

After sellout of Los Angeles teachers strike, new attacks on public schools coming

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30 January 2019

The strike of 33,000 Los Angeles teachers ended a week ago following a six-day walkout that had massive public support. The strike in the nation's second largest school district ended in the early morning on January 22 when the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union agreed to a sellout deal, which failed to meet the teachers' most critical demands to reduce class sizes, increase wages, stop the expansion of charter schools, and address chronically underfunded budgets.

The agreement and its aftermath demonstrate the urgent necessity of Los Angeles teachers and school workers to form their own rank-and-file committees independently of the unions and join the emerging struggles of teachers in Oakland, Sacramento, Rocklin and across the state and across the country.

After the UTLA reached the deal, brokered by leading Democrats including Mayor Eric Garcetti and Governor Gavin Newsom, the union stampeded teachers into approving the deal without giving them sufficient time to study and discuss the 40-page contract.

Knowing full well that they would encounter mass opposition if they called a mass meeting of the 33,000 striking teachers to vote on the deal, the UTLA broke up the teachers into 900 separate locations. Teachers who tried to ask questions were shouted down. Summing up the process, a teacher said, "We didn't have enough time. The contract was shabbily put together. We didn't have all the details. It was an insult to our intelligence."

Prior to the deal's announcement, district and the union officials spent nearly five days in closed-door negotiations where not only the terms of the deal were discussed but how it would be sold and packaged to skeptical teachers and the hundreds of thousands of parents, youth and workers who had supported them.

Though the need to vote within hours applied to the teachers, an entirely different standard applied to the Los Angeles Board of Education, which also had to vote on

the agreement. The board had initially been given at least one week, until Tuesday to review, study, discuss and vote on the agreement. The agreement was passed in a vote taken Tuesday night.

School board officials also passed a nonbinding resolution that calls for a statewide moratorium on new charter schools, an entirely meaningless gesture, which the UTLA hailed as one of the "victories" in the deal. The Democratic Party, which has a super-majority in both houses of the state legislature and has long controlled the governor's office, has overseen the largest growth of charter schools in the US.

From the outset, the district, in collaboration with the state Democrats, made clear that any agreement would be made entirely on its terms. The UTLA, despite its rhetorical attacks on Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Superintendent Austin Beutner and his "billionaire school privatizers," readily agreed, offering concession after concession.

An article in the *Los Angeles Times* posted January 27 revealed significant details about how this process took place. According to the Times, almost every issue ended up at the same spot, "money."

According to the *Times*, as the negotiations entered their end phase, "LAUSD negotiators were exerting more control of the financial parameters of a deal, making it all the more important for the union to have wins not tied to big dollars: more green space for schools; a legal fund for immigrant families; fewer random searches of students for weapons; a working group to examine excessive standardized testing; more say about how campuses would be shared with privately run charter schools."

School district officials agreed to these cosmetic measures because they either didn't cost a dime or were dependent upon outside funding sources. Thus, the district was able to work within its underfunded budget, and UTLA could add these essentially cost-free measures to

its list of “historic victories.”

Moreover, many of those costless “wins” for the union commit the district to do absolutely nothing. Instead of actually reducing punitive standardized testing, a “working group” is formed to examine and make recommendations to address standardized testing. Instead of ending or even regulating the process of sharing traditional public-school campus space with privately run charters, the UTLA is to have a “say” in how those spaces are shared.

The demands that actually required an increase in funding—wages and the hiring of more nurses, librarians, and counselors—are also more of an illusion than a fact.

Prior to the strike, the district offered a 6 percent wage increase contingent on health care changes, specifically eliminating lifetime health benefits for retirees. UTLA has claimed that the 6 percent raise finally included in the tentative agreement (a raise that will not even cover the cost of inflation during the contract’s three-year term) was achieved “without any contingencies.”

The contract, however, provides for salary openers effective on January 1 of 2020 and 2021, and expressly states that on January 1, 2020 “it is the District’s intent to use one of its openers to address retiree health benefits issues.” In other words, after the union withdrew its proposal for a 6.5 percent wage increase in favor the district’s 6 percent, the agreement still allows for the district to proceed with its intended attack on health care benefits.

While the union claims it forced the district to end its practice of unilaterally increasing class sizes, educators will still be burdened with overcrowded classes. As one UTLA spokesman lectured teachers, “reaching the promised land” of reducing class sizes would take years because it is “such a costly, expensive undertaking.”

The centerpiece of the UTLA’s supposed victory is the hiring, beginning the next school year, of 300 more nurses, and more librarians and counselors. The actual agreement, however, again illustrates that this too is an illusion. The contract, however, includes the following loophole:

“In the event the District is not able to meet the obligations....by October 1st of each school year, if UTLA files a grievance for alleged violations of those Sections, the grievance will be immediately placed into abeyance for a period of thirty (30) days in order to allow the parties to explore options to resolve the alleged violation.” This bogus process can be continued in 30-day increments virtually forever.

Announcing the deal last week, Beutner, a former investment banker, called it 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.”

On Tuesday, however, the Los Angeles County Office of Education, an oversight agency, issued a report that concluded that aspects of the contract may not be sustainable and cited concerns over the district’s long-term financial outlook. The county also continued its threats to place the district under its control and use emergency measures to dictate spending.

In other words, the sellout of the strike has paved the way for a massive escalation on Los Angeles teachers. Beutner is preparing to break up the school district into smaller pieces in order to expand the number of charter schools, which siphon students, school building space and resources from the traditional public schools. The deal just struck will give the UTLA a “seat at the table” to help implement this attack while preserving the financial and institutional interests of the union apparatus, including gaining access to a new stream of dues income from low-paid charter school teachers.

The claim by the Democrats and the UTLA that there is no money is a fraud. California is home to the largest number of billionaires in the US. However, the Democrats have no more intention than the Republicans of encroaching on the private fortunes of the super-rich.

Just as the teachers in West Virginia, Oklahoma and other states are being thrust into struggle again after their statewide strikes were betrayed by the unions last year, LA teachers will face new battles sooner rather than later. That is why new organizations of struggle are needed. Teachers must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the unions, to mobilize the working class based not on what the powers-that-be claim they can afford but what is necessary to guarantee the social rights of all workers, including the right to high quality public education.



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