**“Public Education Is Not Your Plaything”: L.A. Teachers Strike Against Privatization & Underfunding**

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Democracy Now

Cecily Myart-Cruz strike leader and National Education Association vice president at United Teachers Los Angeles. She’s been a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District for the past two decades.

Eric Blanc reporter for The Guardian and Jacobin. He is author of the forthcoming book Red State Revolt: The Teachers’ Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics.

Los Angeles public school teachers are on strike for the first time in three decades. On Monday morning, tens of thousands of teachers braved pouring rain on the picket line for the strike’s first day. Some 20,000 people marched through downtown Los Angeles, demanding **smaller class sizes, higher pay, the regulation of charter schools and more nurses, counselors and librarians.** Over 31,000 members of United Teachers Los Angeles are striking. We speak with Cecily Myart-Cruz, strike leader and National Education Association vice president at United Teachers Los Angeles, and Eric Blanc, a reporter covering the strike for The Guardian and Jacobin. He is author of the forthcoming book “Red State Revolt: The Teachers’ Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics.”

AMY GOODMAN: We begin today’s show in Los Angeles, where public school teachers are on strike for the first time in three decades. On Monday morning, tens of thousands of teachers braved pouring rain on the picket line for the strike’s first day. Some 20,000 people marched through downtown Los Angeles, demanding smaller class size, higher pay, regulation of charter schools and more nurses, counselors and librarians. Over 31,000 members of United Teachers Los Angeles are striking. This is **UTLA President Alex Caputo-Pearl** speaking to a crowd of striking teachers Monday.

ALEX CAPUTO-PEARL: *So, here we are, on a rainy day, in the richest country in the world, in the richest state in the country, in a state as blue as it can be, and in a city rife with millionaires, where teachers have to go on strike to get the basics for our students. … Public education is not your plaything, billionaires. It belongs to the people of Los Angeles!*

AMY GOODMAN: The strike follows more than 20 months of strained negotiations between UTLA and the school district, which fell apart last week as the two parties failed to come to an agreement. The strike has effectively shut down Los Angeles Unified, the nation’s second largest school district, with only one-third of the district’s nearly half a million students showing up for school Monday. The new California governor, Gavin Newsom, is calling for both sides to return to the negotiating table, saying in a statement, quote, “This impasse is disrupting the lives of too many kids and their families,” unquote. The walkout follows a red wave of teacher strikes, from West Virginia to Arizona, last year.

Well, for more, we go now to Los Angeles, California, where we’re joined by two guests. Cecily Myart-Cruz, strike leader and National Education Association vice president at United Teachers Los Angeles, she’s been a teacher in the Los Angeles Unified School District for the past two decades. And we’re joined by Eric Blanc, who’s been covering the strike for The Guardian and Jacobin. He’s author of the forthcoming book Red State Revolt: The Teachers’ Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics.

Cecily Myart-Cruz and Eric Blanc, welcome to Democracy Now! Cecily Myart-Cruz, let’s begin with you. Why don’t you lay out why nearly 32,000 teachers are on strike?

CECILY MYART-CRUZ: Yes. We are on strike, in an epic, historic, three decades in the making. We’re on strike because it’s really lack of respect. We want lower class sizes. We need staffing, nurses. Over 80 percent of our schools do not have a full-time nurse. And that’s why we’re there. We want the district to come to an agreement that services have been disinvested in our school system for far too long.

AMY GOODMAN: I want to turn to some of the students who came out in support of the teachers Monday. This is 15-year-old Nicole Moguel, a 10th-grader at **John Marshall High School**.

NICOLE MOGUEL: You know, our teachers need our support, you know, the students’ support. And they need to know that we’re on their side and that we want them to have a better, like, pay and just better conditions.

AMY GOODMAN: And this is 17-year-old Andrew Montoya, a senior at John Marshall High.

ANDREW MONTOYA: Oh, we can have 40 kids, upwards to like 48 in some of my classes. And, I mean, that’s a hard learning environment for anyone and for a teacher to organize, you know?

AMY GOODMAN: Eric Blanc, can you put this in context, as you look at the history of this teachers’ strike and the teachers’ strike, what are called the red wave, around the country? Why is this happening now? And is it at all significant that a new governor of California is now in charge, Gavin Newsom?

ERIC BLANC: Yeah, I think that, fundamentally, this struggle is part of a nationwide struggle of education. Last year, you might remember, it was said that, well, the strikes were a red state revolt; it’s just in the lowest-paid states, Republican states. But what we’ve seen with this movement erupting in Los Angeles is that, actually, the same problems of underfunding, privatization, low wages, that’s clearly a nationwide problem, and it’s been imposed by policies of austerity by both Republicans and Democrats.

So I think the significance is twofold. On the one hand, it’s made clear that this is a struggle of teachers and educators across the country, and I think, in particular, the question of privatization here in Los Angeles has been put to the fore.

