

“It was rushed. It was a farce”

Los Angeles teachers livid over union’s betrayal of strike

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In discussions during and after work and on social media, teachers in Los Angeles are expressing their deep anger over how the United Teachers Los Angeles shut down their six-day strike and rushed through a vote on a contract Tuesday night that they had little or no time to review. Educators in the nation’s second-largest school district are also livid over how their demands for small class sizes, increased staffing and ending the expansion of charter schools were ignored in the three-year deal.

UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl described the operation to steamroll the contract through as “democracy in action.” In reality, 33,000 teachers were told to go online to get the full 40-page contract, read it, and show up to vote at over 900 local sites between 5:00-7:00 p.m. As one teacher put it, “It was rushed. It was a farce!”

The union announced that 81 percent of the membership voted ‘yes’ to ratify the agreement, with 73 percent—or 24,720 members—voting, with 20,024 saying ‘yes,’ and 4,696 voting ‘no.’ The results, which have been met with deep skepticism, are entirely illegitimate, given how the vote was conducted.

The immense opposition and anger among the rank-and-file teachers were expressed in numerous comments denouncing the contract on the union’s Facebook page. Many were deleted. Conscious of this, the UTLA website said, “We know that our effort to move the voting process quickly and get people back to work as soon as possible has caused frustration for some. We empathize with this.... UTLA is extending the vote to Friday at 6 p.m. for those who haven’t had a chance to cast a ballot.” Teachers would have to go to the 10th floor of the union headquarters to vote.

At a press conference on Tuesday morning, Caputo-Pearl stood side by side with Mayor Eric Garcetti and LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner to announce that a deal had been reached to end the strike and that teachers would be returning to their classrooms on Wednesday morning. This pronouncement was made before teachers voted or even saw the contract.

At the Tuesday rally downtown where the deal was announced, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to Yvette, an elementary school teacher. “These negotiations should have been live streamed. Those last five days were closed-door. We don’t know what’s in the contract, and we need time to view the document. We need to know the details.

“They’re just appeasing us with music and festivities. Caputo-Pearl said some things like class size reduction were going to happen gradually. We weren’t here chanting for ‘gradual.’”

Another teacher said, “This is a nationwide thing. It’s a systemic problem. That’s why you see teachers walking out in different states.”

Other teachers gave details about how the deal was rushed through.

“Caputo-Pearl said he didn’t want to burden us with all the details,” James told the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter*. “Well, teachers have degrees. It’s so insulting. I’m intelligent. I can read details. When you hear someone say, ‘Hey, just have faith, trust me,’ that’s the beginning of a rotten scheme. We’re really tired of being stepped on.”

One elementary school teacher in Huntington Park said, “The union’s been negotiating for over 20 months, and they gave us 2-1/2 hours to vote. It was rushed. It was a farce.

“At the area meeting Tuesday afternoon in South Gate, there was a mad rush to hand out the ballots so we could get back to the school sites to vote by 5 p.m. The place was full of chapter chairs and those close to the union bureaucrats, the true believers. They were excited and cheerleading about the contract. Everything was rush, rush, rush.

“There was a mic, so somebody asked a question about class size reduction for fifth grade. Someone from the negotiating team was there, and they couldn’t even answer the question. I was amazed. Then the teacher was shouted down, with some supporters of the union, real believers, saying, ‘Read the contract. It’s in the contract!’

“I tried to read it, all 40 pages, on my little screen, but it was very difficult. Actually, I found the district’s description of the contract much clearer than the union. We get a few more counselors in the first year, zero in the second, and then about 70 in the third year. Many things are like that, postponed to the final year of the contract. It’s seems like a sleight of hand. We lost a lot.

“I heard on the radio that they’re giving additional days for teachers to vote. But it’s a done deal.”

Nancy, a primary grades teacher, said, “On Tuesday I was at the doctor’s office watching the breaking news. I was not happy, especially when I started reading the contract. The union said the fight was about charters and privatization, but they dropped those demands before the strike even began. The UTLA also said that they agreed to not file any more unfair labor practice charges.

“Everything was so confusing and rushed. I only found out we were supposed to vote that day because my friend called me at 5:00 and asked if I was going to vote. What about all the teachers who were out sick, on workers’ comp, or not listening to the news? How were they supposed to know?”

Nancy is one of many high-seniority teachers who have been caught up in LAUSD’s “teacher jails.” These teachers are punished after being accused of violating some arbitrary rule. This practice was initiated by a previous superintendent, John Deasy, in order to block retiring teachers from collecting their pensions as well as full medical benefits in retirement. The union has done nothing to defend framed-up teachers.

One of the results of the 1989 strike was the right of

retirees to receive full medical benefits and a yearly two percent cost-of-living raise for life. In most districts, teachers lose their medical coverage once they retire. The deal the UTLA just signed includes a contract “reopener” on pension benefits. There is no doubt LAUSD Superintendent Beutner will demand sweeping concessions since he has repeatedly claimed that the district is on the verge of insolvency due to supposedly “unsustainable pension obligations.”

According to Nancy, originally, these accused educators in “teacher jails,” many of whom are not even aware of what they are charged with, had to serve time in designated rooms in the district office without books, laptops, or phones. Now “housed teachers” are forced to stay inside their own homes. “It’s not a free, no work day,” she said. “Instead it’s depressing and stressful. It’s like a form of house arrest without due process.”

She said, “This has to change. I believe in a general strike. I think we need to form labor caucuses independent of the unions to unite the working class.”

Sentiments like these are growing. Increasingly teachers and other workers across the US and internationally, are concluding a new road of struggle must be opened up. This underscores the importance of the call by the *WSWS Teacher Newsletter* for the formation of rank-and-file workplace and factory committees, which are independent of the unions and both corporate-controlled parties, and the development of an industrial and political counteroffensive by the working class against austerity, social inequality and the capitalist system.



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