**United Teachers Los Angeles Are Walking the Picket Line in the Footsteps of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.**

by Jim Miller, AFT Guild, Local 1931, Political Action VP

This year the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. holiday falls in the midst of one of the biggest teachers strikes in recent American history. And Dr. King, who gave his life while supporting a public sector sanitation workers’ strike in Memphis, Tennessee because he saw it as a model for his Poor People’s Campaign, would recognize the spirit of this strike. By the end of his life, King, who had long supported labor, came to question not just racial injustice, but also the economic and political struggles he identified as the edifices which produce beggars in the marketplace. His call for questioning the evils of racial, economic and other forms of institutionalized exploitation led him to challenge the American power structure and the unjust business as usual of our society.

That is precisely what the teachers in Los Angeles are doing.

Coming in the wake of the bold actions in red states like West Virginia, Arizona, and elsewhere, this blue state teachers’ revolt is about a lot more than the typical bread and butter issues. Thus, in addition to a fair wage, United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) is also asking for **reduced class sizes and the hiring of more nurses, counselors, psychologists**, all of which would greatly support their students.

On the non-economic front, the teachers are calling for cutting back on standardized testing that is not mandated by the state and reduces much-needed instructional time. They are also demanding the regulation of **charter schools** that are draining resources from traditional public schools and are becoming a vehicle for privatization. Additionally, UTLA is pushing for more parental and educator input on spending decisions so the larger community’s voice is heard.

Finally, the teachers have included what they call “public good” proposals such as adding more green spaces to campuses, stopping racially discriminatory searches of students, and using LAUSD land for affordable housing. In sum, this strike is not only about just compensation for teachers, **it’s about the future of education as we know it in the United States and, ultimately, what kind of democracy and society we want.**

Up against a **school board that was bought by billionaire corporate education “reformers”** who installed Superintendent Austin Beutner, an investment banker with no education experience, UTLA is fighting to keep the “public” in public education. As Erik Blanc observed in his Jacobin piece “Billionaires vs. Public Education,” the stakes of the LA strike are huge:

Unlike many labor actions, the Los Angeles teachers’ strike is not really about wages or benefits. At its core, **this is a struggle to defend public schools against the privatizing drive of a small-but-powerful group of billionaires.**

The plan of these business leaders is simple: break-up the school district into thirty-two competing “portfolio” networks, in order to replace public schools with privately run charters. As firm believers in the dogmas of market fundamentalism, these influential downsizers truly believe that it’s possible to improve education by running it like a private business. Not coincidentally, **privatization would also open up huge avenues for profit-making** — and deal a potentially fatal blow to one of the most well-organized and militant unions in the country, the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA). As union leader Arlene Inouye explains, “This is a struggle to save public education; the existence of public education in our city is on the line.”

As Blanc outlines, in the aforementioned piece, **the list of big money vulture capitalists behind the attempt to destroy public education in Los Angeles includes folks like the Waltons, Reed Hastings, Eli Broad, and other plutocrats who want to impose their agenda on their fellow citizens.**  This same group spent millions failing to buy the Governor and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction posts last fall. Now, with over 80% of Los Angeles residents in support of the teachers, it appears they are on the wrong side of the people once again.

Indeed, even instructors at charter schools seem to have had enough of the billionaires’ agenda as striking charter school teachers joined their colleagues from the traditional public schools last week and marched on the offices of the Charter Schools Association. As the Huffington Post reported of the striking charter school teachers, “`A lot of the things [LAUSD teachers are] asking for are things that we need but can’t ask for because we don’t have job security,’ said Julia Weinrott, a fourth-grade teacher at an Accelerated school who protested on Tuesday morning with nearly all her colleagues.”

