

In wake of January teachers strike, further attacks on public schools planned in Los Angeles

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Details are emerging of how the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) intends to continue its assault on teachers in the wake of the teachers strike last month. United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) shut down the strike after six days on the basis of a rotten agreement that meets none of the main demands of teachers and facilitates the plans of LAUSD.

Last week, the district released details of plans to restructure the nation's second largest school district after repeated requests by the media and school board members who had been kept in the dark. Involving millions of dollars in payments to high-priced consulting outfits, the plans would break up the district into multiple local networks.

Although the district denies any correlation, these plans are fully in line with the "portfolio model" announced by LAUSD superintendent Austin Beutner. Beutner is a former investment banker and State Department official under the Clinton administration in the 1990s.

Beutner's portfolio model treats education assets strictly as private investment vehicles. University of Washington professor Paul Hill, who developed the idea in 2006, describes the operations of such schools. "School boards would closely manage their community's portfolio of educational service offerings, divesting less productive schools and adding more promising ones," Hill said.

According to the details thus far released on the LAUSD's privatization plans, approximately \$1.5 million was provided to the consulting firm of Ernst & Young while \$765,000 was provided to the Kitamba Group, another firm specializing in education policy.

While the Kitamba group's public website contains little information aside from typically vacuous corporate marketing material—"We are entrepreneurial and nimble problem solvers that focus on measureable and sustainable results"—the firm has been instrumental in designing and implementing various school privatization schemes including in Colorado, Texas and other locations. Moreover, funding for its projects is not being provided by the district but by wealthy private donors, including the Ballmer Group of former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation and the

Weingart Foundation.

The latest plans of Kitamba include the implementation of a performance-based rating system for schools along with the shifting of hiring decisions from the central district office to local campus networks. Letter grades are to be provided to individual campuses, ranking each on a 100-point scale. Consequences for poor evaluations are not fully disclosed, however they are likely of a highly punitive character involving either losses of funding or outright school closures.

The contract with Kitamba also requests the drafting of a proposal for each local network to accept or refuse services from the district central office.

UTLA has done nothing to resist the implementation of this policy, especially because it hopes to reap the rewards of captive dues-paying teachers in whatever scheme is ultimately enacted by the district. While the union was in a negotiations impasse with the district last fall, for example, Superintendent Beutner announced the firing of dozens of central office staff, an obvious preparatory maneuver for the planned cutting up of the district. This move elicited no response whatsoever from UTLA.

Furthermore, UTLA president Alex Caputo-Pearl wrote an op-ed in the *Los Angeles Times* January criticizing elements of Beutner's portfolio model plan while again offering no concrete plans to oppose it. Writing in early January, prior to the LA Teachers strike, Caputo-Pearl wrote, "Beutner has moved ahead with what we believe is his agenda to dismantle the district. This approach, drawn from Wall Street, is called the 'portfolio' model, and it has been criticized for having a negative effect on student equity and parent inclusion."

In spite of these comments, Caputo-Pearl and the union bureaucracy were more than willing to meet with Beutner behind closed doors to shut down the teachers strike and ram through a concessions contract that did nothing whatsoever to stop the implementation of the portfolio model. The agreement also did nothing to stop the growth of private charter schools, of which Los Angeles has more than any other district in the country.

In fact, soon before the strike even began, UTLA dropped its

demands around charter schools and standardized testing with the ultimate agreement containing no limitations on the district for either. Unsurprisingly, the deal was subsequently hailed by Beutner himself in a joint press conference with Caputo-Pearl and Los Angeles mayor Eric Garcetti as a “new chapter in labor management collaboration.”

What the union and its pseudo-left collaborators in the International Socialist Organization and Democratic Socialists of America continuously call a “historic victory” was in fact a tremendous blow to teachers and public education. The deal was widely hated by Los Angeles teachers, many of whom felt cruelly betrayed by the union.

One user on UTLA’s Twitter account wrote, “Why so many days of strike, just to settle for what was offered the first day?” Another wrote, “Now we know when negotiations were kept secret. UTLA sold out the teachers.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Los Angeles teachers to review the lessons of the LA teachers in the wake of the Denver, Colorado teacher strike shutdown as well as the strike of Oakland, California teachers initiated Thursday.

Ric, a fifth-grade teacher in LAUSD, spoke about his reaction to the latest contract agreement.

“The UTLA teachers strike has been billed as a historic victory for teachers. It’s hardly that in my case. In my case, nothing will actually change in my classroom except I’ll be over \$1,000 short this year because of the strike. The addition of an extra 124 nurses beyond the district’s final offer isn’t ‘historic’ in a district with over 1,000 schools.”

Ric continued, “The 6 percent raise [in the tentative agreement] is identical to the district’s final offer. The agreement also calls for joint committees to study charter co-location, pay equity across adult, early education and green space on campuses. Everything in the agreement is toothless, and it binds the district to no commitment other than to study the issues and make recommendations. I don’t recall any agreement on the superintendent’s plan to break the 2nd largest school district into 32 portfolio districts and by the time the small reductions in class size occur, the contract will have expired anyway.

“This contract changes absolutely nothing in the classroom that wasn’t already offered by the district. Seeing as the teachers in LA had such overwhelming support from the public, we should have been able to do better in the richest state in the richest nation on Earth controlled 100 percent by Democrats.”

Another LAUSD teacher who wished to remain anonymous spoke about the issue arising from the strike.

“A lot of the teachers I know don’t even know the details of the contract. They are too busy now, and the union only gave them two hours to vote on it. A lot of the language was very difficult to read if you’re not familiar with such things.

“During the lead-up to and during the strike, many of the UTLA chapter chairs didn’t even allow us to discuss the strike with them. They show up and tell us what our media talking

points are and what our marching slogans are going to be and then they leave. Sometimes we get literally two or three minutes to ask them questions, but that’s it.”

As recent events in West Virginia also make clear, the teachers unions are doing everything in their power to prevent teachers strikes from expanding. In that state, the West Virginia Education Association shut down the strike in advance of the teacher strike in Oakland, California, fearful that teachers may get the idea of expanding their strikes nationwide.

Moreover, the agreement in Los Angeles actually contains provisions to create “community schools” which are in line with the local network and portfolio model plans advocated by the district. While the union champions the community schools as part of its “schools LA students deserve” campaign, they were in fact first embraced by the district itself in 2017. The community schools create local networks of campuses using wraparound services, i.e. reducing costs for school services by sharing among multiple schools and thereby opening them up to further cost cutting and private investment.

Former board head Ref Rodriguez, backed by the charter school industry before pleading guilty to felony conspiracy charges related to his 2015 school board campaign, cosponsored the measure. Said Rodriguez, “I believe our schools belong to the community. I support the community school strategy because it is research-based and calls upon all of us to provide our students with the holistic supports and services they need to thrive in school.”

Kitamba had previously implemented such a system called the “System of Great Schools” strategy in Midland, Texas in 2017. A similar initiative was also started by the firm in Denver, Colorado and which prompted a mass strike of Denver teachers prior to being shut down by the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) last week. Like UTLA before them, the DCTA reached an agreement with the district behind closed doors and told teachers to return to work even before they had a chance to see the new agreement and vote on it.



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