruthless attack on public education.

Once admired for the quality of its public-school system and free public universities, California is now 43rd in the nation in per-pupil spending, just barely above Missouri and Arkansas. But California has the highest number of

charter schools (1,300) of any state, while Los Angeles has the highest (244) of any city in America.

Like New York City, Los Angeles has also been a central laboratory for "co-location," a scheme that allows charter schools to use portions of traditional public school facilities for their privately run operations. There are total of 102 charter schools co-locating in the district, operating like parasites on a host, and grabbing up music and art rooms and other facilities.

Teachers picketing at Westchester High School said there were five charter schools operating on their campus. Lauren, a teacher with four years, explained that the school district had an incentive to pile up 39 students or more in traditional schools in order to make room for charter school students. "They are building up these charters, giving them public resources to make them look beautiful."

Lauren continued, "We are fighting for public education, and we've been getting messages of support from Norway, France and other countries. We are fighting for our students, and we can't fight alone. This is a Democratic state, and they're attacking public education."

The Democrats, no matter what the pretensions of Bernie Sanders, Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and others, represent the same corporate and financial interests that want to loot the public schools and get their hands on the "education market," which will be worth an estimated \$2.3 trillion over the next few years.

Unlike the Republicans, which generally seek to undermine the unions, the Democrats have long seen the utility of propping up the unions to suppress the opposition of the working class to the relentless demands for austerity and ceaseless funneling of money to the super-rich.

That is why the struggle of LA teachers, which must be linked up with the fight in Oakland, throughout California, the US and the world, pits educators against the Democratic Party and their front men in the UTLA and other unions.



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