

Los Angeles teachers face looming austerity as contract set to expire

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Are you a Los Angeles teacher? Make your voice heard and tell us what you think the most important issues are on your struggle. We will keep your identity anonymous.

With the contract between the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) and the Los Angeles, California public schools expiring June 30, teachers, school nurses, school librarians and other staff should be forewarned that in these so-called “negotiations” they face two opponents, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) and their own union. The coming contract will be the fourth contract since the six-day strike of January 2019. In each of these struggles the UTLA leadership has represented the interests not of educators and students, but of big business, the LAUSD and the Democratic Party.

UTLA, which bargains for 35,000 educators, nurses, librarians and other public school employees in Los Angeles, California is negotiating a new two-year contract with the LAUSD, attended by 600,000 students, making it the second largest school district in the US.

The current contract struggle takes place in the context of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic that has seriously impacted the lives of students and educators, and also war, rampaging inflation and impending recession.

Teachers are making enormous personal sacrifices, as they work under enormous pressure, compounded by the COVID pandemic and the lack of any safety measures in public schools. During the first year of the pandemic the retirement rate increased 26 percent. In addition, at least 55 percent are considering early retirement. Schools are hemorrhaging staff largely due to an insufficient living wage and educators are experiencing “burnout.” This is taking place despite the recent estimate of a \$33 billion budget surplus for California’s TK-12 public schools.

UTLA’s bargaining proposals presented last May are based on a platform released last February named “Beyond Recovery,” a so-called “social justice” approach, supposedly based on consultations between parents and teachers. UTLA president Cecily Myart Cruz explained that after supposedly recovering from the coronavirus pandemic, the school

system had to move on.

The union has advanced a series of demands, largely for public show, that it has no intention of seriously fighting for. For the most part the demands raised by the union are subject to interpretation or are so general as to be meaningless. They include fully staffed schools, measures to attract and retain educators, higher pay and better working conditions, equitable access for all students, lower class sizes, more learning time, fewer standardized tests, ethnic studies, special ed, equitable access to technology, safe schools, opposition to criminalizing students, healthy green public schools, support for students, families and communities (homeless, food insecurity), equitable school funding.

The teachers union is also demanding a 20 percent wage increase over two years with 10 percent per year. In 2021 the UTLA negotiated a 5 percent one-year raise. If achieved, these raises would barely match current and anticipated rates of price inflation in Southern California.

Management’s counterproposal rejects the union’s wage demand and calls for measures that strengthen the existing reactionary anti-strike clause of the 2019-2022 agreement. In essence, the strike clause solidifies the role that the UTLA and both national education unions (NEA and AFT), already play in isolating strikes and policing their own members.

The school district is demanding significant changes to the existing anti-strike clause that, in addition to outlawing strikes and slowdowns, would leave workers at the mercy of the courts. LAUSD’s counterproposal specifies that:

“There shall be no strikes, stoppages or interruptions of work, or other concerted activities which interfere directly or indirectly with District operations during the life of this Agreement or any written extension thereof.” Moreover: *“Any employee who violates this Article shall be subject to discipline up to and including termination of employment.”*

UTLA itself is being enlisted as the teachers’ police to “immediately take whatever appropriate action is necessary to prevent and bring about an end to any

concerted activity in violation of this Article.” This would require UTLA to inform teachers that “engaging in such activity may lead to disciplinary action, and that the activity is prohibited.”

Despite the gravity of these provisions, the day following the district’s counter, UTLA’s only “action” was posting a Facebook banner that read “Our union is strong because our members are strong.”

In some ways, UTLA’s current demands and posture are a repeat of those in 2019. The Los Angeles teachers’ strike of January 2019 was abruptly ended in six days, and sold out by the UTLA. In addition to a small wage increase, the new contract failed to meet the teachers’ most critical demands such as reducing class sizes, stopping the expansion of charter schools, and increasing school budgets. The union dutifully pushed for a “yes” vote on the 40-page contract, isolating strikers from each other and giving UTLA members no time to meet and discuss its terms.

While the LAUSD agreed to hire more school nurses and librarians, the union agreed to an escape clause that allowed the district to renege by claiming that there was no money.

Three years later, most of the hiring commitments have gone unfulfilled. The betrayal of the 2019 strike set the stage for a tighter union-management alliance against Los Angeles teachers. This includes the July 2021 agreement to reopen public schools for the 2021-2022 school term, based on the flimsiest of health protections in overcrowded classrooms with the pandemic raging throughout Southern California.

This follows the line of the Democratic Party administration of Governor Gavin Newsom, which has overseen the abandonment of COVID mitigation measures under the Biden administration’s policy of “living with the virus.” Meanwhile, California Democrats continue to starve public schools of critical funding and resources while supporting the spread of charter schools.

In carrying out the mass infection policies of the Democratic party, UTLA presented an ultimatum to teachers warning that if teachers voted “no” then the district would unilaterally impose reopening anyway. Showcasing the level of opposition in the district, only 12,000 UTLA members voted, with more than half, or 18,000 UTLA members abstaining. The real aim of the school reopening was to facilitate the reopening of the California economy by sending parents back to work, endangering their own safety and that of students and teachers.

That agreement was followed by a contract and wage reopener in September 2021 that, besides attempting to spread illusions, did nothing to improve the safety of LAUSD employees or students. Rather, over the past nine months, nearly all COVID-19 safety mitigations have been lifted in the district. Mask mandates were lifted in March.

And by mid-June, the district announced the end of its weekly PCR testing for students. Take home rapid antigen tests will be given to COVID-19-symptomatic students as well as exposed students. Hundreds of thousands of students and staff have been infected and reinfected at schools, and under the present policies, this will only continue with diminished surveillance and reporting.

These present “negotiations” consist of more empty promises regarding protections from COVID-19, in addition to preparation for attacks on living standards and democratic rights on teachers and students.

Yet, with the current contract expiring this Thursday, as of today the UTLA leadership has not called for a strike or any other job action.

This year’s so-called negotiations are taking place in the midst of a world-wide surge in strikes and protests, including public school teachers and educators across the globe. This past week, 50,000 rail workers in Britain struck in a direct challenge to the right-wing Johnson government in response to inflation rates that have reached over 11 percent, while 120,000 teachers in New South Wales, Australia are set to walk out next week.

The LAUSD demands for the UTLA to serve as a strike suppression force are an indication of the fear by both the union, the school district and the ruling class that the ongoing explosion of strikes and walk-outs by educators, health workers and logistics workers will reach a revolutionary dimension.

It is critical that educators draw the lesson of all these experiences and follow the example of other educators in the US and take the fight into their own hands. 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.

The successive betrayals by the UTLA leadership require the formation of workers’ committees that fight both against management and against its agents in the unions. We urge UTLA members to join the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee to carry out a common struggle in defense of wages, health and safety, and education rights across the world.



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