

Los Angeles teachers union announces sellout three-year deal

Dan Conway
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Are you a Los Angeles teacher? Tell us what you think about the contract. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

In a surprise announcement Tuesday morning, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) and the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) announced a tentative agreement for the more than 35,000 teachers in the district. The agreement, which has yet to be voted on by teachers and approved by the school board, begins July 2022 and would remain in effect through July 2025. The UTLA has kept teachers on the job since their contract expired last summer.

While details of the agreement have yet to be publicly released, highlights have been provided by both the district and the union. But even the “highlights” show that the contract falls far short of what teachers need.

The “highlights” include a cumulative 21 percent salary increase over the life of the contract, broken up into six half-year increments of 3 and then 4 percent each year. These raises will be mostly eaten up by inflation. Also, factoring in their three-day sympathy strike last March, teachers will actually be receiving even less during the first year of the contract, as the UTLA has refused to provide teachers with strike pay.

The tentative agreement highlights also include class size reductions and unspecified amounts of increased staff for school psychologists and class counselors. The class size reductions are small, at only two students per class over the life of the contract. Moreover, the reductions prioritize the district’s 100 most “fragile” schools, according to reports. Meaning that many schools may not get any reductions at all. The agreement only references enforceable class size caps for Special Education classes.

The agreement also includes a \$20,000 per year salary increase for school nurses along with \$3,000

raises for school psychologists, psychiatric social workers, attendance counselors and other special services providers. The \$20,000 nurse salary increase, while larger than previous district offerings, will still leave school nurses at lower pay rates than their industry peers and will likely do little to alleviate the district’s nursing staff shortage.

Also included is an extra \$2,500 ongoing increase for special education teachers and a \$1,500 ongoing raise for early education teachers.

The contract was essentially written by the Los Angeles chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America. The DSA controlled both sides of the bargaining table, as both the chair of the Board of Education Jackie Goldberg and UTLA President Cecily Myart-Cruz are DSA members. Last December, three DSA members in the House of Representatives, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, voted to ban strike action by 120,000 railroaders and impose a Biden-brokered contract which workers had already voted down.

The latest deal comes on the heels of the contract ratification between the district and SEIU Local 99, representing 30,000 support staff. That deal also included modest wage increases of 30 percent over the life of the contract, raising the average salary of a school support worker from \$25,000 per year to only \$32,000 per year. It was reached in the aftermath of the three-day strike involving both the school support staff and teachers.

The SEIU workers were also not provided any strike pay, with the union recently posting an “assistance form” for their members, the funding of which will not come from union funds but from “community and labor” partners. Furthermore, assistance will be on a first-come, first-served basis as resources for the

funding are “limited.”

The March strike was launched in an intentionally limited fashion by the trade union leadership. No economic demands were raised and the strike was called on an “unfair labor practice” to try to keep workers from raising economic demands. The UTLA called its members out on a sympathy strike but also raised no demands of its own, even though the union itself was in the midst of negotiations with the district.

Once the SEIU deal was reached and the strike called off, after the intervention of Los Angeles mayor Karen Bass, the UTLA adopted a fake militant posture promising renewed strike action of its own should the district not reach a fair agreement.

Last week, it told members to boycott faculty meetings and publicly balked at the district’s offer of a 19 percent salary increase over three years, with the union countering with a nearly equivalent demand of 20 percent.

LAUSD superintendent Alberto Carvalho responded with clear indications that the union was blustering. “Actually, I’m heartened by the fact that we continue to be at the table, we continue to negotiate,” he said. “And I’m seeing quite frankly an engaging dynamic process that may resolve in an outcome that prevents any impact to our schools.”

Even though the UTLA’s last contract expired in June 2022, the union did nothing to mobilize teachers to take strike action against the district and in fact never held a strike authorization vote. This comes on top of the union unilaterally reopening schools for in-person learning in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a massive increase in community spread throughout the greater Los Angeles area.

The latest tentative agreement also comes on the heels of a decision by the California Public Employment Relations Board, which found that the district’s complaint that the March strike action was illegal can move to the next stage of the hearing process. This is highly unusual because such complaints are usually resolved after a contract is reached. This may have partially motivated the UTLA to not move towards strike action, but more importantly, the union is afraid that a strike of 35,000 teachers could open floodgates that would be beyond the trade union apparatus’s ability to control.

A work stoppage by teachers would also intersect

with a massive strike authorization vote by workers in the Writers Guild of America who recently voted 97.85 percent in favor of strike action against the multi-billion-dollar film and television conglomerates.

It would also intersect with massive unrest at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, which together handle nearly 40 percent of the import and export shipping into and out of the United States. Workers there have recently conducted work stoppages that threaten to spiral out of the control of the International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU), which has also kept 22,000 West Coast dockworkers on the job without a contract since last summer.

While contract details will undoubtedly soon emerge, even the limited highlights released so far indicate that the contract agreement is concessionary in nature and will do nothing to meet the demands of teachers and of the community for high quality public schools. Teachers should recall that after the 2019 Los Angeles teachers’ strike, demands for smaller class sizes and more staff were contractually “enshrined” in advisory committees which had no enforcement mechanisms whatsoever.

In the LA teachers’ strike of 1989, which lasted nine days, the union reached an agreement that included pay increases in the final two years of the contract that were contingent upon the district’s financial health. While the district is claiming a more than \$5 billion reserve during the current fiscal year, it has warned of financial headwinds exacerbated by declining student enrollment. It is quite possible that the latest agreement might include similar provisions enabling the district to renege on the salary increases allotted for the later years of the contract.

The only solution for teachers and school workers is to break the stranglehold of the unions by forming independent rank-and-file committees, fighting for what school workers need and not what the district, local and regional governments and the unions say they can afford. More information on either joining or forming a rank-and-file committee can be found here.



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