

Union rams through deal to end Los Angeles teachers strike

Jerry White
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The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) attempted to ram through an agreement Tuesday night to end the six-day strike by more than 33,000 teachers in the nation's second-largest school district. The deal, which was crafted by leading state Democrats, including Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti and California Governor Gavin Newsom, is a blow to teachers that will pave the way for an escalation of the bipartisan attack on public education throughout the United States.

The manner in which the deal was supposedly ratified underscores the contempt the union executives have for rank-and-file teachers. The deal was announced Tuesday morning, just before a scheduled mass rally. The full text of the contract was not released until the afternoon, shortly before 33,000 teachers, nurses and counselors were told to report to 900 separate schools to vote starting at 5:30 or 6:00 pm.

Teachers were told to review the 40-page document, raise any questions and vote on the deal within a couple of hours, in time for UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl to announce that the deal had been "overwhelmingly ratified" at an 8:15 pm press conference.

Many teachers expressed extreme skepticism about the vote results, which were not even finalized before the UTLA announced the end of the strike. Ballots are still being counted into tomorrow, and teachers reported overwhelming opposition at their schools. Most of the comments on the Facebook livestream announcing the "ratification" of the contract were opposed to the deal.

This sham, which Caputo-Pearl cynically called "democracy in action," was designed to prevent teachers from gathering *en masse* and to rush a vote before anyone had time to seriously review and discuss the contract. In addition, many teachers on leave, ill or out of town did not have a chance to vote at all.

The UTLA had the agreement worked out even before the strike began. The past six days have not been spent negotiating, but rather in figuring out a way to ram through a deal with the district over mass opposition. With the

possibility of a strike in Oakland, California next week, a spreading strike wave in Mexico, and growing demands for strike action among teachers throughout the US, the union is determined to end the Los Angeles strike before it spreads to other sections of the working class.

The operation of the UTLA underscores the urgent need for teachers in Los Angeles and beyond to form independent rank-and-file committees to coordinate and unify their struggles. The unions function as strikebreakers that see as their essential purpose to suppress opposition and impose the demands of the corporate and financial elite.

Teachers who have endured a decade-long pay freeze and who live in one of America's most expensive cities will get a raise this year and one retroactively to last year that are actually below the 3.2 percent inflation rate in the city. There will be no raise for the 2019-20 school year and a "salary reopeners" in the last two years. In addition, the agreement includes a "reopener" for pension benefits, meaning the district will likely seek cuts in retirement benefits since it claims it has "unsustainable pension obligations."

A summary of the deal states that the "Board of Education will vote on a resolution calling on the state to establish a charter school cap and the creation of a Governor's committee on charter schools at the next meeting." On school funding, it says, "UTLA, LAUSD and the Mayor's office will jointly advocate for increased county and state funding... The Mayor will also endorse the Schools and Communities First ballot initiative and will work together with LAUSD and UTLA on advocating for the passage of this initiative."

In other words, it guarantees absolutely nothing. The Democratic Party, which controls every lever of political power in the state, has spearheaded the decades-long war against teachers and public education in California. Governor Newsom has promised to follow the "fiscally prudent" measures of his Democratic predecessor, Jerry Brown, who oversaw the largest growth of charter schools in the nation.

Class sizes will remain as high as 39 students in a class and would only decline by four students by the 2021-22 school year. These wholly inadequate class size caps were included in the teachers' last contract, which expired in 2017, and were universally ignored. A UTLA spokesman said, "reaching the promised land" of reducing class sizes would take years because it is "such a costly, expensive undertaking."

The teachers' other major demand to hire more school nurses, counselors and special education aides was ignored. The contract says staffing requirements will not go into effect until July 1, 2021 and "in the event the district cannot meet counseling, librarian and nursing services by October 1st of each year, UTLA may file a grievance for alleged violations at which time the grievance may be put into abeyance to resolve."

Even before the strike began, the UTLA dropped teachers' main demands concerning halting the expansion of charter schools and standardized testing, which is used to scapegoat teachers for the educational problems that inevitably arise from overcrowded classrooms, poverty and chronic underfunding. The UTLA runs several charter schools and it has also gained access to collect union dues from the expanding number of charter school teachers.

The agreement was announced at a morning press conference in City Hall where Caputo-Pearl stood at the podium with Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Austin Beutner and Mayor Garcetti. Also present were the leaders of the national teacher unions, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten and National Education Association (NEA) leader Lily Eskelsen García, who were both singled out for praise by Garcetti and Caputo-Pearl.

Beutner, a former investment banker and Clinton administration official, who has been backed by powerful corporate interests seeking the dismantling of public education, called the deal a "new chapter in labor management collaboration." He praised the UTLA for reaching a deal that would "maintain the fiscal solvency" of the school district, and added, that school funding problems "can't be solved in one week or one contract."

By early evening, there were hundreds of comments on the UTLA's Facebook page calling for a "no" vote and denouncing the contemptuous way the deal was being rammed through without sufficient time to study and discuss it.

"In three years, I will have 1 fewer student then I have right now. One student in three years. That is not class size reduction," one teacher posted. Another commented, "That was the plan of UTLA leaders. Rush us so we don't have time to think on it."

The betrayal of the Los Angeles strike is a damning indictment of the pseudo-left groups, including the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) and the International Socialist Organization (ISO), which provide the unions with a "left" cover. Caputo-Pearl is part of the "Union Power" faction of the UTLA bureaucracy, which spouts phrases about "social justice unionism" and fighting "institutional racism." Caputo-Pearl's counterparts in the "Caucus of Rank and File Educators" in Chicago sabotaged the 2012 strike, paving the way for the shutdown of scores of schools. ISO leader Jesse Sharkey, who sold out the strike, now heads the CTU.

According to the UTLA's filing with the Internal Revenue Service, Caputo-Pearl made \$143,340 in the fiscal year ending in August 2017, the last figures available, and the union's seven top officers averaged \$141,552 in annual salary. The leaders of the national unions make even more, with Weingarten pulling in an annual salary of half a million dollars.

The betrayal of the Los Angeles teachers strike demonstrates the real character of the trade unions, which function as the tools of the corporate and political establishment, suppressing the class struggle and imposing the dictates of big business. Just as they did after the rank-and-file teachers rebelled in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states last year, the AFT and NEA moved in quickly to shut down the LA strike before it become the catalyst of a far broader movement of teachers and other workers nationally.

The growth of the class struggle around the world, including the Yellow Vest protests in France and explosive strikes by *maquiladora* workers in Matamoros, Mexico, have pit workers against the capitalist parties and the unions, which are anti-working-class organizations. This underscores the need for the building of rank-and-file factory, workplace and neighborhood committees, independent of the unions, to open the way for the development of an industrial and political counteroffensive of the working class.



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