30,000 LAUSD support workers must strike now and take control through Rank-and-File Committees!

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On Tuesday, 30,000 Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) support workers are demonstrating against poverty and exploitation which the district is seeking to deepen in a new contract. The support workers include bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers, teacher assistants, special education assistants, playground aides and other classified staff, and are members of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 99.

These workers keep 1,000 schools in the country's second-largest school district functioning for more than 400,000 students across the region, performing essential labor that makes public education possible on a daily basis. Yet despite their central role, the majority earn near or below $30,000 a year, with many making far less, condemning them to poverty wages in one of the most expensive metropolitan areas in the country.

There is enormous potential for a powerful statewide strike movement uniting educators across California. Workers in virtually every major school district have been working for months without a contract, while talks with the districts have gone nowhere. Recently, San Francisco teachers voted by 99 percent to strike. Educators in the West Contra Costa County Unified School District struck earlier this month, before the union officials abruptly shut the strike down.

Low pay, pervasive part?time employment, chronic understaffing and unsafe conditions have produced repeated waves of rank?and?file anger among LA school support workers over the past decade. Many of these workers are immigrants, now facing intensified attacks from the Trump administration through ICE raids and deportations. Neither the district nor the union bureaucracy has done anything to protect them.

The first step is building such a movement is to mobilize educators from below. Rank-and-file committees in every school district must be built, linking educators across the state as well as the country in a common fight in defense of the right to education.

Such committees are necessary to break through the stonewalling of the union bureaucrats. For the past eighteen months, educators in California have been kept on the job without a contract. The previous three?year collective bargaining agreement expired on June 30, 2024.

Although negotiated during the 2022 bargaining cycle, it was only ratified in early 2023 after intense negotiations and a strike in March of that year.

Together with the United Teachers Los Angeles union, Local 99 has sent its members to work without any agreement in place, refusing to call a strike authorization vote or mobilize the overwhelming anger among the rank and file.

The union bureaucracy knows full well that a strike vote would pass by a landslide, just as it did in February 2023, when 96 percent voted to authorize strike action. Rather than allow workers to exercise their collective power, the union leadership chose to shut down the struggle, fearing that an independent movement would escape their control.

Local 99 has called this week's rally to let workers blow off steam before things get out of officials' control. It has been deliberately timed with the tail end of the semester in order to prevent workers from building momentum to take action.

For educators, they must use the rally to start organizing with each other to enforce the will of the membership and prepare for a strike for inflation-busting raises, smaller class sizes, adequate funding for infrastructure, protection from immigration raids and other key demands.

LAUSD began negotiations by proposing a 0 percent wage increase, an open declaration that the district intends to impose further austerity on workers already living in poverty. This, in a city with 56 billionaires and the center of the world's television and film industry!

The $18.8 billion district budget leaves classrooms without basic supplies. This is the outcome of a political and economic framework that systematically diverts resources

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away from students and school workers. The district enforces austerity through attendance?based funding formulas, with layers of bureaucratic overhead and legally restricted spending mechanisms at the school level, particularly in working class communities.

California's Democratic Party establishment oversees public education while subordinating it to the interests of finance and corporate elites. The union bureaucrats work with them to contain independent resistance and block effective organization by workers. This has produced decades of decline in public education.

While the Trump administration openly moves to dismantle public education at the federal level, Democrats in California pursue the same outcome through austerity, insisting that school districts and public universities "have no money" while refusing to challenge the vast concentration of wealth at the top of society. The same Democrats have readily voted for bloated military budgets that fund imperialist war and repression abroad. There is money for war, but not for schools.

SEIU Local 99 has not even countered LAUSD's 0 percent proposal with a concrete wage demand. In 2023, during the strike that preceded ratification of the now?expired contract, the union advanced a demand for a 30 percent wage increase over 3 years. Even that figure was inadequate given decades of declining real wages.

Today, Local 99 nominally opposes LAUSD's latest offer of a total 7 percent raise spread over three years, but its bargaining updates avoid stating any clear alternative. Workers are told only that the union is fighting for wages "above poverty."

The union has gone further by deliberately fragmenting negotiations. To create the illusion of progress, workers were informed that an agreement had been reached on healthcare benefits. In reality, the LAUSD–SEIU Local 99 health benefits agreement codifies austerity while disguising it as "stability" and "fiscal responsibility."

The district's contribution is rigidly capped. If healthcare costs go up beyond that limit, the extra costs are automatically pushed onto workers, either through higher monthly premiums, higher deductibles or reduced benefits. Even if there is a dispute, arbitrators are not allowed to require the district to pay more. A labor?management Health Benefits Committee acts as an enforcement body for cost containment, exploring high?deductible plans and opt?outs that undermine collective coverage.

If healthcare costs come in below the capped amount set by LAUSD, the difference becomes a "reserve fund." That reserve is not owned by the workers and cannot be used to expand benefits or lower future costs at will, in fact any reserve funds above $150 million at the end of a year are automatically transferred back to LAUSD's General Fund. Unfunded retiree liabilities (the difference between what was promised and what is set aside) are addressed through benefit erosion rather than expanded public funding.

The SEIU has fully transformed into an instrument of corporate and state management. Local 99 Executive Director Max Arias, responsible for day-to-day operations and bargaining strategy, received $219,955 from membership dues in 2024. A privileged bureaucracy has emerged whose interests are bound up with institutional relationships, political access and budgetary constraints. Its function is to contain struggle, not to wage it.

The immediate priority is to call a strike. This is the essential first step in reclaiming the power that has been usurped by the union bureaucracy and demonstrating the strength of the workers' collective force. A strike must be organized, sustained, and controlled by the rank and file, not by a leadership that has repeatedly betrayed its own members.

At the same time, rank?and?file committees must be established in every school. These committees, elected and controlled by workers themselves, should oversee negotiations and manage strike funds.

Most importantly, coordinate with teachers across the state, the country and the world. They must also link up with other sections of the working class. Their purpose is to link with teachers, parents, students and other public-sector workers to transform a single-district strike into a wider movement of the working class against inequality and oligarchy.

This approach is necessary not only for immediate economic gains, such as inflation?beating wages and full-time positions with benefits, but because this is a political struggle. Under capitalism, meaningful improvements in living standards and working conditions are impossible without directly challenging the system that prioritizes profit over human need.

The fight of California educators is a step toward a broader, politically conscious movement of the working class. Only through independent, democratic organization, coordinated action, and rank?and?file control can this struggle force a reallocation of resources to public education and ensure that workers collectively determine the course of their own lives.

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