

Reading: LA Teachers' Strike Issues & Organizing

In 2014, LA teachers voted for new leadership of their union, the United Teachers of Los Angeles, or UTLA. The new leaders were part of an activist coalition within UTLA. Their stated mission was to make gains that were not just limited to teachers' salary and benefits. Their organizing encompassed a set of goals that connect directly and indirectly to the quality of education for Los Angeles public school students. These included class size, school staffing, and perhaps most challenging of all, the issue of privatization of education. The union's broad goals made it easier to build alliances with parents and community groups.

In this, the LA strike has much in common with a successful 7-day strike by Chicago teachers in 2012. That strike was also led by a new, activist union leadership. Chicago teachers struck over some of the same issues as in LA – issues that are important to students and their families, as well as teachers. Before the strike, UTLA spent months not only developing the leadership capacity of their own members, but building alliances in the community. They made it clear that they were not just fighting for more pay, but for a new vision of education that would benefit the community as a whole. They called for more funding for public schools and pointed to the inequalities inherent in the privatization model.

The union clearly articulated the need for racial equity in school funding. They noted that as the percentage of Black and brown students in the school system increased, the funding for schools dropped dramatically.

The focus on class size and additional staffing energized parents and students to actively support the strike. Teacher picket lines almost always included students and their families, members of other unions, and members of the community. Many local businesses brought coffee, donuts, burritos, and bagels to the rain-soaked picket lines. In turn, the teachers union and community supporters established a fund to help students and their families cope with the hardships brought about by the strike.

Key issue in the strike included:

Class size

As anyone who has ever stepped foot inside a classroom knows, it is easier to learn (and teach) in a smaller class. Classes in Los Angeles are far bigger than the national average. The class size had been capped at 33 to 39, but the school district had been allowed to bypass the cap when they thought it was necessary. These waivers had become common practice and class sizes often exceeded 40 students. The new union contract requires an immediate reduction of 7 students in secondary math and English classes. In other classes, class sizes will be reduced at a gradual rate—at least one student per year. But importantly, the new contract removes the provision that allows for bypassing the caps.

Additional Staff

Striking teachers demanded additional staff in every school to provide needed support for students and their families. Under the new contract, the district will hire 300 additional nurses so that every school

will have a nurse. The district will hire 82 new librarians to ensure that there will be at least one teacher-librarian in every middle and high school. In addition, the district will hire 77 more school counselors will make counseling more available to students.

Charter Schools

Charter schools are a contentious issue in Los Angeles – and in most other cities in the United States. Those in favor of charters point out the deficiencies in the public school systems and often blame the teachers’ unions for stifling innovation. Opponents see the charter schools as drawing away students and funds from the public schools.

The struggle is complicated by larger ideological issues. Many charter school boosters see privatization of public education as a market opportunity and a step toward shrinking government. Charter schools have become a pet project of some of the wealthiest families in America (including the present Secretary of Education, Betsy DeVos). The 2017 election for the Los Angeles Board of Education—not usually a high-profile race—attracted almost \$10 million from pro-charter billionaires like the Walton family (owners of WalMart) and Doris Fischer (co-founder of the The Gap). The LA Superintendent of Education himself is a billionaire financier allied with the pro-charter forces.

The LA teachers’ new contract requires the Board of Education to vote on a resolution to place a state-wide cap on charter schools. The contract will slow down the process of establishing charter schools on the same site as existing schools.

Other Issues

The contract also requires the LA school district to take steps to:

- reduce testing
- reduce random searches of students
- increase green space at schools
- provide a hotline and attorney for immigrant families and work with the union to provide additional services for immigrant families
- fund 30 new community schools, which provide more services to students and engage parents in all aspects of the school

On Tuesday, January 22, 81 percent of UTLA members voted to accept the new contract. The salary increase was modest (a 3 percent retroactive salary increase for the past two years). But the broad community support for the union’s quality-of-education goals give the strike special significance:

- The momentum for privatization and charter schools (sometimes called “school reform”) may be slowing.
- Advocates for equity in school funding have recognized that the Democratic Party, which dominates in Los Angeles, Chicago, and other cities, is not a reliable ally in the fight. Pressure is growing on Democratic politicians to take a firm stand.
- The LA strike culminates a year of teacher strikes which have shown a new militancy and new level of support for public education.

Ultimately, the import of the LA strike, and the 2018 strikes that preceded it, may rest on the inspiration these strikes are providing for teachers in other states. Look next to Virginia, Denver, Oakland and Sacramento.