

“We do have the money to pay for education. Unfortunately, it’s been funneled away to pay for wars”: California Little Lake teachers walk out

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More than 200 teachers and school employees in the Little Lake City School District in Los Angeles County continued their strike into its third day Monday, following a walkout that began April 16.

Little Lake City consists of seven elementary schools, from kindergarten through sixth grade, and two middle schools, serving seventh and eighth grades, in Santa Fe Springs, Norwalk and Downey in the Los Angeles metropolitan area. The district employs roughly 200 teachers, not all of whom are full-time, and serves 3,656 students. The overwhelming majority of students, about 80 percent, qualify for free school lunches in this impoverished section of southeast Los Angeles County.

The issues in the strike are wages, healthcare benefits, class sizes and special education support services. The immediate trigger was a midyear healthcare benefits cut that could increase some employees’ monthly costs by as much as \$1,400. It is the first strike in the district’s 154-year history, and more than 90 percent of district teachers voted to authorize the walkout.

The educators are members of the Little Lake Education Association (LLEA), which is affiliated with the California Teachers Association (CTA) and, through it, the National Education Association (NEA).

Teachers began picketing at school campuses early Thursday morning. Hours later, they held a rally and marched to the district offices in Santa Fe Springs. Later in the afternoon, more than 1,000 teachers, parents, students and supporters rallied again at the district offices.

The Little Lake City teachers’ strike is part of a growing wave of struggles by teachers and education workers in California and throughout the country. In February, more than 6,000 teachers and paraprofessionals in San Francisco struck for the first time in nearly 50 years, closing schools serving roughly 50,000 students.

Last week, some 70,000 teachers, principals and school support staff in Los Angeles Unified, the second-largest school district in the country, were prepared to strike before the walkout was called off at the last minute after tentative agreements were reached by the unions.

These struggles are driven by the same conditions: unaffordable healthcare costs, wages that do not keep pace with the cost of living, overcrowded classrooms, understaffed schools and attacks on special education services. They are unfolding under conditions in which both big business parties insist there is “no money” for public education, even as trillions are squandered on war, tax cuts for the rich and the

bailout of the financial oligarchy.

On the first day of the strike, reporters from the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with teachers and supporters and discussed how the struggle could be broadened beyond Little Lake City and placed under the democratic control of educators themselves.

Marie, a social worker in SEIU Local 721 who works with LAUSD foster students, came with her sister’s family to support the teachers. “Across the board, I think teachers have been underpaid, and then to take away their significant benefits, such as their healthcare, that is adding to the costs that they’re shouldering.

“They’re already not getting the salaries that they deserve. And then to make them pay for their own healthcare, that takes away from their value as teachers. All around it’s unfair, it’s inequitable. And then to expect them to put in more work because the class sizes are going to get worse. It’s also unfair to the students because they’re not going to get the attention that they need. Teachers are not going to be able to teach. They’re only going to be able to manage their classroom at that point.”

Regarding the Democrats’ voting for Trump’s military budget, she said, “It’s not a party thing anymore. We deserve to have good education. We, the working class, deserve equitable pay for the work that we do. We have to keep fighting for our rights.”

Asked what she thinks if the 70,000 LAUSD workers had gone on strike, Marie said, “There’s a good potential that it could have been empowering to the rest of us. And because LAUSD is such a big district, it would have empowered other districts to do the same or something similar.

“I think a lot of people think socialism is this very unusual thing, but what we have currently is not working either! So, we might as well make things more equitable for everybody and give everyone the chance to have equal rights. I think capitalism has not worked for our country.”

Meghan, a special education teacher, said the teachers were “asking for nothing more than safety language and a continuance of our benefits. We didn’t even ask for a raise. The district came in and added increased class sizes and is cutting teachers.

“For class sizes they are suggesting that kindergarten have a 1 to 27 ratio, so that would be one teacher for 27 kindergarteners, which actually violates state law.”

Kindergarten teachers are “our first line of defense,” she said. “These are the people who see when a child is struggling and may need to get assessed for special education. If we have 27 in classroom, we are going to have students who fall through the cracks.

“There was actually a RIF, reduction in force. They have removed 21 teachers in total, 6 non-re-elects and 15 tenured teachers have been fired. The district’s most recent proposal, which they gave yesterday in an emergency meeting, would fire an additional 13 teachers.