AMY GOODMAN: You have an interesting piece in The Nation, where you write, “Pro-charter billionaires like Eli Broad and Reed Hastings spent an unprecedented $9.7 million in the spring of 2017 to ensure the election of a pro-privatization majority [to] the school board.” Explain that further, Eric.

ERIC BLANC: Right. So, the most important thing to understand about this strike, I think, is that, fundamentally, it’s about whether public education will continue to exist in Los Angeles or not.

There’s two plans. The plan of—**Austin Beutner**, who’s the new superintendent, who was imposed by billionaires who bought the 2017 elections, **has a plan to downsize the district to push students into charter schools**. And the vision of the teachers and parents and the union is contrary, to not only defend, but preserve the schools and make them actually serve the needs of the majority of students.

So, what we see by Beutner is fundamentally a push to really dismantle the institution that he’s nominally supposed to be leading. And so, he says that there’s a financial crisis, that he would love to meet the demands of teachers. But we know that there’s actually a **$1.86 billion reserve.** And so what’s at stake is, he doesn’t want to use that money to improve the schools, because if he were to do that, it would undermine his mission to basically dismantle and privatize L.A. public schools.

AMY GOODMAN: This is Los Angeles Mayor Eric Garcetti.

MAYOR ERIC GARCETTI: *For some time, L.A. teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District have been engaged in contract negotiations. This past week produced good results, with very important face-to-face negotiations and real movement. But, unfortunately, talks broke down on Friday, and teachers are set to strike tomorrow.*

*I stand with our teachers and agree that L.A. kids deserve smaller classes, more support staff and community-focused schools. All parents deserve to know that their children are safe and attending great schools.*

*We must also ensure the long-term fiscal health of the district. I deeply believe there is a lot more that unites us than separates us, and that a just, fair and responsible deal needs to be our immediate priority.*

AMY GOODMAN: Cecily Myart-Cruz, if you can talk about the negotiations that are currently taking place? The latest offer to the union includes a full-time nurse for every elementary school. District reports its offer adds about $130 million and 1,200 positions to previous proposals, increased staffing limited to one year. Talk more about all of this.

CECILY MYART-CRUZ: Right, and I think you just capped it at the end: All of those supports that were laid out are a 1-year guarantee. So, putting in supports, an additional nurse, it’s choosing one or the other—a nurse or a class size reduction teacher—and that staffing would only stay for one year. We know that that’s not sustainable within a school when you’re trying to work on trauma-informed care, having psychologists. We shouldn’t have to choose having a nurse, a counselor, a psychologist or a class size reduction teacher. All of those staffing needs are important, and we need that for our students. We know that **the students’ learning conditions are the educators’ working conditions.** And that’s really what’s at stake here.

AMY GOODMAN: So, according to The New York Times, more than 80 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Latinos make up roughly 75 percent of all students, while whites and African Americans account for less than 10 percent of enrollment. Talk about the significance of all of this.

CECILY MYART-CRUZ: Well, I think that the significance is what Eric brought up: a systematic defunding of public education over many years. I graduated from this L.A. Unified School District in 1990, and we had a nurse at our site every day. We had lower class sizes. So, when we’re talking about a systematic underfunding of public education, we’re talking about a privatization model that has swept the country, and particularly here in Los Angeles. When you have 287 percent unregulated charter growth, where $600 million is not recouped from to come back into our general fund and is given to unregulated charter growth, that is a problem. The district is not utilizing that. But that is the plan. The plan is to dismantle our school district and, really, dismantle public education. And we’re not going for that.

AMY GOODMAN: So, the Los Angeles Times is saying an estimated 400 substitutes have been called in; 2,000 staffers from central and regional offices filled in for 31,000 teachers, nurses, librarians and counselors. At 10 schools, non-teaching employees are taking part in a sympathy strike. So, describe what is happening now and what the plans are. I know today another call for a massive presence in rallies around Los Angeles, Cecily.

CECILY MYART-CRUZ: Yes. And so, there’s a few unique things that happened. We did hear reports that 50 kids, out of 500, attended schools yesterday. Folks are very sympathetic. Parents have been on the line and energetic with us. Students have been on the line. And today, the **Accelerated charter school is going on strike**. So, it’s a unionized charter school that’s going on strike. Their employer is obviously not LAUSD, but they are also feeling the same effects of what we are feeling.

And the sentiment out there, if you saw the pictures yesterday, I think that says it all. Folks were out, rain or shine, to walk these lines in front of their schools and then converge on downtown Los Angeles, in a way that I have never seen before, energetic, but saying, “We need better. Our students deserve more. And privatization has to go.”

And so, today, we are taking the fight right to the charter industry at the California Charter Schools Association. So I can’t wait to be there to show what’s happening with the privatization piece and put it on display for everyone.

