

Lessons from the San Francisco strike: How the unions, Democratic Party and pseudo-left betrayed the teachers

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Across California, educators are preparing new struggles against decades of bipartisan austerity and the escalating nationwide war on public education by the Trump administration.

The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) has set a strike deadline of April 14, which would mobilize 35,000 teachers, as well as 30,000 support staff in the Service Employees International (SEIU) who are also working without a contract. This has enormous potential to galvanize hundreds of thousands of educators and transform the fight in defense of public education, nationally and internationally.

But to win, educators must draw the sharpest possible lessons from the recent San Francisco teachers' strike—above all, about the role of the union bureaucracy, the Democratic Party and its pseudo-left appendages.

Just a little over a month ago, roughly 6,400 educators in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) walked out, shutting the city's schools for four days and mounting pickets and mass demonstrations that brought thousands of workers, parents and students into the streets. The walkout coincided with a strike by 31,000 Kaiser healthcare workers throughout California and Hawaii, expressing a broad and growing wave of working class opposition.

This powerful strike tapped into years of opposition by teachers to draconian rounds of budget cuts and threatened school closures in one of the richest regions on the planet, home to more than 130 billionaires. The strike was directly political, pitting educators against a Democratic Party-controlled school administration, a Democratic mayor and governor.

After just four days, the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF), however, working hand in glove with American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten, shut down the strike on the district's terms and demobilized educators.

There was no effort to unify with striking healthcare workers or to organize joint strike action with other educators working without a contract throughout the state, despite the fraudulent "We Can't Wait" campaign of the California Teachers Association (CTA), which is affiliated with both the AFT and the National Education Association. The same pattern of betrayal was rapidly imposed in neighboring Berkeley and Oakland on the basis of the rotten San Francisco deal.

Weingarten—longtime AFT president and former Democratic National Committee member—flew into San Francisco to wrap up negotiations and impose a quick surrender, a role she has played in school districts from coast to coast. She did so in league with top California Democrats, including former US Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, a San Francisco power broker, and Mayor Daniel Lurie

of the billionaire Levi Strauss family. Indeed, Governor Gavin Newsom and the state Democratic machine moved aggressively to force a capitulation on the demand for a livable wage and to secure a rapid return to work.

The agreement signed by UESF and CTA was a calculated betrayal. It offered only a 4 percent raise over two years—a real wage cut in one of the most expensive cities in the world—while maintaining the entire state-imposed framework of austerity and school closures. The union openly admitted that wage demands were scuttled in favor of "full family healthcare" coverage, a critical demand for educators.

But the nature of the betrayal became clear almost immediately. Within days, preliminary layoff notices were issued by the district—targeting 42 positions, including art and music teachers, counselors and 32 instructional aides.

SFUSD officials simultaneously signaled that hundreds more jobs would be eliminated through non-renewals, attrition and further cuts as part of a multi-year "fiscal recovery" plan dictated by Newsom's administration, including more than \$100 million in cuts for 2026–27 to avoid state receivership.

In other words, educators got pink slips as their "victory." The contract contained no protection against a new wave of layoffs and school closures; the district made clear it would balance its budget, including rising healthcare costs, through brutal cuts.

Weingarten, nonetheless, touted this disaster as "a big win for San Francisco educators" and a model of "collective power," repeating the pseudo-left mantra "When we strike, we win," as a cover for the union's role in enforcing austerity.

This is not an aberration but the essential function of the AFT and the entire AFL-CIO machinery. Under Weingarten's autocratic leadership, the AFT has systematically prevented strikes, policed contract expirations and enforced austerity in alliance with the Democratic Party. For decades, public education has been starved of resources as the union bureaucracy has suppressed the class struggle. The results are stark: Educators have been reduced to low-wage workers. To cite only one statistic, as of 2024, public school teachers earned nearly 27 percent less in weekly wages than similarly educated workers. Meanwhile, AFT President Weingarten makes more than \$500,000 a year.

Throughout this period, the pseudo-left spectrum has hung onto the coattails of the union bureaucracy, defending each and every betrayal as a "historic" victory and consciously concealing the unions' pro-capitalist role.

The betrayal in San Francisco continued this trend, under conditions

of an escalating movement of workers and young people, as workers attempted to reverse years of cuts.

