

# Los Angeles schools superintendent warns of “reckoning” after failure of property tax measure

By Dan Conway  
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A special election measure that was supposed to bring an extra \$500 million in funding to Los Angeles public schools failed to pass in a citywide vote last week. Measure EE, which would have implemented a 16 cent per square foot tax on building space, required the support of two-thirds of the voters but only received 45 percent.

The measure itself was drafted as means to placate Los Angeles teachers in the waning days of their strike last January with false promises of additional funding at the local and state levels. The Los Angeles teachers strike involved more than 33,000 educators and gained the sympathy of millions of workers throughout the city and beyond.

The UTLA, which had continuously postponed strike action by LA teachers and abandoned key demands over salary increases and charter school limits before the strike finally began, took great pains to portray itself as an intractable opponent of pro-austerity superintendent Austin Beutner before the six-day strike concluded. Nonetheless, after Beutner, a multi-millionaire banker and former state department official under the Clinton administration, hired hundreds of strike-breaking substitutes and released plans for a “portfolio model” to open the Los Angeles school district up to private investment, the union, led by its president Alex Caputo-Pearl decided to openly partner with him and his attacks on public schools.

After spending four days at city hall, in which the 33,000 striking teachers were kept completely in the dark, in a joint press conference, Caputo-Pearl, Beutner, and LA Mayor Eric Garcetti announced that the strike was finished even before teachers had a chance to vote on any agreement. Teachers voted that evening even though they had only two hours to review the entire contract. “The strike nobody wanted is behind us now,” Beutner announced at the time. The superintendent then hailed the new deal as “a new chapter in labor-management collaboration.”

The deal, according to Beutner, maintained the fiscal

solvency of the district in exchange for no gains whatsoever for teachers. Nonetheless, he added, that school funding problems would be ongoing as they “can’t be solved in one week or one contract.”

Many of the provisions of the agreement were in fact dependent upon ballot initiatives such as Measure EE and the good graces of state politicians in Sacramento. The union, the district and the Democratic Party were determined to prevent the LA strike from spreading throughout the state and challenging the austerity regime the Democrats have imposed on behalf of Silicon Valley and other corporate interests in the state.

Any increases in school funding would have to come instead through regressive measures, including last week’s ballot measure, and cuts to other vital social programs. The failure of the measure has led to a financial “reckoning,” in the words of the superintendent.

In fact, the union and the district have continued their active partnership in the wake of the measure’s defeat. Last Wednesday, Beutner introduced Caputo-Pearl, installed as part of the fake progressive “union power” movement of the UTLA as his “partner in this work.” Mayor Garcetti also praised this new austerity coalition. It was “a new chapter of finding what we agree on first instead of what we disagree on.”

After the measure’s defeat, Beutner quickly announced \$40 million in cuts through the elimination of 289 central office positions. He then announced that further job cuts would be effectively be made on the basis of ongoing attrition and retirement. The district has also shifted 20,000 Medicare-eligible retirees from traditional health care plans, saving \$3.8 billion by taking retirees off the better plans. None of this elicited a single murmur of opposition from the UTLA.

These actions, along with proposals increasing the amount of money received from the state for special education students, have at least temporarily mitigated the risk of

takeover by the county of Los Angeles after the latter had warned that the district was facing looming insolvency prior to the strike. Current projections, however, show that the district will still face a deficit within the next three years. It is now projected to be \$269 million in the red at the start of fiscal year 2021-2022.

To address the looming deficit, the district will surely make use of contract reopeners contained in the UTLA contract to reduce teacher salary and health benefits. Already in January, teachers were forced to agree to a mere 6 percent salary increase over two years, well under the rate of inflation. Approximately half of that amount was already absorbed due to loss wages during the teachers strike itself. Neither the UTLA or its state and national affiliates paid the teachers a dime in strike benefits even though the last teacher walkout was nearly 30 years ago.

The projected district deficit will also likely increase as state legislative efforts allegedly to curb or stop the growth of charter schools—a significant drain on public education funding—have been either deliberately sidelined or would have an entirely negligible impact if passed. The Los Angeles school district, the second largest in the country, already has the highest number of charter schools in the US.

Most recently, Senate Bill 756, which would have moderately limited the growth of new charter schools by preventing state education officials from approving new charter schools without local backing, was shelved by its author, Senator Maria Elena Durazo, a Democrat from Los Angeles. Another law to prohibit charter schools from opening outside of the home school district approving it, has been approved in the assembly and has yet to be voted on in the senate.

This is indeed a far cry from promises made by the UTLA to end the growth of charter schools. Teachers were told to put their faith in state governor Gavin Newsom and other Democrats who would fight for teachers. At a rally held in Los Angeles in May 2018, when the district and the union were in negotiations, and when teachers strikes were spreading across the US, Caputo-Pearl told the thousands of assembled teachers that “the most important thing we can do now is vote for Gavin Newsom for governor.”

These remarks followed those of American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten who was traveling the country to prevent the outbreak of a nationwide educators’ strike. “The most important piece right now is to try and build on the strikes and create transformative change in state after state by changing who’s in the elected leadership because most education policies happen in state legislatures, executive school boards,” she said. The “walkouts at schools,” she said, had to be turned in to “walk-ins at the ballot box,” i.e., to vote for the Democratic Party.

The next legislation proposed by the Los Angeles district after the failure of Measure EE will be an attempt to revise the state’s Proposition 13 constitutional amendment, which limits property tax increases to one percent of assessed property value and prohibits such assessments from increasing by more than two percent regardless of actual market value. Proposition 13 has long been known as the “third rail” of California politics, and although proponents are calling for a split roll revision of the proposition whereby homeowners would be unaffected, any change is likely to encounter vicious opposition from many of the same forces who bankrolled the political campaigns of leading Democratic politicians.

Teachers must be warned: each of these legislative campaigns is a deliberate dead end. Those that fail will be attributed to supposed anti-teacher sentiment among voters and be used to urge even greater subservience to the Democrats who are no less enemies of public education than Trump, DeVos and the Republicans.

The only way teachers can win their battles for smaller class sizes, better pay and benefits, and quality public schools is to break from the Democrats and the trade unions and chart a politically independent course to mobilize the working class against capitalism and for socialism. Educators should form rank-and-file committees at every school and in every community to mobilize the working class, including in a statewide and national strike to fight for full funding for public education, which is only possible through a frontal assault on the private fortunes of the corporate and financial elite.

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