

“We voted to strike, that should be enough!”

LAUSD school district workers angry at SEIU for delaying strike action, as district begins hiring scabs

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Last week, more than 30,000 Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) workers voted by 96 percent to authorize strike action. The vote came two months after an impasse was declared in negotiations between the district and SEIU Local 99. The 30,000 SEIU members include bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers, teaching assistants and other support occupations.

Nearly 35,000 LAUSD teachers represented by the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) are currently in separate negotiations with the district, with no calls from either union for joint action. Teachers have also been working without a contract since June 2022. In 2019, the UTLA betrayed the nearly two-week-long strike by 35,000 LAUSD teachers, providing them with a concessionary contract which they had only a few hours to read before they voted.

As of this writing, no details of the negotiations, which resumed on Tuesday, have been publicly released, and the SEIU has issued no calls for an actual strike. This has prompted angry responses from workers.

Robert wrote on the SEIU Local 99 Facebook page: “All the union is doing right now by not setting a strike date is giving the district more time to hire replacements and temp workers. We voted to strike, THAT SHOULD BE ENOUGH!!!”

Another LAUSD worker, Danielle, also posted on the Facebook page: “LAUSD is hiring for many classified positions so that we can be replaced! Go to lausdjobs Instagram page and see for yourself. We need to take a stand and now! We gotta bring the heat now! Let’s stop talking and be about it!”

The district’s latest offer is an insulting 5 percent per year wage increase for three years of the four-year contract with no raise whatsoever during the first year. These LAUSD workers have been without a contract since late 2020, meaning that the proposed wage increases would be retroactive, and the new contract would also be expiring a year from now in 2024.

While local media outlets claim that a strike of LAUSD

workers would be met with widespread hostility by parents, students and overwhelming numbers of the Los Angeles-area public, the reality is the exact opposite. A strike would focus powerful opposition to years of public education cuts, not to mention stagnating wages while inflation skyrockets.

It would meet immediate support from the working class throughout the region, including not only teachers, but also Los Angeles-area dockworkers who have also been kept on the job by their union without a contract since last summer.

Gene, a student at Pacific Palisades Charter High School, expressed his support for the school workers directly to the *World Socialist Web Site*.

“I wanted to show my support for the LAUSD workers. Money has been a huge issue in education affecting us all, from students like me to the faculty that help run our school. According to the website for my high school, there are exactly 3,004 students enrolled. With just one cafeteria with a few workers, lines can reach all the way past the eating tables, even with multiple people serving out dishes at a time.

“There are students who do not get their meals until the second lunch bell has rung, ending it. Instead of hiring more school police, they could focus on hiring more cafeteria workers. It’s not as though the budget hasn’t been shifted before, as the bus for my home stop was gotten rid of due to the small amount of students where I live attending. It’s time for it to shift back in our direction.”

He lamented that no expense is spared for police to terrorize the student population while there is nothing for teachers and staff. “With the school police, it’s LAUSD police, as their cars say on the side. They always have at least one police car where the bus exit is. They are armed with guns on their side.”

In the latest negotiations between the district and SEIU Local 99, the union’s counteroffer is only marginally better than what is being offered by the district. It is proposing a 30 percent wage increase over the life of the contract, or 7.5 percent per

year, which is slightly above the current annual inflation increase of 5.8 percent but lower than 2022 inflation levels, which reached as high as 8.5 percent.

Annual inflation rate accounts for a wide basket of goods and services. However, if one were to consider the particular living expenses of low-wage workers, the actual number would be even higher. Food prices, for example, increased by 9.9 percent during the same period, while energy costs increased by 8.7 percent, making both higher than the aggregate increase.

In the Southern California region in particular, where LAUSD workers are located, heating utility bills increased to an average of \$300 per month in January, more than twice the average from a year prior.

These increased costs are particularly devastating for these LAUSD workers who make only \$25,000 per year on average. This figure is only slightly above the minimum wage and also below the California Poverty Measure (CPM) of \$36,900 for a family of four, a figure calculated by the Public Policy Institute of California and the Stanford Center on Poverty and Inequality.

The CPM also takes into account supplementary state and federal assistance, including child tax credits and food assistance. But with the recent announcement by California Governor Gavin Newsom of a projected \$22.5 billion state deficit for the upcoming fiscal year and an increased budget deficit estimate by the state legislative analyst's office of \$29.5 billion, even these limited amounts of government assistance are in danger of being cut.

By contrast, Max Arias, executive director of SEIU Local 99, took in \$146,319 in 2022, a figure nearly six times larger than the average LAUSD worker. Mary Kay Henry, international president of the SEIU, made \$289,994.

While the 2023-2024 budget will not be finalized until this coming June, the governor has made clear that, as of yet, no funds from the state's rainy day fund, established in the aftermath of the 2008-2009 financial crisis, will be utilized to address the shortfall. Instead, Newsom outlined a minimum of \$7.4 billion in delayed spending and is promising to make billions more in cuts to social programs. The promised delayed spending includes areas such as public universities, transit, behavioral health, building decarbonization and watershed restoration.

The proposals do not yet explicitly include cuts to K-12 public education. However, Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon recently hinted that such cuts are being discussed behind closed doors. Advocating that the state should dip into the rainy day fund to address the shortfall, Rendon stated, "I look forward to working with my Assembly colleagues, the Senate, and the Governor on a 2023 budget that protects classroom, child care, and university funding while safeguarding core programs that protect our environment and our most vulnerable residents."

Should such education cuts go forward, they will inevitably

have a devastating impact on the Los Angeles Unified School District, the nation's second-largest, serving more than 400,000 students. The district, which once had 737,000 students, is already experiencing reduced funding as a result of declining enrollment.

In response to the declining enrollment numbers, newly installed school Superintendent Alberto Carvalho released a four-year strategic plan to offset the decline while "streamlining costs." A key portion of this plan emphasizes "operational effectiveness" and "sustainable budgeting," i.e., cost cutting. Limited resources are to be allocated not universally but selectively based on "equity" criteria, while strict performance standards are to be implemented for teachers and staff ensuring that terminations can be quickly carried out for "underperformers."

In spite of these revelations, SEIU Local 99 Executive Director Max Arias was extremely optimistic about Carvalho's agenda and the latter's four-year plan in particular. "Superintendent Carvalho has expressed a commitment to meeting the needs of the whole child and has publicly recognized that all school staff are essential to ensuring students and families thrive," Arias said. "As he moves into his second year at LAUSD, we look to him to put his words and vision into action."

The UTLA, for its part, is preparing no strike action for teachers even though their last contract expired in 2022. Even though there is a powerful opportunity for teachers and school workers in Los Angeles to launch joint strike action, an action that would resonate with public school workers throughout the country and throughout the world, the union is only advocating that teachers make their own personal decisions to not cross picket lines should support staff eventually strike.

The actions of both the UTLA and SEIU demonstrate that if education workers are to win their struggle, it must be taken out of the hands of the corrupt trade union apparatus. Workers must form rank-and-file committees to take future strikes out of the bureaucracy's hands. Contact the WSWs for assistance in building a rank-and-file committee today.



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