

“There’s only so much workers can take and now we’re rising up”

## Mass demonstration as Los Angeles strike reaches fifth day

Our reporters  
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Tens of thousands of striking Los Angeles teachers and their supporters descended on Grand Park in downtown Los Angeles Friday as the walkout by more than 33,000 educators in the second-largest school district in America reached its fifth day. The teachers, who have won the support of the overwhelming majority of city residents, are fighting low pay, overcrowded classrooms, lack of sufficient nurses, school psychologists and librarians and the growth of charter schools.

As an estimated 60,000 rallied in the second-largest school district in the US, opposition by teachers spread across California and the nation. Also, on Friday, more than 500 teachers at 10 schools in Oakland, California carried out a wildcat “sickout” followed by a march and rally to fight plans to close one-third of the city’s schools. Like LA teachers, the unions, working with the Democratic Party, have kept teachers on the job for more than 18 months without a new contract. In a provocative action, Oakland Unified School District superintendent Kyla Johnson-Trammell threatened teachers that for each 1 percent raise they achieve, more than \$2 million will be cut in benefits or school services.

Virginia teachers, inspired by the strike in Los Angeles, will rally on January 28 in front of the state legislature in the capital of Richmond. Teachers are outraged that they make \$9,000 a year less than the national average, even as the state legislature recently approved more than \$573 million in tax breaks for Amazon.

The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union, which resumed negotiations with the school district on Thursday, is expected to continue talks over the weekend that are being mediated by the city’s Democratic mayor, Eric Garcetti. The *Los Angeles Times* reported Thursday that Garcetti hoped the “strategic plan” issued by district superintendent and former investment banker Austin Beutner could be used as a “vehicle for collaboration” between the district and the UTLA.

Beutner’s strategic plan involves carving up the district into 32 neighborhood “networks” based on a so-called portfolio model, which would pave the way for the shutdown of more traditional public schools and their replacement by publicly funded but privately run charter schools. Under the rule of the

state Democratic Party, California already has the largest number of charters (1,300) in the nation, and Los Angeles has more than any other city. In addition, there are 102 charters that “co-locate” inside LAUSD schools grabbing up space, resources and students from traditional schools.

While the UTLA has not responded to Garcetti’s comments about collaborating with Beutner, union officials have continuously offered the mayor their political support and, before the strike even started, dropped teachers’ demands centered around the growth of charter schools.

At Friday’s rally, UTLA president Alex Caputo-Pearl made the absurd claim that Democratic politicians had reluctantly backed school privatization but had switched sides because the teachers’ strike had given them strength to stand up to the charter school proponents. “Democrats right here in California have allowed this to happen by underfunding public education and being scared of the charter school industry. Now, because you are strong and your union is strong, we are supported by Democrats like [California Senator] Kamala Harris and [Vermont Senator] Bernie Sanders. Because our pickets are strong, Los Angeles mayor Eric Garcetti supports you.”

In reality, the Democratic Party has waged a decades-long assault on public education in California and across the US. Former governor Jerry Brown oversaw a vast expansion of charters while the city’s last mayor, Antonio Villaraigosa, operates a chain of charter schools and received the lion’s share of funding for his failed 2018 campaign for governor from the charter school industry.

Addressing the assembled teachers, Caputo-Pearl claimed, “You need to know that you are the most essential part of the bargaining process. Our bargaining is strong because our pickets are strong.” In reality, all of the bargaining has gone on behind the backs of teachers.

Educators cannot allow themselves to be used as movie extras in a scheme by UTLA executives to secure the own selfish interests at teachers’ expense. Teachers must form rank-and-file strike committees to monitor all negotiations between the district and the union and insist that all talks be live-streamed with transcripts made available the same day. These

committees should poll all teachers and outline their own demands including a real pay increase, the ending of “colocation” and the reconversion of charters into traditional public schools.

Any effort by the UTLA to send teachers back to work once union officials claim they have a contract or the “framework” of a deal must be rejected. The principle of ‘No contract, no work,’ must be upheld. Before any vote the full details of the agreement must be made available and teachers given ample to study and discuss it.

If the strike remains isolated, the UTLA and Democrats will come up with a rotten compromise, which will only accelerate the attack on education. That is why LA teachers cannot fight alone. Rank-and-file strike committees should reach out to teachers in Oakland and across the state to prepare a statewide strike, as part of the fight for a national strike and preparations for a general strike by all workers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to several teachers at the rally. Julie Beres, a LAUSD teacher, attended the rally with her 15-year-old son Phil.

Phil said, “I think it’s really unfair because my mom basically lost her job and now I have to step up at 15 and get a job so that my mom has help paying the mortgage. I’m infuriated that we might be homeless at the end of this month. I’m infuriated about what’s going on in our future.”

When asked about the role of the Democratic Party, Julie said, “Frankly, all of the politicians are corrupt. Our school board member in my district was put in there by big money and resigned and faced a felony because of the billionaires who use the political system. The only way to do this is for workers to organize independently so that the corruption doesn’t happen.

“I agree the union can be a barrier for us getting what we want. I think a nationwide strike would do good to show the plight of all of us because in some of the states they were paid so little for so long. If we all walked out and it was a nationwide strike, it would call attention to what was going on.”

Mariah, a high school student who attended the rally with her friend David, said, “We go to a small high school of 350 students and we still have up to 49 students in a class. We have one counselor who can only come twice a week, which is ridiculous because they’ve been cutting classes due to budget cuts.”

David said, “My math class was cut halfway through and I was forced to take it online, and then they cut the online course!”

On Thursday, WSWs reporters spoke with teachers and students at schools in the area of South Gate in south central Los Angeles. Carolina, who teaches fourth grade at Independence Elementary School, said, “The oligarchs and billionaires abuse the workers. They’re taking advantage of the workers. Finally, there’s only so much the workers can take, and now they’re rising up and demanding their rights.

“The district wants us to have 39 kids in a classroom in 4th through 6th grades. Right now, I have about 31. If they make it 39 kids, I will have to move my desk out of the room. We’re getting fed up with all this.”

At the downtown rally, Israel spoke about the abysmal conditions at his school. “It’s like daycare, we just sit down and go on the computer, but everything is blocked. They teach every kid the same thing in the same books. No actual math, no English, just chapter books. No nurses. No one knows what to do if some get sick or hurt. We have one counselor for 350 kids at Walnut Park Middle School.”

Greg is a teacher who commented on former Obama education secretary Arne Duncan’s recent statements in the *Hill* where he told Los Angeles teachers to drop their demands because there simply wasn’t enough money. “Screw Arne Duncan!” Greg said, “He came out in favor of charter schools.”

Mary teaches at the West Valley Occupational Center, which has adult education programs including job training, GED training and English as a Second Language classes.

“The district keeps shutting down our programs. We can’t get a nursing program because the district doesn’t want to pay for teacher nurses. This is really important though because there is a shortage of nurses in the United States.

“Prior to 2012, we had 3,500 instructors who are a small portion of the school district but were very important. We used to have 30 different adult schools. In 2012, they shut down the program. It was eventually reopened but it’s much smaller. Today, it’s between 660 or 900 teachers left.”

Asked about the significance of the teachers’ strike, Mary said, “We’re fighting for our lives in adult education. The regular teachers are facing 57 students in a class. We’re all fighting for our lives. After all, Donald Trump said, ‘I love the uneducated.’”



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