

# Los Angeles education unions prepare minimal strike actions as district pushes forward with austerity contracts

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Last weekend, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) and Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 99 education unions announced plans to launch a three-day strike by 65,000 educators and support staff in the Los Angeles Unified School District within the coming weeks.

Both unions have kept their members on the job long after the expiration of their contracts despite the crushing rise in living expenses. The contract for nearly 35,000 UTLA members expired in June 2022, while the deal covering 30,000 SEIU members expired in late 2020. Both unions regularly extended their contracts until last week when they rejected any further extensions to clear the way for a strike.

In a strike authorization vote last month, SEIU Local 99 workers, who include cafeteria staff, janitors, instructional aides, bus drivers and other support staff, voted 96 percent in favor of strike action. Rather than announce a solidarity strike vote, UTLA officials have advised teachers to make individual decisions whether or not to cross the picket lines of their fellow workers.

The SEIU only announced a possible strike because of the rising tide of anger amongst LAUSD workers. Support staff workers make abysmally low wages in the face of the extraordinarily high cost of living in the greater Los Angeles area. The average SEIU Local 99 worker makes only \$27,531 per year. Teaching assistants make even less with an average salary of \$22,657 and after school program workers make less still at \$14,576. By contrast, SEIU Local 99 Executive Director Max Arias made \$146,319 in 2022 while seven other local union executives made six-figure salaries, according to the latest data available.

In contrast with the union leadership, the initial strike

authorization vote in February was viewed by school workers, not as a publicity stunt, but as a mandate for action. After SEIU leaders spent days and weeks ignoring the membership vote, angry rank-and-file workers began pressing for action. One worker, for example, posted a comment on the SEIU Facebook page declaring, “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 wrote, “We need to take a stand and now! We gotta bring the heat now! Let’s stop talking and be about it!”

Under these conditions, the union felt compelled to call a strike, albeit limited, lest they lose control of the situation with workers taking matters into their own hands.

The date of the strike is expected to be announced on Wednesday during a planned joint rally of the two unions. The union is limiting the strike to three days and to a protest over unfair labor practices by district officials. In an email to members sent on Saturday, SEIU Local 99 stated, “This is a lawful strike to protest the district’s unfair practices, including threats, interrogation, and surveillance of members who participated in last month’s strike vote.”

Such a campaign of harassment should be opposed. But a limited strike, tied to worthless appeals to the California Employment Relations Board (CERB), will do nothing to stop it. Far from mobilizing the power of workers throughout the Los Angeles area, not to mention the 2 million-plus SEIU members across the country, the planned strike is little more than an effort to let out steam and subordinate the struggle to impotent protests to the CERB and National Labor

Relations Board.

This was underscored by an email sent by the SEIU Saturday in response to growing complaints over the limited character of the proposed strike. “Over three days we show the district we are fed up with their disrespect and not afraid to take strong action to demand a response for our work.” In other words, the strike will not be attached to any specific demands for what workers want and need, but only to pressure the district to “bargain fairly.”

The SEIU has previously called for a 30 percent raise over the four years of the contract or 7.5 percent per year. This would amount to a minuscule increase in real wages given the current 6.4 percent rate of inflation. It would do nothing to address the drastic decline in living standards, including over the last two years of extended contracts when inflation rose to as high as 9 percent.

The UTLA’s latest salary offer, as outlined in its “Beyond Recovery” negotiating platform, includes a pay increase of 10 percent in each of the first two years of the contract and no salary increase in the third.

The district, which includes multiple Democratic Party board members whom the SEIU and UTLA actively campaigned for, is offering the support staff workers a miserly 5 percent wage increase for the three years of their four-year contract with no raise at all during the first year. The district’s offer to teachers also includes a tiny 5 percent wage in two out of the three years of the contract with two one-time bonuses of 5 percent as well. The district has already said it would not consider “anything close” to the 10 percent increases in base pay being proposed by UTLA.

Educators are in a direct fight against the Newsom administration and the Democrats, who control every level of government in California. While the state is home to the largest number of billionaires in the US, state Democrats, like their Republican counterparts, are demanding austerity and more school privatization. Meanwhile, the Biden administration is spending nearly \$1 trillion for its war buildup against Russia and China.

The district received an additional \$1.4 billion from state revenues last summer and reportedly has close to \$20 billion in hand against a nearly \$15 billion operating budget. The district’s future financial health is in doubt due to the loss in state revenue from the 200,000 drop in student enrollment since the start of the

pandemic and a further diversion of resources to charter schools. The state of California also recently announced a nearly \$30 billion budget deficit, which will likely have an adverse impact on public schools like LAUSD especially after the new fiscal year budget is announced in June.

Negotiations between the UTLA and LAUSD are scheduled to resume this coming Friday while the SEIU and LAUSD are involved in mediation with the California Employment Relations Board. It is unclear, however, when mediation will resume.

Given that the “fact-finding” process revolves around unfair labor practice charges, the very reason given by SEIU Local 99 for the planned strike, it is possible this will be seized upon by the union and the district to postpone strike action indefinitely.

Regardless of whether the strike occurs, teachers and education workers cannot leave this struggle in the hands of the UTLA and SEIU bureaucracies, which are tied to the Democratic Party apparatus and have no intention of mobilizing workers in opposition to capitalist austerity and inequality. This was the lesson of the 2019 Los Angeles strike, which was sold out by the UTLA bureaucracy, paving the way for an escalation of attacks on teachers and public education.

A real fight requires the expanding of the network of educators rank-and-file committees throughout Los Angeles, the greater Southern California region and beyond. These committees, democratically controlled by educators themselves, are emerging as the new centers of working-class struggle to win the demands that workers need, not what big business and both corporate-controlled parties say is affordable.

The fight of Los Angeles teachers and support staff is the same as school staff everywhere. To find out more information about joining the Los Angeles Rank-and-File Educators Committee and rank-and-file committees of workers generally, please click here.



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