

After union contract betrayal, Los Angeles school district presses ahead with additional cuts

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Less than two months after the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) forced a concessionary contract on 35,000 educators and three months after a similarly rotten deal was reached with 30,000 school support staff represented by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 99, the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is pressing ahead with even more cuts. Significantly, the initiatives arrive at the end of the school year, when educators and staff are not able to launch a strike in opposition.

LAUSD Superintendent Alberto Carvalho recently announced the ending of the district's highly successful Primary Promise program, along with a raft of new cost-cutting measures. Primary Promise was an early intervention program designed to assist elementary school students struggling with reading and mathematics proficiency. The program will be replaced with the Literacy and Numeracy Intervention Model, which, while expanding access to middle school students, will remove dedicated teachers. Instead, the new program will further add to regular teachers' workloads.

The conversion will save the district an estimated \$100 million per year. The resultant loss of personnel, however, will only be a fraction of the 2,100 full-time positions funded by federal pandemic relief funds through September 2024. Even if additional layoffs do not materialize as a result of the cutoff of those funds, there will be massive cuts to teacher and support staff compensation and benefits. The new Literacy and Numeracy Intervention Model will be entirely dependent on discretionary funding from individual school sites.

Asked if he thought there was any chance of reversing the cuts after the 2024 deadline, Carvalho responded, "Pulling the rabbit out of the hat will not work. The rabbit is dead, and the hat is small."

The plan to end Primary Promise comes despite significant academic gains among students who participated. More than 1,700 parents wrote a letter to the superintendent's office in support of the plan. The letter read, "The LAUSD has plenty of programs that don't work, so we, a coalition of parents, teachers, staff and community members, are asking the board to stop Superintendent Carvalho from unilaterally dismantling this program that does in fact work in order to enact a lesser version."

A deal was also reached on June 2 to add three additional

instructional days to the school calendar. Teachers and school staff will not be paid for the additional three days, although two of the three will replace two mandatory days of professional development training, meaning that teachers will now have one additional working day without pay.

The district had previously attempted to alter the school calendar in March, shortening the winter break period from three weeks to two-and-a-half weeks, followed by an additional decrease to two weeks in subsequent years. In response, the UTLA filed an unfair labor practice charge against the district for imposing a new calendar without any discussion with the union. The unfair labor practice was recently dropped after the latest calendar year alteration was announced.

The district had also attempted to add four so-called acceleration days to the school year calendar, intended to make up for alleged learning loss while students were being instructed remotely during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. This had led to the UTLA advising members to voluntarily boycott the acceleration days, as they too had been imposed without the union's consent.

In both cases, however, teachers had been working without a contract, which expired in June 2022. During the intervening period, the UTLA never once called for a strike vote by teachers, and only called a three-day sympathy strike with 30,000 school support staff teachers in March. Teachers were not paid from the union's strike fund for any of the three days they picketed, and the district has made clear the imposition of three instructional days is meant to completely nullify the effect of last winter's strike.

The powerful strike launched by 30,000 LAUSD school support staff was meant to reverse decades of stagnant, poverty-level wages in the second largest school district in the country. Fearing that the strike could spread to other school districts and reach broader sections of the working class, SEIU Local 99 and the UTLA shut the strike down after only three days, calling a snap vote after providing no details of the proposed agreement to members.

The deal included a mere 30 percent wage increase over the life of the contract for SEIU Local 99 members, raising the average worker's annual salary from \$25,000 to \$32,500, an extreme poverty wage in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas of the country.

Less than a month later, the UTLA reached a similarly rotten

deal with the district, which included wage increases that barely keep pace with inflation, unenforceable language on staffing, no provisions to contain the spread of COVID-19 and other infectious diseases, and measures to allow the continued proliferation of privately run but publicly funded charter schools, which, in the case of LAUSD, are often run either in whole or in part by the UTLA itself. Charter schools constitute a dangerous threat to public education and a democratic society in general. The state of Oklahoma recently allowed the nation's first religious charter school receiving public funding for its operation.

Public school funding, including that for the Los Angeles school district, will inevitably become a target for additional cuts, whether at the hands of Los Angeles, Sacramento or Washington. Most recently, California Governor Gavin Newsom announced that the state's budget deficit had grown to \$32 billion. As a result, the governor's May budget revision includes \$3 billion in cuts to public education grant programs.

On the federal level, discretionary spending has been frozen at 2023 levels in order to finance increased spending on the US war machine in connection with the escalating conflict with Russia and war preparations against China. Politicians from both parties have made clear that the spending freeze is only the prelude to further cuts in social programs, which will have a devastating effect on the working class.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers and a parent about the conditions. Michelle, a longtime adult ed teacher for the school district, remarked about the recent tentative agreement:

I am not happy with the calendar at all. LAUSD forced a three-week (one unpaid) winter break on us years ago, and now that we've incorporated it into our lives, they've taken it away. Many of our students practice orthodox religions that celebrate their Christmas holiday on January 6. So that first week in January often has low attendance anyway.

Then, instead of making the school year start a week later, when the weather is miserable in August, they used it to end earlier. That makes no sense, as our weather is mild in June and scorching in August. Obviously, there's little to no regard for student culture or health.

Sandy, an arts instructor, commented on the Primary Promise program:

I was unaware of cuts to Primary Promise. I am also unfamiliar with the program. I certainly hope that the certificated staff are assigned to schools that have been short-staffed all school year. We still need a math and science teacher.

In the end, the contract got passed when we all realized we would probably spend more than a year arguing about it. Still, our raises haven't kicked in. UTLA promised that we will have our raise increased to 10 percent and the

retroactive pay next month.

Right now, we are getting extra huge infusions of funding from the state as a result of Proposition 28. LAUSD is in a hiring blitz, and we still have large reserves.

As for Sweetwater Union (in San Diego), I have a friend that has worked for them for 17 years. That district has a lot of trouble with corruption and fraud. She hasn't noticed job cuts. They are also in a hiring blitz.

Sarah, an elementary school teacher, said:

I don't know any teachers who work in the Primary Promise program. The district is pushing for small group instruction. This is extremely difficult to do without any help. The younger students become easily distracted and go off task if there isn't another adult sitting with their group. Primary Promise would enable the students to have small group instruction in another room. This quieter environment really targets the individual needs of the kids.

Juanita, a former early education teacher in LAUSD, lost her case against the district for injuries incurred on the job. The UTLA allowed the district to dismiss her lawsuit, which resulted in her loss of retirement and medical benefits. Even so, she continues to actively volunteer and advocate for students and their families.

She said:

As a parent, what really matters to me is that the *students* have to pay for these people's games. It's the students who suffer from these budget cuts and from all these years with COVID. The unions talk like they're radical, but they don't represent the teachers and students. No one can teach or learn in overcrowded classrooms.

Teachers and other education workers formed the Los Angeles Educators Rank-and-File Committee (LAERFC) to oppose the unions' collaboration with the district in imposing impossible conditions in the schools. There can be no reversal of such historic attacks against public education if matters are left in the hands of the trade union apparatus and either of the two parties of big business. Instead, we call on teachers and education workers to join and build the LAERFC to mobilize the working class in the defense of free, high quality public education for all.



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