

# SEIU claims ratification of Los Angeles school workers contract by 99 percent

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10 April 2023

On Saturday, the Service Employees International Union Local 99 claimed its 30,000 members in the Los Angeles school district voted by 99 percent to ratify a new three-year deal. The contract, which contains limited pay increases largely eaten up by inflation, is retroactive to 2021 and expires next year. It follows a powerful three-day strike, joined by LA public school teachers, which shut down Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the nation's second-largest, last month.

The margin of ratification, even wider than the 96 percent who voted in favor of strike action in February, is implausibly high. But even assuming it is an accurate reflection of the actual votes which were cast, it is the product of a voting procedure designed deliberately to suppress turnout as much as possible. Voting took place over the spring break holiday, when many workers were out of town or visiting family. There were only three days for in-person voting, one day each for three sites in a district covering 960 square miles, followed by two days of online voting. Several workers questioned the 99 percent approval of the contract as some reported never having received their online ballots.

Prior to the vote, only one online membership meeting took place which lasted 45 minutes and included the president's slide presentation, and then a few questions from the rank and file. During and after the vote, many workers were raising criticisms and questions in social media, including the union's own website, about issues that were deliberately avoided.

The deal resolves none of the demands by bus drivers, cafeteria workers, teaching aides, playground workers, health care assistants (HCAs), special education assistants, yard supervisors, custodial and various other support staff workers employed in the school district. It will increase the average salary of \$25,000 a year to \$33,000 in the face of skyrocketing inflation in one of the most expensive regions in the country and world.

Staffing, a critical issue for the education workers, was untouched, while the union bureaucracy was able to secure \$3 million dollars for joint "professional development" programs, which are routinely used by other unions as conduits for "legal" bribes by management.

Michelle, an HCA, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I do medical procedures for children with special needs. I was an 8-hour employee for 15 years. In 2016 they took my hours away. Now I'm a 7-hour employee and didn't get my time back."

She also said that she is among a layer of veteran workers who will not even see the wage increase. "Since I've been there over 20 years, I don't qualify for the 30 percent increase because I maxed out in my position. ... Everybody should get the 30 percent raise; at least that's what was presented and what we expected."

The anger and disgust among health care assistants is so great, she said. "Most of the HCAs even opted out of the union." When asked about the 99 percent "yes" vote claimed by the union, Michelle responded: "Nope, another lie."

One major issue is retroactive pay, as these 30,000 workers have been working on an expired contract for three years. One worker asked if employees, who are no longer with the school district, are eligible for their back pay. Another asked about those who retired during this period, if they can collect their money. Many of these questions have not been answered by the SEIU.

A campus supervision aide wrote on social media: "Supervision aides are not even mentioned, we are not covered in all of this! We didn't even reach the four hours to be covered by health insurance. They didn't even bother with us, we stayed the same." Another added, "How about Supervision Aides working for 3 hours? We were fighting for our hours for a long time."

Another worker summarized the past 30 years, noting,

“90’s No Pay increases. 2000’s Furloughs & Layoffs. 2007 to Present overworked and under Paid. 33 yrs of abuse, Happily Retired 11/22.” Like many who have retired or left the district, they will not be entitled to any back pay. The SEIU had kept workers on the job without a contract for nearly three years. This means the contract likely facilitates significant cost savings for the district by leaving out retroactive pay for workers who have since retired.

SEIU Local 99 Executive Director Max Arias attempted to blame the union bureaucracy’s suppression of strikes by claiming that workers are too poor to afford a strike. He told the *LAist*, “the low pay is one reason why SEIU members had not given up their pay to go on strike since 1969. But poor working conditions pushed members to a breaking point.” Former LAUSD Superintendent Austin Beutner repeated the claim to the *Daily News*, “There’s a reason that SEIU has not gone on strike since 1969. ... For those who are struggling to get by it’s a really painful decision to forgo days of pay.” In reality, the SEIU bureaucracy has used poverty wages, which can only be reversed through strike action, to their advantage. They have not paid workers a dime in strike pay from the three-day strike.

The SEIU is claiming that for all those whom the contract does not address they need to wait until 2024, but there is no reason the full demands of the 30,000 workers could not be met now after being kept working without a contract through the pandemic in the wealthiest state in the country, home to 178 billionaires.

Workers have to draw the necessary conclusions from this experience and prepare for the next stage of the struggle, which begins now. In spite of the media hype, nothing has been resolved. What will the situation be in a year from now as the costs of basic necessities increase, food stamps are slashed for 42 million people and deep cuts to Medicaid benefits threaten health care access for 22 million people?

The contract, for all intents and purposes, is being imposed by the city government through the mechanism of the union. After three years without a contract, the deal was announced only one day after Los Angeles mayor Karen Bass, a Democrat, intervened in the discussions. This is similar to the way in which the LA teachers’ contract was settled in 2019, following the United Teachers Los Angeles’ shutdown of a citywide teachers strike.

This follows the policy of the Biden administration, the self-described “most pro-union president in American

history.” Since last summer, Biden has worked with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union to keep dockworkers on the West Coast on the job without a contract. Last year, Biden attempted to broker a sellout deal with the rail unions to end the threat of a national railroad strike. When workers rejected that contract, Congress voted overwhelmingly to ban a strike and impose the deal.

The Los Angeles school workers’ struggle has lessons for the entire working class, including for 35,000 Los Angeles school teachers who still do not have a contract since last year. Workers face not only ruthless management but a corrupt union bureaucracy, posing the need for them to organize themselves to fight a two-front war.

During this struggle, workers founded the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Committee (LAERFC) to build rank-and-file opposition for the deal. It demanded 100 percent wage increases for all, massive hiring to alleviate short staffing, the transition of all part-time workers to full-time with full benefits and full strike pay from the SEIU treasury which rightfully belongs to the workers, not bureaucrats earning six figure salaries. The committee urged workers to take the struggle out of the hands of the union bureaucracy and join together with teachers, students and the greater working class. The LAERFC stated that this powerful strike was part of an international movement of the working class against capitalism. The LAERFC issued this statement calling for the agreement to be rejected.

If you are interested in more information about or joining the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Committee, contact us by filling out the form below, tweeting @EduRankAndFile, texting 619-431-0643 or emailing [wse-rankedandfile@gmail.com](mailto:wse-rankedandfile@gmail.com).



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