AMY GOODMAN: And, Eric Blanc, this is very interesting. This is not only about teacher pay raises, it’s about so much more. So talk more about this association, the focal point of the protest today, and then put it into the context of what’s happening around the country.

ERIC BLANC: Right. So, as I mentioned before, really, the stakes of what we’re seeing in Los Angeles have national implications. I think that, really, what happens here is going to determine, for the foreseeable future, a lot of the dynamics around public education. Educators across the country are looking to see: Can Los Angeles and will Los Angeles teachers fight back and win against the same types of forces that are trying to impose the same types of policies of austerity and privatization in their schools? And I think, conversely, the billionaires are very much aware of what’s happening in Los Angeles, and consciously funding the campaigns of Beutner to lie about what teachers are doing, just to have a systematic smear campaign in the press. So, important stakes—there’s really important stakes to what we’re seeing here, and there’s important vested interests on both sides, both for labor and for the billionaires that would like to see the dismantling of public schools.

So I think that, really, the strike we have, that began in West Virginia, continues. And Los Angeles, in turn, when teachers win, I think we should expect a percolation and really a ripple effect, not just to red states, but now to blue states. Los Angeles could be followed by Oakland teachers—are talking about striking in February—Denver teachers, South Carolina, Virginia. So, really, this education movement has just started, and I don’t even think that we’ve seen how far it will go.

AMY GOODMAN: Eric, you—

ERIC BLANC: I’ll add one—yeah, go ahead.

AMY GOODMAN: You were formerly a teacher in the Bay Area. Why do you think teachers are now on the front lines of a radical working-class resistance today?

ERIC BLANC: Right. I think the most important thing to keep in mind there is that public education is like the last bastion of the public sector in the United States. They’ve taken away most of everything else we had, and put it into private hands. And so, really, what you’re seeing is working people really concentrating around public education as the last right that we have for all people in this country. And so, at the same time, big business wants to dismantle this, because they know that if they can lower people’s expectations—

CECILY MYART-CRUZ: That’s right.

ERIC BLANC: —that they don’t deserve anything, then it’s going to be much harder to fight for other gains that we need, such as Medicare for all or a Green New Deal. So, really, what we’re seeing is: Is this going to be a country that uses its vast wealth to fund human needs, or is it going to be using this wealth to fund, you know, really big billionaires?

And I think it’s a very hopeful moment, because Los Angeles teachers are showing that it’s possible to change these policies. I think a lot of times people feel that things should be different, but they don’t have a sense of power. And really, what Los Angeles, like the other strikes that have come before it, is giving working-class people a sense that they can change the world, and it’s showing them the means through which they can do that.

AMY GOODMAN: Arne Duncan, the former secretary of education under President Obama, said, “[L.A. Unified] is spending half a billion dollars more each year than it brings in and is headed toward insolvency in about two years if nothing changes… It simply does not have the money to fund UTLA’s demands.” Cecily Myart-Cruz, can you respond?

CECILY MYART-CRUZ: Sure, I can. You know, **Arne Duncan comes from the same path of Betsy DeVos**, another privatizer who thinks they know education. And in turn, that’s the same way our superintendent thinks, because he’s a privatizer.

No, we’re not going to be headed for insolvency if they don’t act. And what do I mean by that? We conducted an EIR, an economic impact report, several years ago, saying, “What’s the damage done by unregulated charter growth?” I said that before, so I’ll repeat it. Over the last 10 years, we have had 287 percent charter—unregulated charter growth. So, with that comes money attached, because the school board—and that’s the Broad-backed, billionaire-backed school board—they, every school board session, are approving new charters, new charters, collocations and such, to the tune of $600 million a year. So that’s money that comes out of the general fund, that could fund all of these things. Not everything, but some things can be funded through $600 million a year.

Now, of course, we need to also be looking at the state. We also should be looking at **reforming Prop 13.** And that will be on the ballot in 2020. And it’s called Schools and Communities First. It will put $11 billion into education. That’s another thing. So, we have to start attacking all the places that bring in the revenue and the resources right into Los Angeles—and, heck, California writ large.

AMY GOODMAN: And, Cecily, your message to the half a million students in Los Angeles Unified District?

CECILY MYART-CRUZ: My message is: Students, we’re doing this for you. You are the future. And we cannot expect you to be the future if we put you last. So, we are doing this for you. Stay strong. Stay with us. Be on the lines with us. But demand what you want to see change. Demand that from the legislators. Demand it from the politicians. But let’s start right here in Los Angeles and start demanding this, not only of the superintendent, who has zero educational experience, but let’s demand that from the school board members, as well.

AMY GOODMAN: We want to thank you both for being with us, Cecily Myart-Cruz, strike leader, vice president with UTLA, and Eric Blanc, reporter covering nationwide teachers’ strikes with Jacobin and The Guardian. His new piece for The Guardian, we’ll link to, “LA’s teachers can teach the working class about the power of labor strikes.”