Los Angeles teacher: “I feel like we’re living in a COVID coverup”

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Are you a teacher or school worker in the United States? We want to hear from you and will be publishing further interviews from teachers and school workers on their experiences throughout the pandemic. Fill out the form at the end to let us know what your working conditions are like. We’ll protect your anonymity.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke with Michelle, an Adult Education teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), who spoke out about her experience teaching in the district. Her name has been changed to protect her identity.

Michelle began by describing her position as an adult education teacher in LAUSD.

“I work in adult education. Many of our students are facing poverty and homelessness. We help them get a high school diploma, get into college or find a job.”

“I mean, this is what's supposed to happen. Because that's what our division does, right, we help people out of poverty. That’s our schtick. The program says, ‘Come here, learn a trade, we'll get a good job. You won’t live in poverty anymore. Come here, learn English, you’ll get a better job, you won’t be in poverty anymore.’ Okay, so then they get paid $15 an hour, and they still can't afford rent! And what happens when there are no jobs?

“I just read that there are 100 homeless students just in my local area. A lot of them end up in our program. I’ve had some really great students come in during the pandemic who for various reasons couldn’t do what they had to do in regular school. One of my students lived in a motor home and would Zoom with me from there.

“We are living in a Covid-19 coverup”

Michelle remarked on her experience with COVID in the district.

“I feel like we are living in a COVID-19 coverup. We are ending the COVID testing program as well as the COVID sanitizing program, despite the COVID numbers rising. I did not get COVID until mid-January 2022 when the media was declaring COVID mostly over. Many of my co-workers came down with it. As employees, we were told there was a task force that would contact us when someone we came into contact with got COVID.

“Many of the individuals only knew they had COVID because they tested positive during routine weekly COVID testing and never showed any symptoms. No task force member ever contacted me, or anyone else I spoke to who got COVID during this period. This led me to believe there was no such task force at all or that they were disbanded because ‘COVID is basically over.’

“Two months later, on March 12, 2022, the in-school mask requirement was lifted from LAUSD. Now, any ‘COVID testing’ will be testing students and staff who are only symptomatic, with boxed instant antigen tests. This will effectively keep numbers of asymptomatic people out of the statistics, thus skewing the truth about COVID infections and covering it up. These numbers will also be used to lull students and staff into believing they are safe at school.

“We have lost adult school teachers to Covid. I know one school where I have been accommodated they lost at least two instructors to Covid. At my main campus, we lost one that I know of. She wasn’t very old either, she was in her forties.

“I have an autoimmune disease and had childhood asthma. I worry because if I get it again, it can really do damage. This last case was mild but still I had to get a breather to breathe, and it took two months for that to go away. There’s all sorts of things we don’t know about the virus. Going to campus with mostly all unmasked people scares me, and they have already lowered all the cleaning protocols.

“Many of us did not want to return to the classroom in 2021. When it was decided we had to go back in person, we were told by our union reps that we were going to have to go back, and the side agreements for COVID safety was our best protection. If we did not approve it, they said, the district would not do anything on its own to protect us. There was a pushback, but we were told we were going back whether we were ready or not. Many of us with medical conditions were able to submit reasonable accommodation requests and remain virtual for a longer period of time, but most of us had to report to a school location and teach from a classroom. This provided little to no protection against Covid, as we still had to come to campus. I got Covid while working virtually from an empty classroom.

“They reformed the adult ed program back in 2012 and what stayed open were the occupational centers. We used to have community adult schools in different neighborhoods, but they shut us down and reorganized us. That’s when and why I got sent out of my neighborhood. They were initially going to do away with the entire adult education department, but instead they restructured it. Most of our program focuses on teaching immigrants ESL [English] and teaching job skills.

“When the adult ed department was restructured, they didn’t hire people back to their areas, and some of us are still driving many miles. As I got older they put me on a split shift which made conditions worse.

“My typical workday is from 8am until 2pm and then 6pm till 9pm.

“I’m going to be driving 100 miles a day this year. I’m fighting for accommodations, but they say I belong to this particular school which is far from me. Working for the school district is like slavery because you have no control. And the union does not do anything. When it comes down to it, I feel like I have no choice. I’m a single mom and I have to pay everything.

“When I first started, I was only working two days a week and I would stay at school all day, but it was hard on my son. The changes in work due to Covid were actually beneficial for me, it restructured my life to make it manageable. I have been working with accommodations throughout the

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pandemic, so I can easily come home every day and check on my son, make sure he is doing his schoolwork and that he eats. Then I go back to work again. If I don't do that, and I'm not on him to make sure he does everything, it will not get done. And I'm sorry, if you're somewhere from 8 o'clock in the morning until 9 o'clock at night and you're getting home at 10 o'clock at night, you can't make sure everything gets done. You are fighting to stay awake in the car.

"For me, gas is a major concern. Even before the gas price hikes, it was costing me $100 a week minimum, and that was when I was only going twice a week. With the price of gas now, we're talking about 1,000 bucks a month, because I've got to do the drive twice a day.

