

# Union agrees to sell-out deal covering Los Angeles teachers

By Dan Conway  
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After months of negotiations, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) has reached a tentative contract with the Los Angeles Unified School District for more than 35,000 public school teachers. Teachers will vote on the deal over the next few weeks.

The agreement follows the union's declaration of an impasse last February. A state mediator was brought in to reach a settlement while the union ostensibly began preparations for a district-wide strike as part of a campaign of toothless public relations stunts dubbed as "escalating actions."

The district's last offer contained a meager five percent salary increase, while the UTLA countered by lowering its demand from 17 percent to 8.5 percent. The current agreement contains a 10.36 percent raise, the majority of which is retroactive to the start of the 2014-2015 school year.

Teachers have not had a raise since 2007. Considering average annual increases in the Consumer Price Index along with one day per month unpaid furlough days teachers were forced to take during the height of the financial crisis, the meager raise actually represents a de facto wage cut. Such is the anger against eroding wages that school officials felt it necessary to include terms for reopening negotiations on wages by July 2017.

The UTLA has abandoned any serious demands for reduced class sizes, a major concern of teachers, parents and students alike. It had initially demanded more than 5,090 new teachers, nurses and librarians; however, the new tentative agreement does not include any language related to the hiring of new teachers. It also does not seek the rescinding of pink slips issued to more than 609 LAUSD teachers last month.

The Los Angeles School District—the nation's second largest with 655,500 students—is amongst the most crowded with an average of more than 40 children per classroom. The tentative agreement includes a mere \$26 million for class size reduction—an amount that would be enough to hire only 139 new teachers assuming the total was used for that

purpose. Instead, the agreement institutes "flexible" class size caps that center on a "recommended" average of about 37 children per teacher per classroom. These caps can be changed at any time depending on the district's budget.

Moreover, the district is only required to hire additional full-time teachers to meet increased enrollment should class size exceed the recommended minimum by a specified threshold. In the case of elementary classrooms, the threshold is fully one half above the recommended minimum. Furthermore, such classrooms are allowed to remain overcrowded until the following semester or school term.

Even this provision is nearly completely unenforceable, as the agreement recognizes that class size restrictions are subject to state funding limitations and teacher shortages.

In order to address overcrowded classrooms, the agreement instead calls for the formation of "Joint Class Size Task Forces." These are designed specifically to use overcrowded classrooms as a pretext to bring untrained and lower-paid school employees into classrooms. The joint class size task force is authorized to identify "potential future funding sources for class size reduction, included but not limited to savings related to employee and student attendance, payroll efficiencies, improved utilization of unassigned employees and other operation and instructional efficiencies."

It also calls for class size decreases utilizing savings obtained from teacher and student absences presumably as a result of full-time teacher layoffs and retirement and the transfer of existing students to charter schools.

The agreement also includes a three-tiered evaluation process that paves the way for future mass firings of teachers. Under the new process, teachers are ranked in one of three categories, "exceeding," "meeting" or "falling below" standards. This system is required in order for the LAUSD to obtain \$171 million in federal funding under the Obama administration's reactionary Race to the Top initiative used to push test-based "accountability" schemes, fire teachers and replace public schools with for-profit

charter operations.

The standards had been a significant point of contention for district superintendent Ramon Cortines and the union has readily agreed to implement this key aspect of corporate-backed “school reform.”

This latest agreement is one of several recent developments that serve to expose the thoroughly anti-teacher and pro-education “reform” positions of the UTLA and its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

Just days before the tentative agreement was reached, the UTLA and several other Los Angeles city unions, part of the Health Benefits Committees, reached an agreement with the district over retiree health benefits. The funding shortfall of the HBC fund was addressed by drawing from the HBC reserve account and by moving eligible retirees to an Employer Group Waiver plan. This would place thousands of retirees onto Medicare rolls in place of their promised benefits.

This agreement, like the latest UTLA contract language, was agreed upon completely in secret without any input from rank-and-file teachers. In fact, the teachers union is fully cooperating with the district, and consciously so, in attacking teachers. The UTLA was recently found to have diverted at least \$800,000 from its strike fund to back so-called pro-union candidates in the upcoming school board elections. These include board candidates endorsed by both the union and the California Charter Schools Association such as incumbent board President Richard Vladovic.

Also, as part of the district’s reimplementation of the state’s reactionary “parent trigger” law, which allowed so-called community groups to turn existing public schools into charters, the billionaire-backed Parent Revolution organization has announced that 20th Street Elementary School is the latest to be targeted for conversion. Unlike in previous such cases, however, the majority of applicants state they would like the school to convert into a specific type of charter known as a “pilot school.” These include charter schools run by the UTLA, which has discretion over hiring and firing teachers. They are largely exempt from state regulations.

This is precisely why the union has been completely silent, despite its “Escalating Actions” and “Schools LA Students Deserve” campaigns, about the most egregious anti-teacher rulings passed in California during the last year. These include the *Vergara vs. California* ruling declaring teacher tenure unconstitutional and Assembly Bill 215 substantially reducing due process rights for teachers.

The major concern of the UTLA and the AFT was to prevent a strike. This is not because it would not receive

popular support. On the contrary, the unions are opposed to a strike precisely because it would become a rallying point for a far broader mobilization of the working class against the destruction of public education, the erosion of living standards and the growth of social inequality.

The UTLA and AFT are not opposed to corporate-backed “school reform.” On the contrary, they are allied to the Obama administration and California Democrats because they have generally included the unions in imposing the attacks on teachers and public education. Far from defending teachers, the union apparatus is only looking to be partners in the running of charter operations, collect union dues from low-paid and highly exploited teachers and cash in from the opening up of the \$1.3 trillion “education market.”

In the face of such flagrant attacks on its membership, the UTLA instead responded with a few impotent rallies and faculty meeting boycotts and its “escalating actions” campaign to cover its betrayal. These maneuvers were part of a coordinated campaign backed by pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization aimed at preventing a rebellion against the UTLA and the Democratic Party.

The union’s current president, Alex Caputo-Pearl, was heavily backed by the ISO in his run for office last October. The so-called Union Power movement he led promised to fight for “education equity.” Caputo-Pearl called on teachers to emulate the example of the Chicago teachers strike in 2012, which was betrayed by the union, led by vice-president Jesse Sharkey, a leading member of the ISO. This paved the way for the closing of 50 schools and the layoffs of 2,000 teachers by Mayor Rahm Emanuel. The union, however, gained access to organize teachers at the city largest charter school operation, run by one of Emanuel’s biggest financial backers.

The *World Socialist Web Site* calls on all teachers to reject the sellout agreement and prepare a citywide strike. Teachers, parents and students should organize action committees, independently of the UTLA and the big-business parties, to mobilize the widest support in the working class behind this struggle.

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