

Los Angeles teachers prepare to strike

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More than 33,000 teachers in Los Angeles, California are set to strike Thursday in the nation's second-largest school district. The planned action would be the largest strike by educators in the US since the wave of statewide teacher walkouts in 2018, which began with the wildcat strikes by West Virginia teachers almost a year ago.

The stand taken by Los Angeles teachers is an expression of the growing mood of militancy and resistance among all workers in the US and internationally, which emerged last year after decades of suppression by the trade unions. The year 2019 begins amidst continuing "Yellow Vest" protests in France, a general strike by millions of Indian workers, growing opposition by US autoworkers to layoffs by General Motors and increasing anger over the Trump administration's lockout and payless paydays for hundreds of thousands of federal employees.

The issues confronting workers everywhere are universal: precarious employment and declining real income, relentless government austerity, attacks on basic democratic rights and the explosion of social inequality.

Teachers in Los Angeles are pitted against the entire political system. The Democratic Party controls every lever of state power in Los Angeles and California, from the local school board and city government to the governorship and the state legislature in Sacramento where the Democrats have a super-majority.

California's new governor, Democrat Gavin Newsom, who was sworn in Monday, has pledged to continue the "fiscally prudent" policies of his Democratic predecessor, Jerry Brown, who carried out some of the deepest education cuts in state history. While the Democrats have showered Silicon Valley, the entertainment, defense and finance industries with huge tax cuts, they have starved the public-school system. Once known for its free public universities and for having one of the best K-12 school systems in the

nation, California now ranks 43rd out of 50 states in per-pupil spending.

The state and Los Angeles in particular have also been at the forefront of a national conspiracy of powerful corporate interests, including billionaires Eli Broad and Bill Gates, to privatize public education and hand over America's \$2 trillion "education market" to the financial oligarchy.

Leading the charge in Los Angeles is school superintendent Austin Beutner, a former partner from the Blackstone investment firm whose experience in looting public resources dates back to the early 1990s when the Clinton administration appointed him to lead the State Department's efforts to help dismantle state-owned assets in the former Soviet Union.

Beutner has steadfastly refused to accede to teachers' demands for improved wages, increased hiring of librarians, counselors and special education assistants, the lowering of class sizes and a curtailment of charter school expansion. Instead he has prepared for months for a strike, signing contracts to hire thousands of substitute teachers as strikebreakers and seeking one injunction after the other.

Last year's strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states were initiated by rank-and-file teachers using social media. The unions, meanwhile, did everything possible to isolate teachers and shut down the walkouts.

Once again, teachers in Los Angeles confront in the unions not organizations waging a struggle on their behalf, but an enemy doing everything to suppress their resistance to this historic attack. Despite a near-unanimous strike mandate, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) has kept teachers on the job without a new contract for 20 months.

To the shock and dismay of teachers, on Monday afternoon UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl announced that the union was dropping the teachers' most critical demands opposing the expansion of

charter schools, unlimited standardized testing and other schemes being used to privatize public education. This is a signal that it is preparing a complete capitulation.

If the strike does go ahead on January 10—and there is still a possibility that the union will try to call it off—it is because there is such a militant mood among teachers that the union officials feel unable to prevent a strike. The aim of the UTLA and its parent unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), is to isolate such a struggle and shut it down as soon as possible.

This underscores the necessity for teachers to take the conduct of the struggle into their own hands by forming rank-and-file strike committees to unite educators and other sections of workers, including hundreds of thousands of locked-out federal workers, to prepare a powerful counteroffensive by the working class. The fight to link up the struggle of teachers in Los Angeles, Oakland and other cities, along with teachers in Virginia, Indiana and other states to conduct statewide walkouts and a national strike to defend public education must become an integral part of preparing for a general strike of all workers against austerity and social inequality.

The right to a publicly funded education is an achievement won over centuries of struggle, dating back to the American Revolution and Civil War and the mass working-class battles to abolish child labor and Jim Crow segregation. But the egalitarian and democratic principles embodied in public education are incompatible with a society dominated by social and economic inequality. In its mad pursuit of more wealth, the American ruling class, like its counterparts around the world, are hell-bent on returning to the days of a class-based education system when only those wealthy enough could afford a proper education while the children of workers were confined to ignorance and hard labor.

If the \$71 billion private fortune of Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, the richest of California's 144 billionaires, were confiscated and used for public needs, the number of public-school teachers in California could be doubled overnight and their annual salaries raised to \$100,000. This would still leave almost \$20 billion for hiring 100,000 new librarians, special education assistants and other critical staff to address the needs of

the state's school children.

The question of how society's wealth is to be allocated is, above all, a question of which class holds political power. The Democrats and Republicans—which defend the economic and political rule of the corporate and financial oligarchy—insist that there is no money for education or any other pressing social need. At the same time, they can find trillions to squander on Wall Street bailouts, corporate tax cuts, endless wars of conquest and attacks on immigrant workers.

If the wealth created by the collective labor of workers is to be used to secure the social rights of the vast majority, instead of further enriching the wealthy few, then workers must take political power in their own hands. This means replacing the government of the capitalist billionaires and multimillionaires with a workers' government to expropriate and redistribute the wealth monopolized by the super-rich and reorganize economic life based on the principles of international socialism.

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