

Former Los Angeles teacher speaks out as unions and district impose horrifying conditions at school sites

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The start of the new school year in Los Angeles has revealed absolutely horrific conditions for students, staff and teachers alike in the country's second largest school district.

All measures to contain the spread of COVID-19, including mandatory masking and testing, have been completely abandoned. Los Angeles itself is the midst of a nearly two-week-old extreme heat wave, with temperatures exceeding 100 degrees Fahrenheit each day with at least 170 of the 1,000-plus Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) campuses without working air conditioning. The district's computer systems, furthermore, were completely shut down over the Labor Day weekend after a massive ransomware attack, now the subject of an ongoing investigation by the FBI and Department of Justice.

Because of the deplorable conditions, attendance at LAUSD remains at all-time lows as parents and students worry about the potential severe health impacts.

The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to Juanita Garcia about the conditions in LAUSD schools. Juanita is a former early childhood teacher in LAUSD who also used to be very active in the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA). Now, at 71, she is a grandmother raising her grandchildren, one of whom is still attending school at LAUSD.

Juanita said, "I was watching the news on Channel 5 about the heat wave. We live in the San Fernando Valley. Yesterday it was 113 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. Not in the sun, in the shade. The teacher took a picture of the thermometer in the room."

Teachers in Los Angeles receive 22 percent less pay than the average worker who holds a bachelor's

degree, and according to national averages, this pay disparity increases to upwards of 30 percent by mid-career.

Additionally, the average rent in the Los Angeles area was \$2,095 in 2021, which represented 48 percent of a beginning educator's pre-tax monthly income at an annual salary of \$51,440. Since then, the average Los Angeles area rent has risen to \$2,450. This is a 17 percent increase over the previous year and is 55 percent of a beginning teacher's pre-tax monthly income factoring in the meagre 3 percent pay raise in the 2019 contract that was pushed down the throats of teachers by the UTLA.

About working conditions, Juanita said, "Teachers face the worst mistreatment of all professions. We get our degrees and then daily take care of and teach children under worsening conditions. Sometimes we are the ones buying food and clothing for our students and their families."

She also stated, "I've been working in this district in different capacities since 1982. I've never seen in my whole life how bad this district has been, especially in the last 15 years. This is not just because of COVID. The pandemic only aggravated everything. This system really needs to be corrected, needs to be overhauled, because it's decadent. It's not good."

"It's really sad because this is a big district, the second largest in the nation. And they complain about the shortage of teachers, but they don't know how to treat and keep teachers either. Because they let good teachers go."

The UTLA recently released a report that is a damning indictment of the horrendous working conditions faced by teachers in LAUSD, conditions the

union has helped impose.

The study, “Burned Out, Priced Out: A Solution to the Educator Crisis,” surveyed 13,000 teachers in June, and combined that with recent state and national studies on the ongoing teacher shortage. The study seeks to explain why teachers have left and continue to leave the profession in droves, while seeking to absolve the UTLA itself, which has presided over decades of concessions, of any responsibility for the decline.

On a national level, the number of educators fell by 6.8 percent between 2019 and 2021. For LAUSD, this means that around 15,800 teachers left the profession during the same period. If current hiring rates hold, those teachers will not be replaced. The number of those training to become teachers has declined in similar fashion.

The report notes that “the district does not pay enough for beginning teachers to afford rent in any Los Angeles neighborhood,” while, “nearly 60 percent of veteran educators with 20 or more years of experience cannot afford to live in the community where they teach.”

The report also documents that more than a quarter of UTLA teachers, 28 percent, are forced to hold down a second job to just survive.

Teachers, like workers in general, are being compelled to take pay increases well below the rate of inflation—pay cuts in real terms—while landlords are free to raise rents well in excess of the average rate of inflation.

The solution to this problem, according to the authors of the study, is an across-the-board 20 percent pay raise, something that the UTLA itself is not prepared to even demand. Instead, the UTLA is asking for a 10 percent raise in each of the first two years of a three-year contract. In other words, the pay raise the union is asking for is far below the expected rate of inflation for the life of the contract, amounting to yet a further cut in real wages for teachers.

Nonetheless, teachers shouldn’t expect the UTLA to stick to even this modest demand. After now going more than nine weeks without a contract, the union has not called a strike authorization vote and has refused to discuss the progress of negotiations with members.

Juanita is following the struggle by teachers in Washington state, and based on her own experiences with the UTLA, she said, “This is what I want to say to

the teachers striking at the Kent Schools and the Seattle teachers. Keep your spirits up. I know how hard it is being a teacher under the conditions you are fighting.

“And never, never rely on your union. Most of the time, these people are only trying to please other union bureaucrats, getting their fat checks and living high. They do nothing for the teachers. And I’m saying this from the bottom of my heart. I really feel this way.

“We are not just teachers. We are also nurses and counselors to our students and often their parents. Many times our classrooms are the only safe places for them.”

In regard to economic stagnation and the mantra that there is no money, Juanita said, “And yet they talk about billions and billions and billions for the war.”

Referencing another recommendation by the study’s authors for so-called community schools, a plan to give UTLA more control over the day to day operations of schools, Juanita said, “It’s just like what happened with the charter schools. It’s the same story. They just wanted the money. They couldn’t care less about the students. They couldn’t care less about my neighbor’s children getting skills. Everybody’s looking for the money!

“We’ve been so mistreated. I know. I’m one of them. I’m suffering from all the things the union never fought for. All they do is collect dues and travel to conferences. That’s not what the unions are supposed to do. We need real organizations, real leaders.

“Sisters and brothers, these unions just get into positions and forget about us. It’s time to wake up! We need to build these rank-and-file committees. We have to do it. When it comes to elections, vote carefully, not just for another person who could care less about teachers and is only concerned about his bank accounts.

“I’m not faking it. We the working people have to unite, regardless of race, color or religion.”



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