Four months after contract expiration, UTLA still refusing to hold strike authorization vote

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The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), which represents over 35,000 public school educators in Los Angeles County, has kept workers on the job for over four months after their previous contract with the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) expired. The district is the nation's second-largest, with almost 665,000 students.

Teachers are being kept on the job under the terms of the old contract at a time when inflation, running at over 8 percent, is hammering teachers' living standards. At the same time, understaffing has forced many teachers to essentially work two jobs in order to cover for shortages.

While the UTLA has called for toothless rallies to be held on December 5, three weeks from now, they have yet to even broach the subject of a strike authorization vote. In their call for the rallies, the union says, "On December 5, we turn out to show LAUSD that we have the power of educators, parents, and communities to win every element of our Beyond Recovery platform. We demand they stop passing the burden onto educators to fill the gaps they refuse to address with the $3.4 billion sitting in reserves."

This is just so much hot air. If UTLA wants to demonstrate the "power of educators, parents and communities," it will not do so with rallies, but rather with a strike that shuts the district down, linking up with 48,000 striking grad student workers at the University of California schools, as well as with West Coast dockworkers and railroad workers, who have also been without a contract.

The reality is that the union's so-called Beyond Recovery platform covers up its betrayal in 2019, when LA teachers struck for a week, for the first time in 40 years. The issues then—increasing pay, reducing class sizes, hiring more counselors, nurses and librarians, among others—are the same as today. The final contract was rushed through with teachers told to vote on it with only a few days' notice. The teachers also received no strike pay. The same issues are being raised now because the 2019 strike was betrayed by the UTLA.

In a statement in October, the union stated, "As we did in the 2019 strike, we will build power through a series of escalating actions." At the current rate of escalation, the union may call for a strike authorization shortly before the next contract is due to be negotiated.

Generally, unions have explained away not calling for strike authorization votes as a demonstration of good negotiating. However, in the current case, they have just completely avoided the issue, because LAUSD is not only bargaining in bad faith, according to UTLA—it is not even bargaining at all.

In a press release issued by the UTLA on November 4, the headline reads, "Bargaining: LAUSD Refuses to Negotiate, Continues to Delay." They can refuse to negotiate only because UTLA refuses to call for a strike authorization vote. With only pep rallies on the agenda, and those still three weeks in the future, there is zero pressure on the district to return to the table.

Putting aside the refusal to negotiate, LAUSD's offers are evidence of their "bad faith" negotiating. The district is offering an eight percent pay raise over the life of a three-year contract, which would amount to a gargantuan pay cut at the current rate of inflation of eight percent a year. Considering that many teachers already cannot afford to live where they work, the offer is an order of magnitude greater than a mere slap in the face.

The offer by LAUSD on class sizes is even more insulting considering the current staff shortages. With over 1,600 positions still vacant, it is only proposing to reduce class sizes by an undetermined number in only

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one grade at only 100 schools.

For its part, as far as pay is concerned, the union is asking for a pay cut over the life of the contract by asking for a paltry 22 percent over a three-year term. It does so even as it continually repeats the mantra that the district is sitting on $3.4 billion in reserves.

Mention should also be made that for UTLA the pandemic no longer exists. The union has fully backed the murderous misnamed policy of the Democratic Party of “living with the virus.” This comes as the COVID-19 numbers for Los Angeles County mimic those of last year at this time.

The Los Angeles County Department of Public Health (LACDPH) just issued a warning that there are signs that a winter surge of COVID-19 will be hitting the county. The seven-day average of new cases currently stands at 1,300 a day, which is 24 percent higher than the previous week's seven-day average.

According to LACDPH, “There has been a steady increase in this number since November 1. As is expected with rising case counts, LA County is also seeing an increase in the average number of daily hospital admissions.”

It should be added that this year there exist no mandated public mitigation measures, and due to the unrelenting barrage of propaganda the virus has been allowed to circulate and expand to the point that now there are hundreds of Omicron variants that are circulating, each more virulent than the original virus.

Amid the constant refrain that the pandemic is over, vaccination rates in Los Angeles County have also declined dramatically as well. Currently only 23 percent of those 65 and older in the county have received an updated bivalent booster dose. Those numbers dwindle even more for those in the younger age categories, with only five percent of children between 12 and 17 receiving the updated booster and four percent for those younger. At the same time there are reports from across the US of hospitals filling up and medical services breaking down.

The tentative agreements (TAs) to which the UTLA has already agreed cover sick leave and absences, but the word COVID is nowhere to be found in those documents.

If this struggle is to move forward, let alone be successful, it has to be taken out of the hands of the bought-and-paid-for bureaucrats at the UTLA. With their enormous salaries, they do not have inflation whittling away at their paychecks, leaving them with hard choices to make. Nor do they have to face COVID in the classroom.

Four months on end LAUSD has refused to even come to table. This would be completely unacceptable in normal times, much less during an economic and public health crisis under conditions where the district is sitting on a windfall of billions.

To advance their struggle, teachers, parents and students must form independent rank-and-file committees as the first order of business, with the second being forcing a strike authorization vote! These committees, democratically run by educators themselves, must determine a program of demands based on the needs to teachers and students, not the agenda set by LAUSD.

Teachers should contact the WSWS for help in forming committees at your schools.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

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