

An Oklahoma teacher speaks on the Los Angeles educators strike

By Andrea Peters
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“We support the LA teachers,” an Oklahoma biology teacher told the *World Socialist Web Site*, speaking for her coworkers in the Oklahoma public school system. Deini is a veteran of the two-week-long strike of educators last April which spread throughout the southwestern state—the first such walkout in over 25 years.

She said, “What I hear is [LA] teachers are upset and concerned about are the same things [we are]. Honestly, a small part is about teacher salary. This is not an educator’s biggest concern.

“Education is just underfunded. There are huge classrooms with 30-40 kids. We do our best, but the toll is taken on the kids. We’re trying to teach, but the students can’t find a place to sit in the classroom. In some districts, there are textbooks that are taped together.”

She solidarized herself with the struggle against Los Angeles Unified School District Superintendent Austin Beutner’s plan for portfolio schools and growing privatization. “Always as a teacher I want every student out there to get an education. If you’re going to charter schools, is every student really going to get the same thing?” Deini asked.

Oklahoma has itself been a testing ground for the “portfolio model” of education with which Beutner, together with the pro-privatization Broad Foundation, is identified. With generous foundation funding earmarked for the purpose, Tulsa Public Schools has established a “director of portfolio management” to promote “partnerships” with charter schools. Likewise, the cash-strapped school districts in the state implemented the Gates Teacher Effectiveness Model (TLE) value-added teacher evaluations, A-F grading of schools and third-grade reading retention policies—all measures designed to degrade public education as

“failing” and promote charter schools.

Over the past decade, Oklahoma enacted more cuts to public education than any other state in the US. It slashed 30 percent of its general education funding while giving massive tax cuts to the state’s oilmen. Income taxes were cut first by Democrats and then Republicans.

In response, rank-and-file Oklahoma teachers followed the example of West Virginia last spring and took the initiative. They demanded strike action, full funding of public schools and \$10,000 raises. The Oklahoma Educators Association (OEA) then launched a series of subterfuges trying to prevent a walkout, including a grossly inadequate last-minute deal which they labeled “historic.” When the anger of teachers made the strike inevitable—with or without the union—the OEA jumped in and attempted to limit it to a one-day protest.

Teachers, however, had had enough. They defied state law and forced a statewide strike which began April 2 and lasted for two weeks. However, without independent organizations, Oklahoma teachers were unable to prevent the OEA—in league with pseudo-left social media groups—from reasserting control and concluding a rotten betrayal. The National Association of Education and the American Federation of Teachers deliberately isolated Oklahoma educators from ongoing struggles in Arizona, Kentucky and elsewhere, with calls for campaigns for elected office and the “Remember in November” slogan. The national unions were adamantly opposed to unifying the teachers across state lines in a nationwide walkout.

The betrayal of the Oklahoma strike is indeed a critical lesson for teachers in Los Angeles who face not only the same overstuffed classrooms, inadequate resources and poverty wages, but the same enemies in

the unions, which are seeking to shut down the strike and impose a rotten pro-privatization deal.

Speaking directly to LA teachers, Deini pointed to these bitter experiences. Asked if she supports forming rank-and-file committees outside the unions, she concurred, “I do.” She explained, “Honestly, a lot of teachers felt betrayed by the OEA. They caved and put an end to the strike, and teachers didn’t get what they were fighting for. Once the OEA said we got what we wanted, teachers were being told by the union if you don’t come back to the classroom, we won’t support that.”

As another Oklahoma teacher put it at the time, the “OEA ran out in front of our train which was gaining momentum and started acting like they were leading the train, and then said they were stopping the train.”

In the aftermath of this betrayal, Deini said, “Many teachers have left the union. We paid dues for 15-20 years and got nothing [from the strike fund],” a policy the United Teachers of Los Angeles has also reprised in LA.

Throughout the teachers strikes last spring—from West Virginia to New Jersey, Puerto Rico, Arizona, Oklahoma, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Colorado—the WSWS called for spreading the strikes nationally and internationally. We advocated a socialist program, in opposition to the Democrats and Republicans, calling for the reorganization of social life based on need, not profit. We pointed to the necessity of a workers’ government and the confiscation of the billions looted from society by a handful of oligarchs as the only means to provide high quality, fully funded education for all and address the terrible growth of poverty and social inequality.

Deini also emphasized the need for the full funding of public education. “We are held to very high standards,” she said. “We don’t mind being held to high standards. I just want to get respect and appreciation in the form of funds for education. They find money for other things. Education is the bottom of the barrel. They find money for things that they think are important. It follows the campaign money trail.”

When asked about the fact that Los Angeles teachers are being told to put their faith in the local Democratic Party politicians who carried through all the budget cuts, she said, “Our state is different, it’s Republican. I don’t really care whether they have a D or an R by

their name, I care what they’re doing.”

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