

Los Angeles teachers angered over secret talks between union, school district and mayor

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Striking teachers in Los Angeles are expressing their anger over being kept in the dark on the content of the closed door negotiations between the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union and school district officials, which began last Thursday under the auspices of Democratic mayor Eric Garcetti. While the mayor has indicated that a deal could be reached before Tuesday, neither side has issued an official statement on the talks.

The walkout by more than 33,000 teachers, which began on January 14, has pitted educators in the nation's second largest school district against the entire Democratic Party establishment, which has overseen decades of defunding of public education and expansion of charter schools and other privatization schemes. Teachers who have not had a raise in a decade are fighting for improved wages and school funding, smaller class sizes and to halt the expansion of publicly funded private charters that siphon off resources and students from the traditional public schools.

UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl and other union officials have claimed that teachers "are the most essential part of the bargaining process." In practice, however, the UTLA has relegated teachers to the position of cheerleaders while union executives bargain behind their backs.

During the course of the weekend negotiations blackout, the UTLA posted a number of videos on social media of teachers taking a break from picketing to dance and sing along with several celebrity endorsements of the strike. This campaign, meant to distract and mollify rank and file teachers, has encountered growing anger from educators determined to carry out a serious struggle. One teacher writes on the UTLA Facebook page, "UTLA leadership seems to be more interested in performances and entertainment. People are NOT getting paid. This is NOT a celebratory occasion!!"

Another teacher, referring to the UTLA blackout, posted, "Stop being cute and tell us the facts! We are not getting paid here."

A student at Pepperdine University getting a Master's degree in education and a student teacher who has joined the

teachers' picket lines and rallies said he is upset by the confidential negotiations and that the "union should be transparent." He also said he supports expanding the strike throughout California.

"It doesn't surprise me that the UTLA is negotiating in secret," Steve, a teacher in Santa Cruz, said. "They want to be part of this new set up. All of these teachers who still have illusions in the UTLA are going to be in for a big shock."

Los Angeles teachers must immediately demand that all negotiations between the district and the union be live-streamed over the internet. The details of any deal reached between the two sides must be provided in full to the teachers who then must have adequate time to read and discuss before voting.

To fight for this, teachers should form rank-and-file strike committees in every school and community. These committees should fight to spread the strike to Oakland and across the state and prepare a statewide and national strike to defend public education.

Since it has not called a strike in three decades, the UTLA has amassed a giant strike fund. However, teachers have been given no strike benefits and have been told to take out loans, if necessary, to pay critical bills.

The teachers enjoy overwhelming popular support, with polls released last week by Loyola Marymount University and the local news outlets showing more than 80 percent of Los Angeles area respondents siding with the striking teachers, and two-thirds saying they are not paid enough and that class sizes are too big.

In addition, there is growing sentiment for a statewide strike by educators. Oakland carried out sickouts last Friday and held a demonstration to oppose district plans to close a third of the schools. While the state is home to the nation's highest number of billionaires it is near the bottom in per pupil funding and first in the number of charter schools. The LA strike is also rekindling opposition by teachers across the country, with Denver teachers starting to vote to authorize a strike and Virginia teachers planning mass protests on

January 28.

Allied with the Democratic Party and opposed to a broader movement of teachers, the UTLA abandoned the teachers' most critical demands, including a halt to charter expansion and mind-numbing standardized tests, and has proposed pay increases barely above the rate of inflation. Last week, Mayor Garcetti indicated that the only thing keeping the parties from reaching agreement is determining what role the UTLA will play in the restructuring of the school district. Garcetti said the union should collaborate in the plan which will pave the way for more school closings and charter expansion.

Throughout the course of the strike, Los Angeles teachers have displayed enormous determination to fight back against decades of cuts to public education. They have been joined in their struggle by hundreds of thousands of parents who immediately recognize that the strike involves issues that extend far beyond the individual concerns of the teachers themselves.

Tens of thousands of teachers and their supporters joined mass rallies in downtown Los Angeles on Monday, Tuesday and Friday, effectively occupying entire city blocks along with rail and bus lines in the city of more than four million residents. The two rallies on Monday and Tuesday were attended by more than 50,000 while the Friday rally was attended by more than 60,000.

The UTLA's parent organizations, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), have spent the last year acting as firefighters trying to put out teacher strikes and prevent them from coalescing into a nationwide walkout. Under conditions in which federal workers are going without pay, GM workers are facing the closure of their plants and tens of millions of workers have never recouped their losses since the 2008 crash, a mass strike by teachers could spark a far broader movement and a general strike.

In a statement titled, "Strikes and Shutdowns," AFT President Randi Weingarten, a leading member of the Democratic National Committee, warned that Trump and the LAUSD Superintendent were discrediting the entire political system. "When our elected leaders fail, whether by not funding public schools or by shutting down services that provide for our safety and freedom, they strike at the very heart of what makes us a democratic republic," Weingarten declared.

The AFT leader, whose annual salary is over half a million dollars, claimed, "Our democratic society is made possible by the social contract between citizens and our government. In return for our consent to a democratic government, to pay taxes and obey laws, that government agrees to protect our rights and promote our common good."

What nonsense! For the last forty years both corporate-controlled parties have waged a relentless war against workers on behalf of the corporate and financial elite, which has enriched itself. Beutner—a Democrat—and Trump—a Democrat-turned-Republican—didn't fall from the sky. They are the product of the grotesque rise of social inequality in America, which controls both parties and the entire political system. Such levels of inequality are incompatible with the maintenance of democratic rights, including the right to public education.

Both political parties can find trillions for endless wars, Wall Street bailouts, corporate tax cuts and "border security" to hunt down and terrorize immigrants, but they all say there is no money for public education, decent wages, health care and pensions.

That is why the struggle by teachers is a political fight against the entire economic and political system. The resources required to pay teachers a living wage, to hire sufficient staff, to vastly improve public education and put an end to poverty and homelessness can only be attained through a frontal assault on the private fortunes of the rich.

Far from waging a genuine struggle, the unions, like the AFT, NEA and UTLA, are only concerned with defending their own institutional and financial interests. In her column Weingarten declared that the struggle in Los Angeles was "not a debate over charter versus public schools." That is because the unions have dropped all opposition to charters and are only interested in collecting union dues from the expanding number of charter school teachers.

This position stands in sharp contrast to the position of the teachers themselves who want to broaden the struggle as widely as possible. One teacher writes on the UTLA Facebook page, "We are fighting for LA and the country! Oakland votes on 1/29 for their strike!"

To take this fight forward teachers need to organize rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions and both corporate-controlled parties.

The *World Socialist Web Site* will provide every assistance to teachers in taking forward this struggle. We urge all teachers, school staff and their supporters to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* today.



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