

Los Angeles teachers and support staff face June 30 contract expiration

Hong Jian, Marc Wells
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The three-year contract between the second largest school district in the United States, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) is set to expire on June 30. The labor agreement covers 34,000 teachers and support staff.

The current contract was signed after the UTLA's betrayal of the powerful six-day strike in 2019. Forced to call the strike, the UTLA and the national American Federation of Teachers (AFT) did everything to isolate the struggle and collude with city and state Democrats to shut it down as soon as possible. The deal was rushed through without giving educators and staff sufficient time to study and discuss it.

As the WSWs said at the time, 'Teachers returned to their classrooms Thursday still shocked and outraged over how the UTLA pushed through a contract that ignored their most critical demands to increase wages and school funding, reduce class sizes and stop the expansion of charter schools. One teacher described feeling like there was 'a hole in her heart' and reported seeing teachers crying because nothing they went on strike for was realized.'

Educators and school staff are currently under an unprecedented strain, made worse by the COVID pandemic. According to a report from the National Education Association in February, 55 percent of US educators are thinking about leaving the profession earlier than planned. This adds to staff shortages, burnout and an accelerated crumbling of public education.

In the lead-up to the negotiations that began Thursday, May 12, the UTLA had been touting its Beyond Recovery Platform (BRP) which, it says, received a 96 percent "yes" vote from union members. The platform, which would be the basis of negotiations with district officials, is a compilation of generalities that commits the UTLA to doing absolutely nothing about educators' real grievances.

The UTLA put forward an initial proposal which UTLA President Cecily Myart-Cruz called the union's "most ambitious bargaining platform" ever.

The union's wage demand—which it will no doubt retreat

from—is for a 10 percent raise in each of the first two years of a three-year contract. Even if this were achieved, the raise would amount to only a 1.7 percent increase in real wages, given the 8.3 percent annual inflation rate. This would do little to stop the continued erosion of living standards. Housing costs in Los Angeles are already beyond reach for most educators and the price of gas in LA County is over \$6.00 a gallon.

Similar to the last round of negotiations in 2019, the UTLA is calling for a reduction in class sizes. In regard to this, the UTLA claimed: 'An essential victory from the 2019 UTLA strike was the elimination of Section 1.5 from the contract, which had allowed the district to unilaterally ignore class size averages and caps. The win created enforceable limits for the first time in decades as the initial steps in a multi-year struggle to dramatically reduce class sizes.'

These "initial steps" did absolutely nothing. The only limits for classroom sizes appear to be how many desks can fit in any given classroom. This time around, the union is calling for a reduction of class sizes by four students over the next three years, which itself is utterly insufficient. Teachers were promised reduced class sizes as a safety measure most recently during the return to in-person learning late last year. Despite a pandemic, no reduction took place.

In regard to the most important issue, that of the safety and well-being of teachers, staff, students, and the community at large, UTLA's proposal does not mention the word "COVID" at all. This is entirely in line with the lies peddled by the Biden administration, Governor Gavin Newsom and Mayor Eric Garcetti that the pandemic is essentially over. Throughout the pandemic, the UTLA, like its AFT and NEA counterparts across the country, have made sure that students have been kept in infected classrooms so that their parents can be sent to work to make corporate profits.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) reported last week that there were 3,151 students and 737 staff who tested positive for the week ending May 1, a 322 percent increase from the previous month. The

LACDPH also said that the test positivity rate moved up by 163 percent to 0.5 percent. According to LACDPH, in the first week of May there were 16 outbreaks at LAUSD schools, which is five more than the first week in April.

Despite this evidence, UTLA's pandemic strategy consists of "Consistent enforcement of LAUSD policies, including COVID-19 health and safety protocols, at co-located schools." It also calls for "LAUSD to publicly call for and take action to support federal COVID relief monies becoming permanent as of 2024, and publicly call for and, in coalition, take action to support state initiatives in 2024 to permanently increase state school funding."

The UTLA is opposed to any struggle to temporarily close the schools, convert to virtual learning and save lives. At the same time, they are essentially abandoning any struggle for mitigation measures like mask and vaccine mandates, or high-quality air filters and ventilation. Instead, the UTLA is leaving life-and-death decisions in the hands of the LAUSD and the Democratic Party-dominated state government whose murderous policies have already led to more than 90,000 deaths in California alone.

Stopping the expansion of charter schools, one of the main demands of workers in 2019, is completely left out in the UTLA's current contract proposals. In 2019, the UTLA dropped this issue as soon as the LAUSD claimed it was not something that was covered by collective bargaining. In the interim, the UTLA has sought to unionize teachers at Alliance College, the largest charter school chain in Los Angeles, hoping to collect additional dues from these highly exploited educators while subordinating them to the demands of the for-profit charter businesses.

Due to federal and state COVID relief funding, LAUSD increased its current budget by \$5 billion and is set to have billions left at the end of the year. This makes it impossible to claim that there is no money to meet teachers' demands. However, the UTLA is not making any substantial demands. Instead, UTLA officials have no doubt been briefed that after COVID funding runs out, the district will be demanding deep cuts. Meanwhile, LAUSD's new superintendent, Alberto Carvalho, who oversaw \$2 billion in school cuts when he headed the Miami schools in 2008-09, says he wants to "explode choice" and divert even more money to charters and other school privatization schemes.

The UTLA leadership includes members of various pseudo-left organizations, including the Democratic Socialists of America. These groups specialize in promoting identity politics to divide teachers along racial and ethnic lines and cement their relations with the pro-capitalist and pro-war Democratic Party. But the unbroken trail of betrayals of the UTLA and other "left" teacher unions, including the Chicago Teachers Union, the Oakland Education

Association and the Minneapolis Federation of Teachers, has not escaped the attention of rank-and-file educators who are increasingly looking for a real way to fight.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on LA educators to take the initiative into their own hands by forming democratically controlled rank-and-file committees, independent of the UTLA and the Democratic Party. This committee can join with educators across the country and around the world who are forming their own democratically controlled organizations, which are dedicated to what educators and students need, not what the big business politicians claim they can afford.

Surging inflation, the continuing pandemic, rising social inequality and the diversion of vast resources towards Biden's reckless military confrontation with Russia are driving millions of workers into struggle.

In the Golden State, which is becoming a hotbed for summer struggles, more than 2,000 nurses were on strike last week at the Cedars-Sinai Medical Center demanding improved staffing levels, higher pay and better protections against the COVID-19 pandemic, while dockworkers throughout the West Coast are confronted with the prospect of a sellout deal as their contract expires July 1, Chevron oil workers in Richmond, California have been on strike nearly two months and Los Angeles County workers overwhelmingly voted to strike. Sacramento and Oakland educators are also engaged in recent strikes. In each case, workers are being driven to build new organizations of struggle.



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