

The timeline of a sellout

How the UTLA orchestrated the betrayal of Los Angeles teachers

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The betrayal Wednesday of Los Angeles teachers by the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) epitomizes the anti-working class character of unions and the depths these organizations will go to suppress social opposition.

Teachers returned to their classrooms Thursday still shocked and outraged over how the UTLA pushed through a contract that ignored their most critical demands to increase wages and school funding, reduce class sizes and stop the expansion of charter schools. One teacher described feeling like there was “a hole in her heart” and reported seeing teachers crying because nothing they went on strike for was realized.

In particular, teachers were angered over how the union rammed through the deal without giving teachers sufficient time to study and discuss it, along with the undemocratic voting process. As of this writing, the UTLA has still not completed counting the ballots.

How was this done?

From the very beginning, the UTLA did everything to prevent a strike, dragging the negotiating process over 20 months, ignoring the 98 percent mandate to strike, and submitting to endless state mediation and fact-finding.

Facing increasing pressure from rank-and-file teachers, the UTLA was ultimately compelled to call a strike for January 10. Three days before, however, UTLA president Alex Caputo-Pearl announced the union was dropping the teachers’ most critical demands opposing the expansion of charter schools, unlimited standardized testing and other schemes used to privatize education. Caputo-Pearl tried to justify this capitulation by claiming the union had no choice but to accept LAUSD’s position that such issues were outside of collective bargaining.

Then the UTLA announced it was postponing the January 10 strike date to January 14. When it became clear the teachers’ commitment to fight had become even stronger, the UTLA called the walkout on January 14. Although there was widespread public support, it was clear the UTLA had no intention to wage the type of battle that teachers were demanding. Although it had not struck in 30 years, the union provided no benefits from its multi-million-dollar strike fund.

During the week the strike continued with virtually empty classrooms, two more mass rallies, and polls showing 80 percent of the public supporting teachers. Although Caputo-Pearl claimed he was miles apart from LAUSD superintendent Austin Beutner, the UTLA president suddenly announced talks would resume on Thursday, January 17, under the auspices of Democratic mayor Eric Garcetti. The UTLA agreed to keep the talks secret, deliberately keeping teachers in the dark, while the union conspired with Beutner, Garcetti and Governor Gavin Newsom to impose the deal on teachers.

On Friday, January 18, a third mass rally was held in downtown Los Angeles and coincided with the Oakland teachers’ mass wildcat sickout. Fearful that two major teacher strikes could spark a statewide walkout, the UTLA and the national teacher unions did everything to isolate LA teachers and shut down the strike. In a tweet, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten insisted, “This is not about a strike wave—this is a specific fight for the kids & public schools of LA.”

Over the Martin Luther King three-day weekend, the UTLA continued the secret talks at City Hall with press reports announcing progress was being made during the “marathon bargaining sessions.”

On Tuesday, January 22, the day of infamy for Los Angeles teachers, it was announced that a deal had been reached. It is most likely that the agreement had been reached long before the strike even began. But unable to prevent the strike, the UTLA and the Democratic Party went through the charade to wear teachers down.

However, the UTLA still had the challenge of getting teachers to ratify a contract that failed to meet any of their central demands.

At 6:45 a.m., almost three hours before the agreement was publicly announced, the UTLA held a press conference thanking local firefighters for standing in solidarity with teachers. AFT President Weingarten spoke at the rally and kept silent about the deal she knew had already been signed.

Teachers began picketing at their schools at 7:00 a.m. as they had been doing all week. Another mass rally had been

scheduled for 10:30 a.m. in downtown Los Angeles, and as instructed, teachers left their school picket lines at 9:15 to attend the rally. By 9:30 a.m., as thousands were en route to the rally, Mayor Garcetti, LAUSD superintendent Beutner and UTLA president Caputo-Pearl held a press conference at City Hall. They all announced the strike was over even before teachers even saw the contract, let alone had a chance to vote on it.

“The strike nobody wanted is behind us now,” Beutner declared. Caputo-Pearl said he expected the agreement to be approved.

At the rally the UTLA brought out various bands and singers to create a festive and celebratory atmosphere. Around noon, Caputo-Pearl took the stage to announce that teachers had won a “historic victory” before trying to paint the miserable deal in the brightest colors.

The union deliberately did not want a mass meeting of 33,000 teachers, which would challenge the deal and demand sufficient time to study it. So instead they broke up teachers into 900 separate school locations.

Teachers began receiving emails explaining what appeared to be an ever-changing process involving union reps picking up materials that were then to be distributed to the teachers at their local sites between 2:00 p.m. and 3:00 p.m., and with a vote to follow by 5:00 p.m. Later, the actual 40-page contract appeared on the UTLA website.

Meanwhile, teachers were given conflicting information about meeting and voting places that now included schools, homes, and other unions, etc. Some teachers were advised they would vote between 6:00 p.m. and 8:00 p.m. while others were told they had to vote by 5:30 p.m.

One teacher from Huntington Park described the process: “We had an area meeting at 2 p.m. in Southgate. There was a mad rush to get us the ballots so we could get back to the school sites to vote by 5 p.m. Teachers tried to ask the union questions and they were shouted down.” Another teacher said, “We didn’t have enough time. The contract was shabbily put together. I resented that we didn’t have all the details. It was an insult to our intelligence.”

All of this served to minimize the time teachers would have to actually study and discuss the contract. This was necessitated because any thorough reading of the contract would have revealed the deceptive, misleading and false statements that had been made by Caputo-Pearl and the UTLA.

Among the countless examples is the claim of a 6 percent raise over two years with no health care increase. Aside from the two 3 percent raises—actually below the rate of inflation in LA—being virtually the same offer as before the strike, the UTLA failed to disclose that the contract contained language regarding “reopeners,” which will likely be used to demand wage freezes and cuts to pensions. This would more than chew up any raises.

As to UTLA’s much touted “victory” in hiring more nurses,

librarians, and counselors, what was not revealed is the fact that there is a strong likelihood that none of these positions will be filled. These new positions are staggered during the contract and do not go into effect until the beginning of the next school year. The deal includes this escape clause, which reads: “In the event the District is not able to meet the obligations” to hire new staff by October 1 of the school year, the UTLA can file a grievance!

Lastly, the UTLA has hailed the worthless promise to get the Board of Education to agree to vote on a resolution calling for the state to establish a cap on charter schools. Considering that the school board has a pro-charter majority, and the Democratic legislature has been responsible for making California the leading charter school state in the country, such a “victory” is nothing but a cynical fraud.

No organization that genuinely represented the working class would function like this. There is growing opposition among rank-and-file teachers against the UTLA, which has proven to be a tool of the Democratic Party and the powerful financial interests that are pushing for the privatization of public education.

Already teachers are discussing organizing opposition independently of the UTLA. This underscores the importance of the call by the WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* for the formation of rank-and-file workplace committees, democratically controlled by educators themselves, which are completely independent of the unions and the two corporate-controlled parties.

These committees must reject what the political establishment and the unions say is “affordable” and base themselves on what is necessary for the working class. They must fight to link up the struggle of LA teachers with educators across the state, the US and internationally, and fight to mobilize the power of the working class in a counter-offensive against austerity and social inequality and the capitalist system that produces it.

The WSWS *Teacher Newsletter* will give educators all the assistance it can to take forward this fight.



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