Los Angeles school workers hold strike authorization vote after years-long contract impasse

Los Angeles bus driver: “We’ve been working without a contract for nearly three years. That’s supposed to be normal?”

Dan Conway
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Are you an educator at LAUSD in the SEIU or UTLA? Tell us about your working conditions and what you want to fight for in the next contract by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

More than 30,000 custodians, bus drivers, cafeteria workers, special education assistants and other Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) support staff are voting this week to authorize a strike, after talks between the district and SEIU Local 99 officially reached an impasse in December.

The school workers, who have been without a contract since June 2020, earn an average salary of only $25,000 per year, only slightly more than minimum wage.

The district’s latest wage offer contains 5 percent wage increases each year for three years of the four-year contract, with no increase at all during the first year. At current levels of inflation, this is effectively a pay cut. It also includes an additional $2 an hour for special education assistants. Small one-time bonus payouts of 4 percent and 5 percent during the third and fourth years of the contract respectively are also included in the district’s proposal.

The SEIU’s counteroffer includes a 30 percent wage increase over the four years of the contract, in addition to a $2 per hour one time wage increase which would still put these workers under the current inflation rate. The union is also asking for paid training and professional development days along with higher staffing levels.

Among Los Angeles teachers, who have also been working without a contract for the past six months, there is immense sentiment for a united struggle with support workers. The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), which has kept teachers on the job without a deal, felt compelled to acknowledge this in a recent statement by President Cecily Myart-Cruz which encouraged teachers “to exercise their right to not cross a lawful picket line should SEIU Local 99 go on strike.”

If teachers refused to cross the picket line, this would effectively shut down the country’s second-largest school district. It would be the latest show of force by educators in the United States, following the strike by more than 40,000 graduate students at the University of California System.

But such solidarity actions would have to be organized and enforced by rank-and-file teachers themselves. The statement from the UTLA cannot be taken at face value. In fact, it is the practice of both unions to keep actions at each isolated from the other. During the UTLA’s strike of early 2019, SEIU Local 99 kept its members on the job while teachers were on the picket line. In December and January, neither the UTLA nor SEIU Local 99 did anything to support UC graduate students outside of encouraging members to donate to the United Auto Workers strike fund.

The LAUSD school board itself, which has been at the forefront nationally in cutting funding for public education, is composed of a majority of members who are backed by both the SEIU and UTLA. In last year’s school board elections, UTLA-backed candidates Kelly Gonez and Rocio Rivas both won their elections.

The current head of the school board is Jackie Goldberg, a long-time fixture of middle class left politics in California whose most recent school board campaign was heavily promoted by the UTLA in particular. The 78-year-old Goldberg was a student leader of the 1964–1965 Free Speech Movement at UC Berkeley. Goldberg long ago gave up the radical leanings of her youth to become a Democratic Party official, holding office in the Los Angeles City Council, California State Assembly and the LAUSD school

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board. She is now a member of the Democratic Socialists of America.

Los Angeles Bus driver speaks out

The WSWS spoke to John, a 16-year veteran LAUSD bus driver and a member of SEIU Local 99.

"The average annual salary among the workers in our unit is $25,000. We've also been working without a contract since June 2020," John said. "That's three years ago. That's [supposed to be] normal!"

"We're asking for a certain amount of increase, but then the district will hire some professional organization to say, 'Okay, let them go on strike. But don't let them stay out any longer than a certain number of days before you agree.' For our district or any company, payroll is the biggest source of expenditure. But they don't care about us. They only care about their bottom line.

"We've never gone on strike since I've been here for 16 years. They've threatened to. At some point before I came to this district, the bus drivers and teachers were grouped together. Typically, when the teachers would go out, it was like 'me too' for us.

"Somewhere along the line it changed, and the bus drivers got put in with the cafeteria workers, maintenance people and everyone else. Right now, there are about 1,000 bus drivers. The other workers—the cafeteria workers, special ed assistants, custodians, food service workers, teacher assistants and other essential workers—actually outnumber us.

"So the last time we wanted a pay increase, the union told us that we weren't going to be able to get that pay increase because the focus was trying to bring the cafeteria workers up to better working conditions.

"Strategically I don't know if it's legal or illegal, but my belief is the union is in cahoots with the employer. To me there's been underlying kickbacks. They'll say, 'Well, I had to vote for this because we had to look out for these people over here.'

"In 2019 when the teachers went on strike, they needed our support. But we didn't go out on strike. Then we were told that they were going to put us in the classrooms to watch the kids. And there's always been this theory that you don't need a teacher to watch the kids, and the whole thing was the district gets paid off of the attendance of the kids. So, if the kids don't come to school, the district doesn't get paid.

"So, they were planning for us to go to the homerooms, where the kids come in, and take attendance. And then after that they would let the kids stay on the campus and be on the playground. All we were supposed to do was just monitor the kids. So, the district wouldn't lose any money. They could still count the kids who are at school.

"Then, of course, inflation is hitting everyone hard. Gas prices right now have been artificially inflated out of pure greed. And the employers' position is that 'it's not our fault there's inflation,' but our salaries are not keeping up with inflation. I can remember when I was younger, we would get that cost-of-living adjustment, even though I was only making $13 to $14 an hour. They added in that cost-of-living adjustment, COLA. It was doable. It was good. I can't tell you exactly when companies started not giving us that cost of living. But that's the problem: Cost-of-living adjustments are no longer automatic.

"I used to drive for RTD (Rapid Transit District) back in the day when I was going to school, maybe around 1987–1988. My top salary back then was $14 an hour. And I used to bring home every two weeks $1,900, but my salary was adjusted for cost of living. Living at home, I was almost bringing home $3,000. And I was a youngster with benefits.

"So whenever it was that the government decided there would be no COLA, my wages have been stagnating all these years. I figured that in order for me to keep up with inflation for all those years, I really need to double my salary. Right now my salary is in the $30,000s. If I was making what I should be making with cost of living, my salary right now should almost be like $60 an hour to keep up with inflation. But nobody wants to pay an average worker $60 an hour, but everyone wants to be paid an adequate salary.

"For teachers, I don't know what their salary is per hour. But you're talking about people who've been educated, gone to school for those degrees and everything else, and the way they're working them, they're getting well below what they should be for their occupation and experience."

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