

Why the LA Teachers Strike Matters

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The January 14 strike date announced by the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) has heightened tensions in an already contentious dispute with Los Angeles Superintendent Austin Beutner, who represents the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) in negotiations. However, far more is at stake in Los Angeles and for the rest of us than a traditional contract struggle.

Given how many students LAUSD educates, the possibility of a strike by its union is huge news. LAUSD has 694,000 in its schools. The entire state of Oklahoma educates about that same number of students in its public schools.

The reforms LAUSD has demanded in Los Angeles schools are based on the bipartisan project to convert public education into a lucrative market for wealthy investors. Merrill-Lynch heralded this change in a 1999 report for prospective investors: “A new mindset is necessary, one that views families as customers, schools as ‘retail outlets’ where educational services are received, and the school board as a customer service department that hears and addresses parental concerns.”

Networks of wealthy billionaires and the foundations they create have advocated and imposed reforms nationally, even globally, we see today in LA schools: using standardized tests to control what and how children learn; creating charter schools to weaken neighborhood schools and undermine parent loyalty to public education; creating new revenue sources for corporations to profit from education; and weakening teachers unions. The “portfolio model” LAUSD has announced it will adopt fragments the school system into networks operated by private charter management organizations.

The explicit rationale for the portfolio model is enhancing “choice,” providing more and better educational options for low-income children of color. But research by scholars who work independent of think-tank funding documents that privatization has increased school segregation and racial disparities in educational outcomes. Its main achievement has been to “plunder” public education.

In New Orleans, Detroit, and other cities in which states have imposed the “portfolio model”, creation of charter networks may have given a small number of students increased educational opportunities, but as we have seen in the most extensive “experiment” in charterization, in New Orleans, the vast majority of schools and teachers receive inadequate funding and support. Schools that have become more racially isolated train students for low-paid jobs and “push out” those who are dissatisfied. A select number of elite and well-funded public schools are maintained in the richest and whitest parts of the city, and a few lucky working-class students of color find spots in these schools.

As teacher union influence has waned, especially among Democrats, who have adopted the pro-privatization views of their largest donors, teachers have become angry about their unions' inability to stem deteriorating conditions in schools. A vibrant reform movement has formed in both national teachers' unions, the National Education Association (NEA) and American Federation of Teachers (AFT). Activists are challenging the model of "business unionism" that NEA, AFT, and their state affiliates embrace. Reformers see the union's strength in mobilizing members and making alliances with community, not relying on political "friends of labor" who will reward the union's loyalty with economic improvements for members.

The current UTLA leadership campaigned and won office with ideas that put it solidly within the reform movement, where it is allied with the Chicago Teachers Union. Though the "red state" teacher walkout movement last spring was cast by media as a peculiarity of states that had exceptionally poor funding for schools and low teacher salaries, #RedforEd was actually a response to conditions that are national and have been festering for years. The conditions were felt first and most intensely in urban schools and sparked formation of a reform caucus that won office in the Chicago Teachers Union, transformed it, and organized an electrifying strike.

Acting on principles of "social justice unionism," UTLA has consciously built the union's presence in the schools and has reached out to community groups, working to develop mutually respectful alliances that acknowledge racial and class inequality in the city's schools. Hence UTLA's current contract demands include reducing student-counselor ratios and lowering class size, as well as ending punitive disciplinary procedures that feed the "school to prison pipeline" and do nothing to improve school climate, essential for safe schools.

The battle between UTLA and LAUSD is over contradictory visions for the role of public education in a society that claims to be democratic. LAUSD wants a privatized "public" system funded by tax dollars that its supporters say will simultaneously boost profits and allow "the best" to succeed in a competitive system. UTLA sees a teachers union's responsibility to its members and the society as creating a system of public education that is controlled democratically, empowering parents, students, and teachers to transcend the role of consumers to create "choices" that serve all elements of its diverse population equally well.

Though this seems to be a contract dispute, the battle between UTLA and Superintendent Beutner and the economic and political interests he represents is something far bigger. It's a turning point for Los Angeles in deciding its future.

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