

Los Angeles teachers have the right to know the details of the negotiations

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The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union and the school district continued their closed-door negotiations all day Monday, the fifth straight day of bargaining mediated by Democratic mayor Eric Garcetti. While negotiators have spent day after day in City Hall, no details have been publicly released regarding the proposals and counterproposals of the UTLA, the district and the mayor.

Over 33,000 Los Angeles teachers have been engaged in a historic strike since January 14, the first time in 30 years that teachers have struck in the second-largest school district in the US. While UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl has repeatedly declared that teachers “are the most essential part of the bargaining process,” the reality is that educators—whose lives will be dictated by the agreement—are the only ones being kept in the dark. Beutner and the school authorities know what is being discussed. The UTLA officers know. And there is no doubt that Garcetti has kept Governor Newsom and other top city and state officials informed.

Yesterday’s bargaining update on the UTLA web site says, “We are making progress,” but provides no details of the proposals and counterproposals over the last several days. The last full counterproposal from the district that is available on the UTLA site is from January 11. The last UTLA proposal is from January 7.

Teachers have a right to know exactly what is being said and what the latest proposals and counterproposals by the UTLA and the district are. They must demand that all contract negotiation meetings be live-streamed and fully available to the public.

From the standpoint of advancing the interests of teachers, there is no justification for a confidentiality agreement with Mayor Garcetti. What are the UTLA, the district and the mayor afraid of? The only rationale is that if teachers got wind of a rotten compromise they would get up in arms and fight to prevent it.

Garcetti has already declared that the only thing keeping the union and the district apart is what role the UTLA will play in implementing Superintendent Austin Beutner’s plan

to break up the district into a network of smaller “portfolios,” which is intended to facilitate the growth of charter schools. The mayor has encouraged the union to make the plan the basis of collaboration. What has been offered to the UTLA in exchange for collaborating against the interests of teachers?

“Of course, the negotiations should be made public,” Ric, a fifth-grade teacher in Huntington Park, told the WSW. “I’m not in favor of these closed-door meetings. Before the strike even began, the union dropped the issues of charter schools and over-testing,” he added.

At around noon Monday, the UTLA posted a press release which states in part, “It is important to know, whether or not we reach an agreement late tonight, we will NOT be going to work. Report to picket lines as usual in the morning on Tuesday. Even if we have an agreement late tonight, we will need to ratify the TA before we end the strike. *We have systems in place where everyone will be able to be informed about the tentative agreement and vote on it, over a period of hours.*” [emphasis added]

The WSW contacted the offices of the UTLA to ask what this last statement means. An official said she was unaware of what systems would reduce voting time to a “period of hours” and asked the WSW to submit its questions in an email. As of this writing, we have received no reply.

Teachers should see this press release as a warning that the UTLA is planning to ram through a sellout agreement before giving teachers the full details and sufficient time to study and discuss it. Teachers must reject this. There should be no vote on the contract, let alone any return to work, until teachers have the full contract in hand, not just self-serving “highlights,” and at least four days to fully study and discuss it. Rank-and-file teachers should organize meetings, independent of the UTLA, to discuss the details and only allow union officials in to question them. Only then should ratification meetings be held, at times convenient for the largest turnout, and a vote taken overseen by trusted workers.

None of this can be done in “a period of hours.” The fact

that the UTLA would even propose such a limited time frame points to its complicity in conspiracy against the interests of educators and public education as a whole. This is further underscored by the union's repeated promotion of Democrats like Garcetti, Newsom and others, even though teachers are in a direct battle with the Democratic Party, which has spearheaded the assault on education in California.

Whatever deal reached by the UTLA will do nothing to address the existential threats to public education in the form of charter schools and future budget cuts. The district will maintain absolute authority to impose layoffs, close schools and further erode working conditions as they deem necessary. Moreover, the union's capitulation will not only embolden Beutner but also the powerful corporate forces behind school privatization to double down on their campaign to dismantle public education across the United States.

To carry forward a genuine fight in defense of public education, Los Angeles teachers must act now to establish their own, independent rank-and-file strike committees, at every school and in every neighborhood. These committees should raise their own demands: the reconversion of all charter schools into public schools; a 30 percent raise for teachers and all public education workers; class size limits of 25; Special Education caseload limits at half their current levels; a halving of all student-to-staff ratios; and the remodeling of all buildings in need, along with other demands agreed upon by workers themselves.

Nothing can be solved at the local level, as state funding accounts for roughly 90 percent of Los Angeles school funding. Thus, LA teachers must forge links with Oakland teachers, as well as teachers in Fremont and other districts facing contract battles, to prepare for a statewide teachers strike.

"Because of UTLA's actions, one of the most important things teachers can do is work for the development of rank-and-file committees," Steve, a ten-year teacher in Santa Cruz, told the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*. "Without these committees, teachers won't be able to independently intervene in this struggle." Numerous teachers in Los Angeles, Oakland and around the country have expressed similar sentiments, underscoring the basis for fighting for a statewide and national strike to defend public education.

To sustain the strike in Los Angeles, rank-and-file committees must raise the demand that the union's strike fund be immediately distributed to teachers, including an immediate \$1,000 benefit to cover lost wages from the first week on strike and \$1,000 per week for the duration of the struggle. The last strike happened 30 years ago and the UTLA has amassed a war chest from monthly dues, and the

strike fund should be valued in the tens of millions of dollars. If the strike fund is depleted, where has that money gone? Was it siphoned off into the election campaigns for Jerry Brown, Gavin Newsom and other Democrats? Has it gone to subsidize union officials' salaries?

If the UTLA does not have the money, then they should get a loan from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and their California affiliates. What is more important, sustaining teachers who are fighting for the future of public education or the bloated annual salaries of AFT President Randi Weingarten (\$514,000), NEA chief Lily Eskelsen García (\$317,826) and California Teachers Association head Eric Heins (\$317,000)?

If LA teachers take this road, which will require independent initiative and a conscious struggle against the UTLA and the Democratic Party, they will find themselves with powerful allies among workers throughout the US and internationally. Last Friday, hundreds of teachers in Oakland carried out a wildcat "sickout" strike in defiance of their union and the bogus state mediation process. Teachers in Denver are voting on striking and educators in Virginia are preparing a mass protest at the state capital to demand improved wages and school funding.

Over the past week, over 70,000 *maquiladora* workers at 50 auto parts factories in Matamoros, Mexico threw out their union leadership and began a wildcat strike with global implications. The Yellow Vest protests in France are in their tenth week and teachers in the "Red Pens" movement are joining and see no signs of stopping. Greek teachers clashed with police while protesting against austerity and educators in the Netherlands are also preparing a national strike.

All over the world the issues are the same: a handful of billionaires and multimillionaires who control the governments and the unions are trying to turn the clock backwards and strip workers of their most basic rights, including the right to quality public education. Teachers in Los Angeles have taken a courageous stand. Now it is time to take the conduct of the struggle in your own hands and take forward this historic fight.



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