

Unions employ scare tactics in attempt to blackmail Los Angeles and Oakland teachers into adopting return to school agreement

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Yesterday morning, 27,000 teachers in Los Angeles represented by the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) began voting on a tentative agreement (TA) that the UTLA and Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) agreed to on March 9. The agreement intends to reopen schools in the second largest district in the country for in-person learning as early as April 19 for elementary schools.

This week, the majority of the state of California entered the “Red tier” from the more restrictive “Purple tier” of coronavirus infection rates, not because counties reported significant declines in case numbers and positivity rates, but because the tier metrics were altered for the purpose of getting the major districts—Los Angeles, Alameda, and San Diego counties—into the Red tier, the prerequisite for reopening.

The UTLA is working overtime to scare teachers into adopting the TA. On Thursday afternoon, the union released a six-minute advertisement on its Facebook page. In the advertisement, the UTLA contends that because other districts from New York to Chicago have been forced to reopen with even fewer protections, Los Angeles teachers should consider themselves lucky to at least have access to vaccines.

In the video, the UTLA explicitly states that “A no vote means we don’t have an agreement and that LAUSD would be allowed the directive to unilaterally reopen physical school sites without our enforceable safety conditions in place.”

The UTLA wants teachers to believe that if the contract is not adopted, bargaining essentially ends, and all of the minimal and still insufficient safety measures such as daily symptom reporting, temperature checks

and air filters will be revoked. The absurd framework which UTLA has laid out is an ultimatum and scare tactic used to push teachers to return to campuses.

The same tactic is being used on Oakland Unified School District (OUSD) teachers who are also voting over the weekend on a nearly identical tentative agreement which the Oakland Education Association (OEA) executive board agreed to. Oakland teachers are being told that they must not show divided sentiment, but should instead join together and show the district they are “unified” in returning.

The tentative agreement issued by the OEA and OUSD also has teachers accept a miserly bribe of \$200 per week to those who volunteer to come back to campus on March 25. The agreement also includes a one-time \$2,000 stipend for all teachers who come back on April 14.

In Los Angeles, news station KTLA ran a report highlighting the safety preparations being made at a wealthy Hollywood school. Principal Karen Hollis and another school official reported that 90 percent of its parents wanted in-person education, a clear indication of the wealthier demographic and squeaky clean school. Also shown were distanced marked out spots on the playground where students were expected to “stand and talk” to each other before school.

However, when asked by reporters how new CDC guidelines lowering the distance requirements from six to three feet would affect the school, the official said “That’s the limiting factor, we don’t have the classroom space to bring students back at 100% capacity with six-foot distancing. We could at three or two feet.”

Los Angeles teachers voting on the latest tentative

agreement have been given numerous promises of dashboard tracking, publishing of case numbers and notifications of exposures, and two-day test turn around for biweekly testing are promised in the TA. Such promises, however, make little impression on teachers who have long worked in schools with crumbling infrastructure and deeply underfunded classrooms.

Oppositional comments from educators that have flooded the UTLA Facebook page are often deleted with the offending posters suspended from the page. Educators are denouncing the scare tactics and numerous others are declaring their plans to vote no and reject the ultimatum.

Ric, a fifth grade teacher in LAUSD, told the WSWS that the TA has been met with significant pushback and anger from educators. “I’ve been against the TA and calling for a no vote on the UTLA FB page. I don’t hide my opinions among my colleagues at school. One teacher said we’re going to look bad, look selfish if we vote against it. But then later, she did a 180 and talked about all the flaws in it and how it’s going to be so disruptive to teachers’ lives.

“One thing in the TA is that the district is requiring us to get COVID tests, but that’s on us, on our own time but I myself can’t do that. After work, I need to get home right away because I have an elderly family member I’m taking care of. I can’t stop somewhere on the way home and get a COVID test.

“First, the union rep said it was up to us. If we didn’t think it was a good deal, then go ahead and vote no. After that, he came out with all the scare tactics: if we don’t vote for it, the district’s going to impose it anyway; it’s going to make teachers look bad, make us look selfish, etc. He said if the majority vote no, then it means a strike. But actually, that’s not true. There’s a long process we have to go through before we strike.

“Last Thursday, the Board of Ed. had a special meeting. First, they announced that there’s a new process for addressing the Board starting that day. There will be no speakers or visitors allowed into the board room because of COVID, and speakers have to sign up in advance using the website. So, it’s not okay for people to attend the board meeting in person because of COVID, and yet it’s okay for teachers and students to meet in person in the schools?”

The vote is a sham, Ric said. “The district and union already agreed to it last week. It’s a done deal. The

UTLA really is hoping that by throwing the vote to the teachers that they can then blame us. They’re hoping a lot of teachers will vote for it, using their scare tactics. UTLA President, Cecily Myart-Cruz, knows this is a bad contract, and she signed her name to it on March 9, last Tuesday.”

Two weeks ago, the UTLA held consultative votes giving teachers a “choice” between returning under the inadequate conditions demanded by the union or returning sooner on the demands of the school district. The TA that teachers are currently voting on throughout the weekend was signed on March 9, almost immediately after the previous vote concluded. The vote has been revealed as a distraction while UTLA was nailing down the deadly plot with LAUSD.

Both the Oakland and Los Angeles unions posture as “radical” unions and attempt to couch their betrayals through the use of identity politics, but just like the fake-left Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), they are working behind the scenes within the highest echelons of the state and ruling class to prove their usefulness and push teachers into classrooms so that workers can get back to work for corporate profits.

But educators face an enemy not only in the UTLA or the OEA but in the entire Democratic-run state and the Biden administration. The push to get educators from Los Angeles to Oakland to accept the dangerous reopening deals must be opposed. Educators must unite throughout the West Coast and begin to organize themselves independently of the unions and the Democratic Party spearheading the deadly reopening campaign.

We encourage educators, parents, students and all workers to attend the next meeting hosted by the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committees this Saturday at 2 p.m. PDT to take this struggle forward. Register today and invite your coworkers and friends to attend!



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