If non-union charter school teachers marching with unionized brothers and sisters seems unusual, perhaps that is because there just might be something extraordinary going on in Los Angeles. Will Bunch, observing the strike from his post at the Philadelphia Observer, sees it as a potential spark that could spread the fire across the country: *[T]he L.A. teacher strike feels more like the cutting edge of a wider social revolution. For one thing, as noted in a recent Atlantic analysis of the standoff, both the students and the teachers who remain in the city’s public schools after the charter-school stampede are heavily Hispanic, and many see the roots of this movement not so much in the contract battles of yesterday but the so-called “brown power” uprisings of the 1960s and early 1970s — a fight for social justice . . .*

*If the teachers of Los Angeles can win back in the streets what they so passively watched slip away over the last decade, it’s possible — likely, really — that other citizens will start to speak out and act up more aggressively as well, in a year when increasingly America’s center is not holding.*

As UTLA President **Alex Caputo-Pearl** explains, the teachers there are building vital labor-community alliances and **promoting a social justice unionism vision** that draws on lessons from other struggles across the country and is seeking to draw a line in the sand in defense of public education for all in our democracy: *We’ve been inspired by the work of teachers’ unions that connect with parents and community and putting forward a vision of this community schools model. So when we saw the Chicago Teachers Union in 2012 building such a strong movement around these kinds of politics, and then of course the red-state teacher rebellions that happened earlier this year, where you had teacher unions fighting for the rights of educators but also bonding with parents and community and students and fighting for a broader agenda — this is all very inspirational.*

*The circumstances are very different in each place. California is not West Virginia and LA not Chicago. But the question is the same: do we want to have a public education system that is thriving and serves all kids?*

*That is the question that has led to these fights across the country, because the answer has been a resounding yes. We need that, and if we just let the billionaires and investment bankers privatize the system, we’re not going to have it. So the circumstances are different, but the question is the same, and the answer for progressives and organizers is the same: yes, let’s fight for public education.*

When it comes to the thorny question of how to fund a future that serves all kids for the long term, the UTLA, along with their labor and community allies across the state, point to the **Schools and Communities First measure headed to the ballot in 2020 that would finally reform Proposition 13 by closing a property tax loophole that the wealthiest commercial property owners have been taking advantage of for years.** Simply by closing this loophole for the richest corporations while leaving ordinary homeowners unaffected, the State of California could bring in up to $11 billion to help fund schools and social services.

This funding would go a long way toward bringing California’s per pupil spending up from its current dismal state standing at 43rd in the United States. In the richest state in the richest country in the world, this is simply unacceptable. So, on this Martin Luther King, Jr Day we can thank the UTLA for standing up for the dream that all of our children deserve a quality public education and for showing us not just that an “edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring,” but also how to do it.

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If you are looking for some ways to provide direct support to the strikers, here are some suggestions:

1. Adopt a school. Learn how from the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor at https://thelafed.org/how-you-can-support-lausd-teachers.

2. Contribute to the AROS strike fund, which is supporting the effort by providing child care, meals for kids and other necessities. You can contribute online at https://www.aros-wearela.com, or you can send a check (made out to the Los Angeles Teacher/Parent Strike Solidarity Fund c/o ACCE Action) to the community group ACCE Action, 3655 S. Grand Ave., Suite 250, Los Angeles, CA 90007.

3. Continue to support the strike on social media. Go to the AFT’s social media toolkit at http://bit.ly/UTLAStrong. The toolkit includes handles and hashtags, key online actions, sample messages for social media, retweets of members’ stories, graphics, links to media coverage, background information and other resources.

4. Show up. Encourage your members in the Los Angeles area to join a picket line. If you get the chance, participate in the picketing or rallies.

5. Stay informed. For daily updates on the strike, visit https://www.utla.net. For UTLA’s community campaign, visit https://wearepublicschools.org. For information from the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor, visit https://thelafed.org/how-you-can-support-lausd-teachers.

6. Continue to demand that Beutner meet the demands of teachers, parents and students and immediately reach a fair contract with UTLA. You’ll find links for this petition action in the social media toolkit described above.