“So far, they have been charging us for our insurance since January. I myself pay \$1,412 a month for my family’s coverage. This is unacceptable, and it’s not sustainable.

“They call it a wave across California of districts attempting to pay the teachers less, give the students less services, increase class sizes in an effort to save money. This is not something that is good for children. It’s not good for teachers; it’s not good for schools or the state. We have to invest in the kids.”

On the government’s war on Iran, she said, “I think that this is terrible. I think that we have done enough damage in the world. Right now we have a lot going on here. I don’t understand why we’re picking fights other places. We have a lot to take care of right here.

“They were going after all the early intervention funds. As districts, as educators, we have to stand together no matter what district you belong to. We are under attack. We do have the money to pay for education. Unfortunately, it’s been funneled away to pay for wars, to pay for tax breaks, to pay for anything except educating the children and paying the teachers.”

Janna, a parent of a student at Cresson Elementary School, told the WSWS she came to the rally “because we support teachers, we believe their healthcare is important because they are important.”

The teachers “provide a lot of stability, especially for our children who have special needs.” She added that teachers are not “being greedy unlike what the district is trying to say.

“All they want is covered healthcare. I mean that is a basic right, right? And they haven’t had any increases to their salaries for years, and I think that is the least this district can do.”

Andrea, a fifth grade teacher, said she has “been with the district for over 10 years. And throughout this time, I’ve encountered amazing educators. Educators that support, value and guide our students. And today, we fight for them. Our district wants to increase class sizes. We know that more students in the classroom is a disservice to them. And that’s not the education that this community deserves.

“Our district has removed our healthcare coverage and is using increasing classroom sizes as a bargaining chip. For many of us paying over \$1,000 a month means being forced to make an impossible choice between the profession we love and the financial stability for our own families. We stand together as educators wanting the best for our students.

“Currently, I already have 31 students. So an increase in class sizes, we can only imagine. It’s not fair to any of us: the students, the parents or teachers.

“Some of these teachers are paying over \$1,000 a month for their health care,” she added.

Andrea noted that LAUSD is “one of the biggest districts ... they are powerful. We are a tiny district trying to be just as strong.

“We are not even asking for a raise. All we are asking for is for our healthcare to be covered and for our class sizes not to increase.”

On the broader situation facing workers, Andrea said, “I feel like we are getting hit all over the place. We are getting hit with our economy, we’re getting hit with changes in our district, we’re getting hit with gas prices going up, our food supplies, everything.”

The Thursday rally was addressed by California Teachers Association (CTA) President David Goldberg. The union bureaucrat assured demonstrators that their battle had already been won, declaring, “There is no way this puny superintendent... He is no match for this. Look at the power here: the parents, the students, the educators. He is no match for this.”

Goldberg made demagogic references to past teachers’ strikes and claimed that 300,000 California CTA members were “standing with you today.” He said:

“Look at all these incredible women. The disrespect that this district does is a disrespect of women’s work. It’s a disrespect of our students. It’s a disrespect of our families, and it’s going to stop now. We’re honored to be here, and we will be here as long as it takes. We’re honored to be the wind beneath your wings as you take incredible solidarity and show us what it means to struggle. Onward and upwards, folks. Onward and upwards.”

But while it is true that the strike has widespread support, active, organized opposition to school cuts is being sabotaged by the CTA bureaucracy.

Goldberg made no mention of the last-minute contract settlements in Los Angeles USD, where the UTLA, the administrators’ union and SEIU Local 99 prevented a strike by 70,000 education workers that would have shut down the second-largest school district in the United States. The threatened LAUSD strike would have enormously strengthened the struggle of Little Lake City teachers and opened the door to a broader statewide fight in defense of public education.

Little Lake City teachers and district officials resumed bargaining Monday. The central danger is that the CTA and its local affiliates will seek to isolate the strike, wear teachers down and force through a settlement that leaves the fundamental issues unresolved.

To prevent this, Little Lake City educators must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of the CTA bureaucracy and into their own hands through rank-and-file committees, democratically controlled by teachers and school workers themselves.

Such committees would provide the means to unite educators across district lines, link up with LAUSD workers and other sections of the working class, and organize a genuine fight against layoffs, unaffordable healthcare costs and the dismantling of public education. This is not simply a contract dispute with one small district but part of a broader confrontation with a political establishment that claims there is “no money” for schools while pouring trillions into war, corporate bailouts and tax cuts for the rich.



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