

United Teachers Los Angeles and National Nurses Union back Democratic candidate

Union sellouts endorse the Bernie Sanders presidential campaign

By Dan Conway and Matt Rigel
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On November 14, the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) became the first teachers union in the country to endorse a 2020 presidential nominee. The 500-member UTLA House of Representatives voted by an 80 percent margin to back Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders for the Democratic nomination.

This is also the first presidential endorsement by a US teachers union since the national wave of teachers strikes beginning in 2018. Sanders was also endorsed the same week by the National Nurses Union, which had backed his campaign in 2016 as well.

These endorsements are really an indictment of both sides in the political transaction. The endorsing unions are desperate to channel rising rank-and-file anger into the safe confines of the Democratic Party. And favored candidate, Sanders, seeks to prop up the union officialdom by giving them the benefit of his “progressive” and even “socialist” pretensions, while seeking to cash in on the support of the union apparatus.

The six-day strike of Los Angeles teachers last January was the first teachers’ strike in the second-largest US school district in nearly 30 years. More than 33,000 walked off the job to demand smaller classes, more nurses and more support staff. The demands, however, were ultimately betrayed by the union itself in conclusion with the mayor’s and district superintendent’s office.

The UTLA’s aim from the outset was not to mobilize broad masses of teachers and workers in a coordinated struggle to defend public education but to instead isolate the teachers and allow them to let off steam. The intent was to foster illusions that demands should be raised at the ballot box—i.e., by voting for union-endorsed Democrats—and not on the picket line.

This outlook was enunciated by UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl in the spring of 2018 when the union was still

in negotiations with the district and immediately after massive teacher strikes had spread throughout West Virginia, Oklahoma, Colorado and Arizona. “The most important thing we can do right now,” he said in front of a downtown rally of more than 50,000 teachers and supporters, “is elect [Democrat] Gavin Newsom for governor.”

Similarly, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) president Randi Weingarten noted at the time that, in the union’s opinion, strikes were at best a useful tool to pressure state and local governments. “The most important piece right now,” she said, “is to try to 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 chambers and local school boards.” As Weingarten later said at the AFT’s biennial in July last year, “Walkouts are turning into walk-ins at the voting booth.”

The UTLA vote follows the 2016 experience when the American Federation of Teachers preemptively endorsed Hillary Clinton, and union locals thought to be sympathetic to Sanders were blocked from making endorsements.

In announcing the UTLA’s endorsement, president Caputo-Pearl said, “Why now, and why Bernie? Because we want him to win in the primary election and because we need an unapologetic, longstanding ally of progressive policies to make public education a priority in the White House. Sanders is the first viable candidate in 25 years in the Democratic Party to stand up to privatization, the charter billionaires, and high-stakes testing and to stand up for a massive redistribution of wealth to schools and social services. Critically, like UTLA, Senator Sanders believes in building a national movement for real, lasting change.”

This is a remarkable statement that amounts to a self-indictment by the union officialdom. For the past 25

years, the AFT has been endorsing Democratic presidential candidates—Bill Clinton, Al Gore, John Kerry, Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton—that the local president now concedes did not “stand up to privatization” and other reactionary attacks on public education.

And there is no reason to set some arbitrary timeframe for this bankrupt policy of supporting the Democratic Party. Who was the magical Democratic Party candidate 25 years ago who stood for a massive redistribution of wealth to schools and social services? In 1991, Bill Clinton, running as a right-wing “new Democrat,” faced off in California against Jerry Brown, who as governor of California declared, “If you want frugality, I’m your man.” Brown oversaw the largest growth of charter schools of any state in the country.

As for being committed to a “national movement for real, lasting change,” nothing is more frightening to the leaders of the AFT and UTLA. Caputo-Pearl shut down last January’s strike by LA teachers to prevent any linking up with other struggles of teachers, in Oakland, Sacramento, Denver and throughout the United States. AFT President Weingarten herself tweeted in the middle of the Los Angeles strike, “This is not about a strike wave—this is a specific fight for the kids & public schools of LA.”

The strike was stopped on January 22, with union heads emerging from secret closed-door meetings with district and city officials to declare the strike over before teachers even had a chance to vote on the new contract. Even worse, teachers were only given three hours to review and vote on the agreement that same evening.

The UTLA endorsement statement went on to praise Sanders as “the first major US politician to publicly support our 2019 strike, and he pushed for donations to our strike fund, leading to a cascade of influential support and an increase in the fund of more than \$100,000.” The UTLA neglects to mention, however, that teachers didn’t receive a single dime from the strike fund while out on the picket lines. Under UTLA provisions, teachers receive no money at all for the first week on strike, after which time they can request strike loans underwritten by the strike fund to meet expenses.

Sanders also received a nomination from the National Nurses United (NNU) that same week. Bonnie Castillo, the executive director of the NNU, wrote in an opinion piece published in the *Hill* that his push for “Medicare for all” is a major component of this political support.

There is little doubt that a large constituency of nurses would be attracted to “Medicare for all.” Nurses have come under attack on healthcare and working conditions under the misnamed Affordable Care Act (ACA), or Obamacare. The ACA, which was drafted by pharmaceutical companies and

major hospital chains to boost profits, was used to shift the costs of healthcare from the government and employers onto the backs of the working class by moving to eliminate employer-sponsored healthcare.

This is especially the case for healthcare workers, where it has been used as the basis for further attacks on working conditions. Based upon the ACA, hospital chains have been forcing higher workloads onto nurses by making them look after more patients and refusing to hire more nurses as the number of admitted patients increases to maintain profits.

On top of this all is the underlying fact that Sanders was part of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, one of two committees responsible for piecing ACA legislation together, something Sanders boasted about in the 2016 election debates.

The NNU and its affiliated organizations have also worked against nurses’ own healthcare benefits. For example, in 2016, almost 5,000 nurses were left to battle against the Allina Health hospitals in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area of Minnesota after the Minnesota Nurses Association (MNA), the union representing over 13,000 nurses in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area and an affiliate of NNU, isolated them in their struggle against the hospital systems.

One of the primary issues that nurses were striking for was to preserve their union-sponsored healthcare plan, which was being replaced by a costlier healthcare plan run by Allina Health. Nurses rejected the contract four times over the course of six months of bitter fighting with the hospital system. During the strike, nurses agreed that the fight should be spread to the other hospital systems, but the MNA refused.

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