"With these prices I almost miss Trump. He was a big idiot blowhard, and I don't agree with most of what he said, but I could eat in a restaurant—can't do that anymore. I could fill my tank up and get to work. Biden, who was supposed to rescue us from the tyranny of Trump—whose crazy antics and Tweets made us look stupid to the world—actually came on strong and callously with an anti-work from home policy. He said, 'Get back to work and fill our great downtowns,' amid uncertain COVID future infections. He has shown zero empathy for working people. He has no idea what it's like to be a worker struggling with real life economic problems. Biden, and the Democratic Party, has lost touch with their constituent's cares and concerns.

"I call Biden the Marie Antoinette of the 21st century. Working people have no gas and so he's like, 'Let them drive Teslas.' Really?!

"We have only been penalized since the 2019 strike"

Michelle also spoke to the fact that conditions in the district were already dire before the pandemic, and noted her experience with the 2019 LAUSD teacher strike.

"I don't work in a regular K-12 environment, so the demands for lower class sizes and more school nurses didn't apply to me. The adult school wants as many students as we can help and we don't have nurses on campus in our program except those teaching or learning in one of our medical Career Technical Education programs. I went on strike because I was taught at an early age not to cross a picket line. I have also been struggling to get a better schedule at a school closer to my home since 2012, and if I do not support the union, it won't support me. Though, the union has been little to no help in assisting me with my cause.

"It feels like we have only been penalized since the strike. The district is not replacing adult ed teachers when there becomes a vacancy, when say, somebody retires. That position is just eliminated. It really limits any opportunity or any possibility of expanding the program and providing options for teachers. I would like to work back in my neighborhood but there are no positions for me to fill. The district is just making the program smaller and smaller. If they want to, they could shut us down tomorrow because the program is not mandated by the state. We are always seeking outside funding.

"My parents were both Teamsters in different industries and I was taught from a very young age, we band together and we fight. Now it just seems like the union forces a contract, and there's nothing we can do. During the strike, we were all anxious to make an agreement and get back to work. We were sent emails that told us of the pay agreements and medical benefits 'wins' urging us to vote to approve as quickly as possible to end the strike before the offer was taken off the table.

Michelle also responded to the current contract negotiations, in which the latest district counter proposal seeks to strengthen the clause against work stoppages in the contract. The contract already states that UTLA members cannot engage in any work stoppage during the term of the contract, and employees can be fired for engaging in any work stoppages independent of the union. The latest proposal from the district seeks to extend the restriction on work stoppages to include any written extensions to the contract, and calls on UTLA to "immediately take whatever appropriate action is necessary to prevent and bring about an end' to any violations of this anti-strike ban by its members. Further, the district is seeking to take any disputes regarding contract violations to the courts rather than the contract grievance process.

"I wasn't aware until I read your article that the district is trying to do that. I don't agree to that, it basically tries to end any power we have against the district. As a single mother of a special needs child, I need my job to support my family. I'm sure the firing would come with a blacklist to be hired as an educator anywhere else, and perhaps risk my pension. Most of the educators I know are similarly situated. Now how can any of us protest unfair working conditions?,' she said.

"We must find another way to bring about change"

Michelle also remarked on the overall lack of funding for K-12 schools, which has been the result of a decades-long bipartisan attack on public education. The expansion of charters and other school privatization schemes have been heavily pushed by the Democratic Party, which controls the LA city government, both houses of the state legislature, and the governor's office. "As for charter schools, I placed my son in one for half of his education due to the small class sizes and services that were more readily available to him. The reason is because it offered me the Special Ed services I feel are lacking in the public school environment.

"When the demands of the charter school became too much for our family due to my own physical disability, I transitioned him to public school much closer to our home. The public school urged me to drop his IEP [Individualized Education Program], but I refused because of the benefits he can receive from it, especially post-secondary. He was finally transitioned to a public school program, but it took a semester to get his IEP redone by the public school. They cited a back up of IEPs and insufficient staff to meet the needs of the students. If more funding were available, this problem would be averted."

Our reporter asked what Michelle thought about the Socialist Equality Party's call for workers and youth to unite across industries and internationally to build a network of independent rank-and-file committees in schools and workplaces to fight for better working and living conditions.

"To call for separate committees is a good thing because I've seen corruption in the union. Both the union and the district share information, there's double agents, all of it. They know exactly what's going on and who's doing what. I was once a volunteer union rep at a school. I have a law degree so I thought it would be interesting. I was younger and full of hope, full of all the stuff I don't have now. Regarding contracts, one of the reasons so many few people vote is because we don't get documents on time.

"The union has not helped me. I'm still fighting for continued accommodations. I've said, 'I have a special needs kid, I'm on a split shift, I'm a single parent.' And they're like, 'Wow, that sucks to be you.' I even reached out to my school board member about my schedule and stuff. No one got back to me."

"I was just speaking with a friend who is a union worker in another industry, and she was complaining her union no longer supports its workers and continues to raise dues. When there's no help for workers from their representatives, we must find another way to bring about change. Youth in the Covid era are depressed and need some hope for the

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future as they can’t see themselves ever being able to make it on their own with out-of-control inflation, fuel and housing prices.

“If workers and youth unite nationally and internationally, then perhaps a new standard can be established that countries would be forced to meet. The US might fall from a first world country if it was being scrutinized for what our average workers’ wages can actually buy in our country. The media loves to say how high wages are, but never talks about what the wages can actually buy in the place they were earned.”

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