UESF bargaining team Vice President of Substitutes Nathalie Hrizi, a contributor to the Party for Socialism and Liberation (PSL)'s *Liberation News*, was recently featured by *Jacobin* magazine as a "rank and file leader" of the strike. *Jacobin* functions as the publication of the Democratic Socialists of America, a faction of the Democratic Party.

Hrizi celebrated the settlement as containing "multiple victories," including a 5 percent pay "increase" for certificated employees who are already forced to work two or three jobs to survive, portrayed as "some relief" despite being below inflation and leaving teachers in poverty.

Jacobin itself ignored the immediate layoff announcements and the promise of further cuts, choosing instead to hype zero-cost contract items, such as "sanctuary school" language and a stay-over program for unhoused families as proof of a "win."

Hrizi's interview also praised the CTA's "We Can't Wait" campaign, which in practice meant forcing educators to work without contracts for nearly a year while the bureaucracy staged short, tightly controlled strikes to ram through deals which maintained austerity.

Pseudo-left groups who claim to be to the "left" of the DSA were no different. On Strike! Substack, also affiliated with the PSL, described the deal as a "transformational victory," highlighting its nominal salary gains. The Morenoite *Left Voice* headlined their February 16 report "San Francisco Teachers' Strike Ends with Major Gains," portraying the contract as a blow "against austerity logic." It went further, claiming:

under no circumstances should these increases lead to scarcity and budget cuts in other areas that would still damage the working conditions for teachers and the learning environment for students.

Yet, this is precisely—and predictably—what has occurred. The WSWS specifically warned, on February 14, that the union bureaucracy would acquiesce to jobs cuts in exchange for gains in benefits, and urged a "no" vote. We wrote:

Supposedly, in exchange for maintaining low wages and giving up sabbaticals, educators will get relief on 2026 copays and full coverage for some family healthcare plans by January 1, 2027. However, given the elimination of hundreds of positions year after year, the district will likely "cover" any healthcare costs by cutting jobs.

The pseudo-left told educators they were "winning" precisely as the district and state were preparing layoffs, functioning as an ideological shield for the union leadership and the Democratic Party. They have systematically obscured the essential fact revealed by the San Francisco experience: that the union bureaucracy, integrated into the Democratic Party and the state, operates not as an instrument of workers' struggle but as the mechanism through which austerity is enforced.

For educators, parents and students, the lessons are urgent. The

overwhelming strike votes in Los Angeles reflect the same conditions that drove San Francisco teachers into struggle—poverty wages, unbearable workloads, chronic understaffing and mounting threats of cuts and closures. LA officials are already invoking "financial challenges" tied to declining enrollment and the expiration of federal pandemic funds, laying the groundwork for a new round of budget cutting that mirrors, in both language and substance, the regime imposed in San Francisco.?

The San Francisco strike shows that the struggle to defend public education is a political fight against the entire framework of capitalist austerity, imposed by the Democrats no less than Trump and the Republicans. LA educators cannot win by aligning with so-called "progressive" Democrats on school boards or in the legislature; these figures are part of the same apparatus that enforce state oversight and budget cuts in San Francisco.

The central question is the formation of new organizations of struggle independent of the union bureaucracy and both corporate parties. To prevent a San Francisco-style betrayal, teachers and support staff in Los Angeles and across California must build rank-and-file committees in every school, entirely independent of the union apparatus and all factions tied to the Democratic Party and the capitalist oligarchy.

These rank-and-file bodies must advance non-negotiable demands: Stop Trump's war on Iran! Stop the ICE raids and defend immigrant workers and youth! No layoffs and school closures! Rehire all workers threatened with job loss! Wage increases that surpass inflation! Fully funded healthcare! Massive hiring to reduce class sizes and workloads! They must insist that public education be fully funded through the expropriation of the billionaire elite, not sacrificed to their profits or the escalating costs of imperialist war.

The enormous potential of a united teachers' and support staff strike in Los Angeles can be realized only on this basis. The central lesson from San Francisco is that militancy and overwhelming strike votes are not enough on their own. The decisive question is the formation of rank-and-file committees and a political program, independent of both corporate-controlled parties, which will fight for workers to take political power, expropriate the oligarchs and use society's wealth to greatly expand public education and fight for social equality.



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