

As Delta variant takes root in Southern California

Los Angeles teachers union reaches agreement to fully reopen schools

Hong Jian, Kimie Saito
6 July 2021

The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), which nominally represents more than 30,000 teachers in the country's second largest school district, has approved a side letter tentative agreement (TA) with the district for the summer session and upcoming school year. Under the terms of the agreement, the district's 1,000 schools, serving over 600,000 students, opened on June 23 for daily in-person instruction with only three-foot distancing between desks.

Without any discussion, the school board approved the agreement only one day before schools reopened. A dangerous precedent has been set by the UTLA which will be followed by districts throughout the West Coast.

The reckless school reopening agreement has been finalized as Los Angeles County, like many other parts of the US, experiences another surge of COVID-19 cases as the Delta variant has begun to take hold. In fact, the county reported 506 new infections last Thursday, its largest daily increase in coronavirus cases since mid-April. Furthermore, children under 12 years old—the majority of students returning to classrooms—are not yet eligible for the vaccine and remain unprotected from the virus.

Meanwhile, the number of Delta variant cases sequenced in county labs has doubled, reaching a total of 245 last week, or roughly 44 percent of all cases sequenced, according to LA County Public Health Director Barbara Ferrer. "Given that 4 million residents in LA County are not yet vaccinated, the risk of increased spread is very real," Ferrer said.

While the union is boasting that 94 percent of teachers approved the TA, the reality is that only 12,193 out of over 30,000 classroom teachers, counselors, nurses, psychologists, social workers and librarians in district and charter schools actually voted; 18,000 abstained from the vote.

"With the approval of this agreement, schools across Los Angeles will have critical COVID safety protocols in place when we welcome students back to the joys of full-time in-person learning," said UTLA President Cecily Myart-Cruz.

Superintendent Austin Beutner, who retired immediately after the agreement was reached, insisted that the district implemented "the highest set of safety standards of any school district in the nation" to protect against COVID-19 as campuses welcomed back students this spring, pointing to upgraded air filtration systems, sanitation efforts and supplies of protective equipment.

Among the provisions of the agreement with UTLA is a requirement for COVID-19 testing at least every two weeks, maintaining a public "dashboard" to report all positive cases, mandatory symptom-screening of all students, staff and visitors entering a school site, along with continued physical distancing requirements and mandatory wearing of masks. The deal also calls for "regular" cleaning and replacement as needed of classroom air filters.

For parents who opt to keep their kids learning safely from home, the deal calls for elementary students to have three hours of daily live online instruction in addition to assigned independent work. Secondary school students will have three 75-minute periods per day with at least 40 minutes of live instruction per period, as well as assigned independent work.

The agreement also calls for all school sites to have a COVID-19 Compliance Task Force. The task forces, similar to those set up after the 2019 Los Angeles teachers strike, are essentially window dressing with no real enforcement capabilities.

Teachers who returned to classrooms in April noted that six-foot and even three-foot distancing guidelines were impossible to meet, with promised supplies of PPE, soap and hand sanitizer ranging from inadequate to nonexistent.

Not only does the UTLA/LAUSD reopening plan not enjoy the confidence of schoolteachers, but parents also are highly reluctant to send their children back into unsafe classrooms with students under the age of 12 completely unvaccinated. At the close of the 2020-2021 school year, only 30 percent of elementary students and 7 percent of

LAUSD high school students had returned back to classrooms.

Those students who did return often received “zoom in a room” style instruction, underscoring the fact that the school reopening plan has nothing to do with improving educational outcomes and everything to do with getting parents back into unsafe workplaces to produce corporate profits.

In presenting the latest TA to teachers, the UTLA once again regurgitated many of the same lies from its initial campaign to open schools in April, in line with the nationwide policy of the Biden administration. As with the first TA agreed to in March, the UTLA claimed that it provided for all of the necessary conditions for a safe return to school by stating that they will provide “enforceable safety conditions and protocols at every school, including PPE, physical distancing, improved ventilation, and daily cleaning.”

In response, Ric, a fifth grade teacher in LAUSD who recently retired, stated, “Back in April after the first TA was passed, the air conditioning and fan unit in my classroom were not working. I informed the principal and told her if they weren’t working, I would refuse to teach inside of a classroom and would opt to teach outside on the grass. I had to complain loudly for three days before it got fixed. Our site rep didn’t like that I told him that my AC and fan units weren’t working. I told him he should go to all the classrooms and note what had to be fixed. He quit soon after that. Seems pretty worthless. Many teachers’ non-functioning ACs did get fixed due to my loud complaints.”

Responding to the three-foot social distancing measure, Ric stated, “Three-foot separation instead of six feet allows them to pack the classroom as usual.”

Ric commented, “On this latest TA, that vote was engineered by the UTLA. The teachers had no choice. Again, when they say ‘regular’ cleaning, what does that mean? The same rules were used after the first TA, and ‘regular’ meant maybe once a week, in reality. That’s not clean.”

Not only is it not clean, but it stands in stark contrast to Section V, Part C of the new TA, which states, “Cleaning and Daily Disinfecting—The District shall ensure all classrooms, restrooms, and workspaces are cleaned regularly and all high touch surfaces are disinfected daily. Unit members shall not be expected to provide these services.”

The WSWs interviewed another teacher, Sarah, who teaches high school English at LAUSD. She said, “These are my issues with the results of the UTLA vote. First of all, we don’t know that schools are safe. The number of students that returned in-person at the end of the year was nothing. I had one student in my room, and teachers that had students had between one to three maximum. That is not at all

comparable to 35 in a room.”

Sarah continued, “For parents that want to opt out of in-person learning, their child will have to enroll in City of Angels for online school in the fall. I worked at City of Angels for one year, and I can tell you the quality of instruction is not at all the same. It has also not been explained what the rules for choosing the online option are.”

In regard to social distancing, Sarah said, “Three feet of social distancing is not possible in many classrooms that I have worked in over the years and definitely not possible in the school I am in now. The school I work in has roving teachers because there aren’t even classrooms.”

As for ventilation, she said, “I have worked in multiple schools, including the one I am in now, that have no windows. Many CDC articles about classrooms specifically mention the importance of keeping windows and doors open.

“LAUSD says ventilation systems have been upgraded, but I am not sure what this means. At my school, when I complained about how small my room was, they wheeled in a little ventilation unit, a box on wheels. How do people know if this box is enough to clean the air in a room?”

The voting on the TA began on June 15, four days after the last day of school in a year of unprecedented changes and trauma due to the pandemic. Normally, teachers are working to complete report cards, cleaning out their classrooms for the summer, attending end-of-the-year events like graduations and other assemblies.

June 15 was also the day that Los Angeles County fully reopened along with the rest of California. According to the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH), the county saw 210 new cases of COVID-19, and the test positivity rate was around 0.5 percent. In the two weeks since, those numbers have doubled.

At the same time, the LACDPH has warned that because of the increasing circulation of variants of concern, such as the Delta variant, there is a heightened risk of infection for those who are not vaccinated. On June 30, less than 50 percent of the county’s current metro population of 12,459,000 had been vaccinated.

Teachers, parents, students and support staff are rightly angry at the UTLA betrayals, and fearful of the dangers of the pandemic with the return to full-time schooling. We urge all those opposed to the reckless reopening of schools who wish to fight back to join and help build the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee today.



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact