

Los Angeles teachers pressing for a fight three weeks after contract expiration

Our reporters
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Wednesday marked three weeks since the expiration of the labor agreement between the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) and the Los Angeles School District (LAUSD). The contract covers 35,000 educators, nurses and other support staff in the nation's second largest district, which serves 600,000 students.

The contract expired on June 30, and the only update on the negotiations so far has been a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) covering virtual academies, which was signed last week by the UTLA. Educators, on the other hand, want substantial raises to protect their income from surging inflation and to fight plans by district and state officials to slash school funding, pack more children into COVID-infected classrooms and divert more public funds into charters and other for-profit schemes.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* has stated clearly, educators are fighting a war on two fronts. Teachers confront a Democratic-controlled political establishment that is determined to force them to work in unsafe conditions with constantly dwindling resources, even though this year's budget includes a windfall of billions in extra funding. Teachers also confront the bureaucrats in the UTLA who have pushed through one rotten contract after another, including the one the union imposed after the betrayal of the powerful five-day strike in 2019.

In its attack on teachers, the UTLA has dispensed with warnings, firing its first salvo at teachers last week with the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) covering virtual academies. In its very first paragraph, the MOU stands the eight-hour day on its head, making it the minimum for a teacher to be considered a full-time employee, rather than the maximum number of hours a teacher should have to work in a day.

Section 1.0 states: "It is agreed that the professional workday of a full-time regular employee requires no fewer than eight (8) hours of on-site and off-site work, and that the varying nature of professional duties does not lend itself to a total maximum daily work time of definite or uniform length."

The WSWS spoke with two teachers this weekend about the negotiations on the new contract and the conditions they face in the classroom.

We asked Bill, a middle school teacher, about his thoughts on the June 30 expiration of the contract, and he said, "When I reached out to the UTLA during an on-line forum, I was rebuked. We should have had our demands in place last January. The UTLA is not doing what they need to do. We should have started sooner.

Cost of living in Los Angeles

"They are saying we need a substantial raise, but what does that mean? It should be 50 percent. Look at the cost of living in Los Angeles. It's the second highest in the nation. The district is loaded with money. Their projected budget is \$12 to 13 billion a year."

The UTLA is reportedly asking for two 10 percent raises a year over the life of the three-year contract. Bill disparagingly called the amount "paltry," adding, "Most of us have one or more post-graduate degrees, and we need better salaries and working conditions."

When asked about the UTLA and the 2019 strike, Bill said, "I don't know why we're doing this again. We lost six days of work, and then the offer didn't go up. People remember this. When people go out, they expect the union to fight for them. Last time we had five people cross our picket line. The teachers who join the UTLA leadership never come back to the classroom; they become bureaucrats. The UTLA no longer represents the teachers. They don't even publish their newsletter anymore."

Regarding the last two years, Bill said students were brought back into classrooms too soon, and he condemned the recent lifting of the mask mandate. "After avoiding it for two years, I finally got COVID last May, even though I always wear two masks," he told the WSWS.

We also spoke to Mary, a middle school special education teacher, who told us about how overwhelming the job has been, and that it has worsened exponentially since the start of the pandemic.

“I’m at the end of my third year teaching, but I was a TA [teaching assistant] for five years prior in the district. And I was in the 2019 strike,” she said.

“I was a one-on-one teaching assistant in special education for students that had just come to the country but needed special services. Maybe they didn’t have legal status, or the parents were not comfortable getting their kids assessed.

“Actually, they needed services that the school couldn’t provide. Many of these students are from Central America. And you know, it took them sometimes months to get to the United States and everything that they went through all the way to the United States. Some of them also didn’t have access to education where they were before. Many times, the parents are afraid. It’s a big thing getting community engagement. I worked in a low-income area. We just weren’t equipped with the services they needed.”

Mary said that whereas her caseload used to consist of two Individualized Education Programs (IEP) a month, it now stands at five. This is in addition to her regular teaching duties.

“We had one counselor for 800 students. Just trying to get it all coordinated, let alone special ed kids, was like another task on its own. And it was just hectic, nonstop. I kept saying to myself, ‘I got to catch up; I got to catch up; I got to catch up.’ It was just not do-able. Not do-able.”

In regards to COVID-19, Mary said, “I got COVID in January. It just hit me. It just knocked me out. The next day it was kind of hard, and then by the end of the day I had a fever, headaches, everything.

“At our site, they wouldn’t tell us who had COVID, but then we demanded that we had to know. So, they ended up letting just the teachers know, but we couldn’t tell the students. When we first opened up, by the second or third week, we were all out because it was spreading. It’s been super hectic, super hectic.”

“We didn’t have a nurse for a couple of months”

As for support staff, the issues were similar, Mary said. “We didn’t have a nurse for a couple of months, and then we finally got one. I don’t know if they were not trained or not. I don’t know if they were just new to the field, but they were overwhelmed.”

The word “overwhelmed” was the one constant from our

discussion with Mary. On top of the lack of resources, there has been a mass exodus of teachers from the profession due to the pandemic. Tens of thousands have left, and currently there are more than 50,000 teaching openings in the state of California. This has led to the creation of a negative feedback loop. As teachers become overwhelmed and leave, the remaining teachers face a doubling or tripling of their workload, which forces more teachers out of the profession.

Along with the worsening conditions facing teachers, the same can be said for students, who not only have to face the poor conditions in the classrooms, but they also feel the effects of the economy on their parents. There are over 51,000 LAUSD students who are homeless and 7,000 who are in foster care. According to *LA School Report*, due to the pandemic’s effects on workers, chronic absenteeism amongst these groups has risen from 32 percent to 69 percent and from 34 to 58 percent respectively.

A balance sheet needs to be drawn. The UTLA will not only do nothing to alleviate the horrendous conditions facing teachers and support staff, but they have been and will continue to actively support the district’s initiatives to broaden and deepen the inroads into their working conditions.

To fight for better conditions, teachers must take the reins of the struggle into their own hands by building rank-and-file committees that are independent of the union bureaucracies and the corporate-controlled Democrats and Republicans.

Bill said he supports the formation of rank-and-file committees to give teachers control over the negotiations. “We haven’t even had a strike vote. We need that threat as a bargaining chip. People don’t want to go out on strike. It’s been a rough two years, but teachers will do what they have to do not only for themselves but for our students. We need more pay, smaller classes and more nurses.

“Striking is socialist. We don’t just do it for ourselves. It’s a collective effort,” Bill said.



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