

Los Angeles teacher: Pay for school workers “is not enough to support a family”

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24 March 2023

In Los Angeles, 65,000 school workers concluded a three-day strike on Thursday against intolerably low wages and working conditions. On the first day of the strike, the World Socialist Web Site spoke with Max, a fifth grade teacher who has been teaching for 24 years in LAUSD. His name has been changed to protect his anonymity.

Kimie Saito: Why are you on strike?

Max: I'm here today because I did not know that [Service Employees International Union] members were making on average between \$20,000-25,000 a year. That is unacceptable. That is not enough to support a family. As teachers, we take home about \$80,000.

So I'm here for that and the unfair labor practices. I didn't know that people were getting locked in. There were some cafeteria workers who were getting locked in by their principals so they wouldn't vote. I know these are extreme stories, and I know it's a small percentage, but the fact is it was happening. That's not right. What is that? That's Neanderthal. There's no logic to that. Why would you do that?

And then as for [Superintendent Alberto] Carvalho, I didn't know that he upgraded his office. So he put a new restroom. He rebuilt his whole floor. That's ridiculous. Why? Why would he want a brand new urinal? What the hell is that about? Come on! He bought a brand new house in San Pedro for \$1.5 million. Come on! That's ridiculous.

KS: And the teachers have been working on an expired contract since last June.

Max: Yes, we are. And that's the way we live. Every two years it's an expired contract. Let's go back to the table; let's negotiate.

My main thing is not even the pay. Give me more psychologists. We have our nurse. We have our nurse

five days a week, so thank goodness for that. Give me more psychologists, and give me a smaller classroom size. It's really not about the pay.

KS: How many students do you have in your class?

Max: I have 23 students this year, which is not bad, by the way. But if we can keep lowering this number that would be better. When I started, I had 35 students. In 1999-2000, I had 35 students. Imagine that. So it has gotten better, but let's keep bringing that down. Let's have 20 students so we can work with them.

It would make it easier to teach, especially after COVID. COVID made students fall behind two or three years. That online teaching was a mess. It was one of the worst things that happened in public education in a long time.

KS: But at the same time, at least the students were alive. And the fact is the government didn't spend the money to provide people with income in the meantime. Full measures to fight the pandemic and help the population. Now all that is being dropped.

Max: Right.

KS: And the issue now is you have the government always saying, “There's no money.”

Max: Right, right. And there is money. And they've got to spend it.

KS: But what is the government spending it on?

Max: You know, it's the war. We're funding Ukraine, and that's a tough issue there too. I think it's okay to fund Ukraine, but, you're right, if that's money we could spend here rather than Ukraine, we should spend it here. You're right about that. I do agree with you.

KS: The Ukrainian people and the Russian people—those people are not our enemies. It's the government here. There's a connection between the cuts here domestically and the war budget, and both

parties are working together, the Democrats and Republicans.

Max: That's right.

KS: We're fighting for the formation of rank-and-file committees. The classified staff and teachers need to take control of their struggle. You were there in 2019. Teachers didn't get any strike pay. There should be live streaming of the bargaining sessions. The teachers and classified staff should determine the conditions. If there is a COVID outbreak, the rank-and-file committee should shut down the schools.

Max: And this is a union town. The South Bay is such a big union town. My father was a union member. But I will say that I was very disappointed in the last strike. Honestly, you know what I saw? You know what we got out of that? I think maybe about \$200 difference in our paychecks. That's it. That's really what I saw. And I'm a union guy. I am a union guy for life. But it's not the same, and so our unions, we got to do more. We got to do more. If the difference from a strike is that I'm just going to get another \$100 in my paycheck per month, that's not enough.

KS: That 2019 strike was very crucial. Do you remember how that vote took place? You had to turn it around in a few hours. You didn't even get to study the whole thing.

Max: I remember that. I remember that. It was like, "Let's go. Quick, quick. Let's go. Vote yes. Vote yes. Let's do this." I do remember that.

KS: And back then and now, it's the same issues: class sizes, more nurses, counselors and psychologists. The same thing, and nothing was resolved.

Max: Absolutely. So I think we'll be more aware of this this time around. But again this Tuesday/Wednesday/Thursday thing is just about the unfair labor practices, because then we've got another battle ahead. There's another battle that we're going to have in terms of UTLA negotiations. This is just the unfair labor practices with the SEIU, and that's what we're dealing with right now.

KS: Is there a sentiment among teachers that there might be a strike?

Max: Yes. We're ready. Absolutely. You have to make it where LAUSD is bringing in these top qualified teachers with high pay. If not, we're having a teacher shortage right now. We can't even find subs.

When we call in sick, subs don't even report. So they break up the class, and they spread the students out to other classes. So you've got to bring in more people to teach, but nobody wants to teach anymore. People do not want to teach.

KS: Yes, given the pay, the stress and the overwork, and it's been exacerbated over the past three years.

Max: When I came in in 1999, they really needed teachers. So then they were taking people from all different sectors of society. "Come and teach, come and teach. Don't worry about it. We'll give you a credential. You know, just teach. Teach while you're getting your credential."

Then when the 2008 financial crash happened, they were giving out pink slips [layoff notices]. So that was when they were laying off lots of teachers. And now we're back to the old teacher shortage again, and that's unacceptable. They've got to bring teachers back.

KS: We're calling for rank-and-file committees. When you talked about that 2019 strike, that was a betrayal. We said it was a betrayal by the union bureaucracy. Workers have to take control of their situation.

This is global. You're marching alongside the French workers, Italian and Greek workers and all over the world. They are fighting against capitalism.

Max: The problem is I don't think people see that. "Workers of the world, unite!" Karl Marx had it right.



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