

# 65,000 school workers begin three-day strike in Los Angeles

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*Are you a striking Los Angeles school worker? Tell us what you're fighting for by filling out the form at the bottom of this article. All submissions will be kept anonymous.*

In spite of pouring rain, tens of thousands of workers joined picket lines and a mass demonstration in front of the headquarters of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) Tuesday, the first day of a three-day citywide strike by public school workers. Some 65,000 school workers and teachers are taking part in the job action, the largest strike in the US since 2019. Workers in America's second-largest district, which serves 420,000 students, are demanding improvements on short staffing, high workloads and class sizes and poverty wages, made worse by skyrocketing inflation.

The strike is being carried out by the lowest-paid school workers, which include bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers, special education assistants, IT support staff, office administration and others. They are in Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 99, whose officials have kept them on the job with an expired contract for the past three years. Tens of thousands of teachers in the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union, who have also been working under an expired contract since last summer, have joined them on the picket line.

The strike is part of a growing movement of the international working class. It comes amid nationwide strikes and demonstrations in France against a law, imposed by the French president without a vote in parliament, to raise the retirement age, as well as national strike movements in the UK, Germany and Greece. Last week, 50,000 New Zealand educators carried out a nationwide one-day strike. In North America, the LA strike follows a walkout of 48,000 graduate students in the University of California last year, as well as a strike by more than 50,000 Canadian educators in Ontario which threatened to develop into a general strike before it was called off by the union bureaucracy.

The average member of SEIU Local 99 in the district takes home less than \$28,000 per year, making virtually unaffordable one of the most expensive cities in the country. A staggering one in three SEIU members "have been homeless or at high risk of becoming homeless while working at [Los Angeles Unified School District]," according to the union, and nearly one in four say they "very often do not have enough to eat."

"Bills are rising, gas bills are rising, electric bills are rising, but yet pay stays the same... We're fighting for the cost of living for ourselves, we're fighting for better wages, we're fighting for other

people out there that can't afford certain things, homes," Albert, an IT support technician, told the WSWs.

Celene, a Special Education Instructional Assistant, told the WSWs: "This is my first year as an instructional aid and the amount of work has been a real shock. We need more support for our jobs. I work three jobs. I clean houses, work at a warehouse, and work as an instructional aide for special education in the district. I work at least 60 hours a week.

"Right now, I work in a special education classroom with twelve students, one teacher and one instructional aide. The kids are ages five to eight and have all different needs. This is really difficult, and we need more help. Currently I live with my mom and son. My mom works too, so that's why I have to work more so I can provide daycare for my son."

Mario, a Spanish teacher, said, "school workers' wages are very low, and they need our support." "Basically, it's a lie that there isn't money. There's \$4.9 billion—not million—4.9 billion in reserves [in the district]. We don't know where that money is going. And we basically want it for the education for our kids, our future kids. The money is there."

Sriyana Shrestha works with special education children. "We want equal pay and respect. Respect is number one. I work with special needs children. They need a lot of assistance, and we don't get any help.

"As resource specialists, we have 32 children we're seeing weekly, and we're supposed to have only 28. The reason for that number 28 is because we need to work one-on-one with each child. We only get \$18 an hour. Within a six-hour workday, we end up working like three people. We get pulled out to do playground duty to supervise the children.

"It's very hard to make it on your own with this job. If you don't have any family support, you just can't do it. I'm very lucky because I have support from my own family. And all of my children are all grown up.

"One important demand is we need more staff. I'd say we need to at least double the number of staff. Like I said, we are working like three people. We're being pulled out left, right and center. How can the district say there's no money for these things? They're sitting on \$5 billion. Well, that's supposed to be for us. All we want to do is to help our kids."

Miriam Martin has been a cafeteria worker for 26 years with the district. Her daughter Kelly Bernal works as a school climate worker, specifically on conflict resolution. Miriam said, "We want

better pay. Like everybody else, we need to get more money for ourselves. We are there every day helping and serving the children, making sure they eat healthy food.

"I am making \$17 an hour. It's so sad because someone working at Pollo Loco is making \$19 an hour. McDonald's even pays more for their workers.

