

“This is not a business. We’re not commodities.”

Los Angeles teacher: New tentative agreement does not meet rising cost of living

Kimie Saito
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Los Angeles teachers: Tell us what you think about the contract by filling out the form below. All submissions will be kept anonymous.

Last week, the United Teachers Los Angeles union announced a tentative agreement for 35,000 teachers in the country’s second-largest district. Teachers were not given full copies of the contract until yesterday, with voting scheduled to begin only a week from now on May 2. However, the “highlights” which have been released thus far have sparked outrage among teachers, because they make clear that the deal falls far short of their demands.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Helen, a middle school arts teacher for LA Unified School District (LAUSD). She spoke to this reporter about her own situation, the conditions in the schools and what she thought of the UTLA’s tentative agreement. Her name has been changed to protect her identity.

Kimie Saito: How long have you been teaching?

Helen: I actually started teaching in LAUSD [in the early 2000s], and then I got laid off because of No Child Left Behind. Then because my mother lived in New York, I went there and taught for a while in the New York City schools. Eventually I came back to California and taught in Santa Monica Unified, and then I came back to LAUSD.

It’s very difficult to switch to another district because they won’t recognize all your years of seniority. You take a loss. Here in the LA area, if you apply at Redondo Beach Union School District or Torrance Unified, they won’t give me all my seniority years. They’ll only give you some. That’s the way it is all over the country.

It’s my husband, myself and our son. My husband is a freelance composer and musician. I write grants to enable him to tutor the students, who are too poor to afford private lessons. He helps them to improve their skills and be able to compete against more middle class and wealthier students from other schools in the music programs. This is important to me to be able to give that kind of support to our students.

That’s why I do it.

KS: You mentioned that your landlord sold the house you were renting. What happened?

Helen: Last year, we had to suddenly move out of the house we were renting in Torrance. We had lived there for five years, and even though the landlord had promised she wasn’t going to sell, last year she changed her mind. She sold it for \$1.4 million, and the house wasn’t even that spectacular. It was like a regular tract home, nothing special. But when she was able to fetch that price, she took it, and we had to move out. I wished I could buy that house, but not on my teacher salary.

The new owners bought the home for a family member, and they were putting so much pressure on us to move out as soon as possible. We were treated like we were squatters.

We went out looking for a new place to live, and I kid you not, we went and looked at over 30 places. Housing is a big problem in LA. Everything is so expensive. Things got really dire for us. They were pressuring us constantly. Places that were more affordable were in parts of the city that aren’t safe. We had to stay at an AirBnB for a few days.

Now we’re at a place which costs \$700 more a month. That’s a lot of money for us. Before I could get to work in 15 minutes; now I have to commute 28 miles round trip. And there are many UTLA members who commute much farther.

KS: What did you think of the three-day strike by the teachers and classified staff?

Helen: Last month we went out on strike in solidarity with our colleagues in the SEIU. They supposedly got a 21 percent raise over four years. But a lot of the raises are going to level out because of inflation. It wasn’t really COLA [cost of living adjustments]. Nobody is able to catch up with this kind of inflation. We all went into debt to go on strike, because nobody got any strike pay, either the SEIU members or us. My mother-in-law works in auto and is in the United Auto Workers in Buffalo, New York. They got strike pay.

Why don't we?

During that three-day strike, I saw a colleague, a janitor, who had missing teeth. No working adult should have missing teeth. They pay them so little, while the superintendent is making over \$400,000 and just bought himself a house in Palos Verdes.

To be honest, that three-day strike without pay was a whole month of groceries for my family. I'm the primary earner for our family. My husband's income fluctuates because he's freelance. It is just terrible trying to live with this kind of inconsistency. When you go to the store, the price of eggs is out of control. Everything is going up.

We only have one car, which is over 20 years old. We need a second car, but it's out of our reach. Half of my check goes to rent, and then there's groceries, gas, etc.

In order to try to make ends meet, this whole year I took on working an extra period. Unfortunately that's a lot of work to prep for eight classes, and I only have one prep period. I'm supposed to have 135 students, but I have 150. I get 10 minutes to go to the bathroom and a half hour for lunch, and many days I have to work through my breaks and lunch.

KS: What do you think of the tentative agreement?

Helen: First of all, we haven't seen the whole thing. I don't know. I'm very suspicious. We were supposed to get the full TA, but nobody has seen it yet. I feel like the union is creating some kind of smokescreen. I heard that the SEIU had the workers rush and vote for it, and they actually were still working on the contract. Maybe that's what is happening here. I don't know. We're already working on an expired contract; the SEIU workers' contract expired three years ago.

We're being told that this time they're switching to paper ballots and we're voting at the school sites. Why the change? Why not everybody get an online ballot with an email like usual? What is behind this?

I don't want to hear the union say they sacrificed and stayed up until past midnight to negotiate this contract. What about all of us who are teaching under terrible conditions day in and day out? I had to work with students in a patio because of COVID. Band class had to do that too.

This current raise doesn't have us breaking even. It disturbs me that we are losing out on two years of full pay and CalSTRS (the California teachers retirement system). Then there's the fact that all of us haven't been able to pay on our student loans. We all go back to repayment in August. I feel like the union sold us down the river.

The union is telling us it's a good contract, but I seriously doubt that. That last contract in 2019, turned out it wasn't that good. This time it's way worse because of the inflation. This time it is way worse.

I'm in serious debt and working so hard. I am not making ends meet. We're not able to make it to the end of the month with groceries. Sometimes I wake up at 4:00 or 5:00 in the morning worrying how we're going to have enough to eat or worrying that we may become homeless.

KS: What are your students like? What are the conditions like at your school?

Helen: I work primarily in a high-risk area with many students qualifying for free breakfasts and lunches. This district got so much COVID money from the government. It was a lot. What happened to all that? Just like with our raises that they're giving out 3 percent for the first half year, and then 4 percent for the second half, I think the district is trying to hold onto the money as long as they can, diversify, put it into different accounts, etc.

But who is all this really for? Isn't it all supposed to be for the children? They're not thinking about the children. This is not a business. We're not commodities. There are so many charter schools in LA. Our own school is in a cohabitation arrangement with a charter school. That means they're supposed to share the costs of rent, custodial care, etc. The charter is over \$5,000 in the red, but LAUSD is getting billed and they're using our services. It's all seen as profit.

Our students are poor. There are three families sharing an apartment. So many of them and their families got COVID. When we were Zooming, I'd get messages from them while they were in a car on their way to a funeral. Or another would say, 'I'm so sorry my screen isn't on. I'm sick.'

Welcome to my world! And you don't think these students know how they're being treated by this district? When they don't get consistent teachers, staff and services, they start to feel disenfranchised. The message to these students is 'We don't care about you.' They feel like garbage, and the way that manifests is they act out. They are being robbed.

We are also being robbed. Teachers are supposed to wait until 2025 before they get their 21 percent raise, over a four-year period. With all these little raises twice a year, wouldn't there be a chance that the district reneges?



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