"Many of my co-workers are applying for food stamps and WIC [Women, Infants, Children] benefits. I have to pay rent. I have to drive and pay for gas, and I have four daughters to care for."

Kelly described the kind of work she does as a school climate worker. "The culture and conditions in the schools have gotten really bad. I work at a high school, where there are a lot of behavioral issues. For a long time, it used to be that there might be 3-5 fights a year. Now, there are lots of fights, 3-5 a week.

"Many of these fights involve ninth graders. And it's because their whole middle school years happened under COVID. They couldn't get out. They don't know how to act socially."

When asked what she thought about the fact that the union took so long to call a strike when their contract expired three years ago, Kelly said, "Many of us feel like the union is working with the district, not for the people."

Teachers are still seething over the sellout of the last strike in 2019 by the UTLA apparatus, which rammed through a contract on workers in a matter of hours that resolved none of the teachers' demands. They also recall the disastrous impact of the union's support for premature school reopenings, against overwhelming opposition from teachers and parents, leading to mass infections in the schools.

Today, while the UTLA and SEIU bureaucracies have been compelled to call a joint strike by the overwhelming anger of teachers and school workers, they are seeking to limit it as much as possible, including by calling it for only three days and as an Unfair Labor Practices strike, in a bid to prevent workers from raising economic demands.

"I was very, very disgusted when we went on strike five years ago," one veteran elementary teacher said. "The union totally let the ball go. They were supposed to have class size reduction in middle school and high school. And they were supposed to have more counselors hired to deal with students and their psychological and mental issues. There aren't enough counselors, there aren't enough nurses.

"There are a lot of students in poverty within the school district. We also need school psychologists because they're responsible for writing up reports on students to try to get their needs met. None of that came through. We may get a minor pay raise but they're not going to take care of any of those other problems, the social problems with the students and staff."

There was a warm response from picketers to campaigners from the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Committee, who distributed more than 2,000 copies of its statement, "The way forward for the strike by 65,000 Los Angeles school workers," which called on workers to take the initiative out of the hands of the bureaucracy by forming rank-and-file strike committees.

At the main rally Tuesday, speakers from the union apparatus offered no way forward for workers. They are integrated completely into the same pro-corporate political establishment,

especially the Democratic Party, which in LA is spearheading the cuts to education. Indeed, both the president of the LAUSD Board, Jackie Goldberg, and the president of the UTLA, Cecily Myart-Cruz, are members of the Democratic Socialists of America, a pseudo-left caucus in the Democratic Party. Last December, three DSA members in the US House voted to ban a strike action by 120,000 railroaders and impose a contract they already rejected.

School workers are not just in a fight against the Superintendent Alberto Carvalho, but the entire capitalist political establishment. Workers are told there is no money for public education, but the Biden administration has proposed a \$1 trillion military budget, the largest in history. Both parties are determined to limit wage growth and prevent strikes, both to discipline the country in preparation for direct US involvement in war against Russia and China and to prop up the teetering financial system, for which trillions of dollars are made available at the drop of a hat.

Among the invited speakers at yesterday's rally was Democratic Representative Adam Schiff, former Chair of the House Intelligence Committee. Schiff is one of the leading anti-Russia hawks in Congress and played a central role in the first impeachment of Donald Trump, which was organized not on the basis of his support for fascism but over his cutoff of military funding for Ukraine. Last October, Schiff visited with members of the neo-Nazi Azov Battalion and the Ukrainian military at the US Capitol.

The logic of the policies which Schiff and the rest of Congress are pursuing threaten the involvement of US combat troops in a war against nuclear powers, including many working class youth fresh from schools in Los Angeles and other major cities.

In the state with the largest number of billionaires, the California Democratic Party has overseen vast levels of wealth inequality, homelessness, migrant jails and detention centers and grotesque levels of poverty, with one-quarter of children in the state living in poverty in California. The social crisis was further exposed by the recent storms that have trapped people in their homes and collapsed buildings in the San Bernardino mountains, where people have been left to fend for themselves by authorities.

The strike by LA school workers is a major step forward, but to carry forward this momentum they must break out of the straitjacket which is being imposed upon them by the union bureaucracy. They must develop their struggle into a broader counteroffensive by the entire working class against the capitalist subordination of lives to profit.



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