



USA: L.A. Teachers' Victory ? An encouragement for US Labor.

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By the lights of US labor disputes; the Los Angeles teachers' strike was a victory. The teachers won an immediate 6 percent pay raise of 3 percent for last year and 3 percent for this year. They won a reduction in class sizes, although this was only by 4 students by 2022, still leaving classes of up to 40, which is an obstacle to effective teaching. They also won improvements in other working conditions, including 600 more nurses in-school within two years and more librarians and social workers. These were all issues raised by the striking teachers and, although they did not win all their demands, winning these is real progress.

Expectations

Yet, this did not feel like a massive victory for many. Expectations had been raised after the teachers' actions and victories in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states in 2018. The big city school systems were expected to build on the struggles that won those victories. As social media posts and youtube videos show, many of the strikers themselves feel that they could have gotten more, considering the solidarity shown between the strikers and community supporters. There were also complaints that they didn't have enough time to really study the details of the contract proposals before having to vote on them. In other words, a significant portion of the strikers felt the union called off the strike and declared a 'victory' too quickly. Despite the complaints, however, the contract was ratified, and by what the union calls a 'super majority'.

That high expectations were justified is also shown by the scale of support for the strike. On some days, it is estimated as many as 60,000 struck and demonstrated in support of the teachers, a massive display of solidarity from the community. On top of that, the strike took place in one of the most unionized areas of the US, dominated exclusively by the Democratic Party, the main party that has (falsely) claimed the mantle of a party for workers.

The optimism of strikers can also be seen by the raising of additional, not directly economic, demands, such as a moratorium on "charter schools", that are not really within the purview of "local" strikes. That particular one was kicked upstairs to the state education department and guaranteed consideration by the Democratic governor of California, Gavin Newsom.

So, for all these reasons, this strike was looked upon by many as an 'offensive' strike as opposed to the 'defensive' actions of the school strikes of 2018 in the conservative states. As such, more was expected from the strike and, in spite of many of the gains achieved, the final settlement, therefore, has to be seen as a limited victory.

The Background - Privatization and Austerity

This was the first strike by teachers in Los Angeles in 30 years, but the conditions that led to it had been building for decades. They can be traced back to the austerity and privatization agenda of Ronald Reagan, first as Governor of the state and later as a candidate-in-waiting for president. Reagan and his cabal of capitalists gave their support for Proposition 13 which drastically restricted property tax assessments and cut funding for education in California.

That referendum was voted and enacted in 1978, in the campaign, Reagan tried out the tax cutting rhetoric that

contributed to his election to the presidency in 1980. Since property taxes are a principal source of funding for education in the US, Prop 13 kneecapped the California educational system for decades.

Reagan's subsequent two terms in office as president reinforced the suspicions of the American public, alienated by the high taxes to pay for the Vietnam war, that government is always wasteful, is always inefficient and would serve the people best by serving the people the least ? the economic and ideological mindset that became known as neoliberalism.

The neoliberal solution to government inefficiency was to contract out as many governmental services as possible to the private sector and to slash taxes, which had the added benefit of enriching the millionaire capitalists and Republican donors. This in turn led to cutting funding for governmental services like education. This attitude still powers the Republican Party's agenda today and most of the Democrats', too.

In California, as in the rest of the United States, this meant that education was cut to the bone, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of poorer services and poorer conditions for the teachers, students, and other workers that worked in education. Things got worse through the decades that followed, with the Great Recession and subsequent Long Depression squeezing the California education budget even further.

However, the boom of recent years, touted as the Great California Recovery, created a budget surplus in the Los Angeles Unified District of almost \$2 billion, an amount that the USUD still claimed was not enough to fund the teachers' demands.

Of course, the privatization of the education system, under the auspices of elected Democrats, in the form of Charter schools, further drained much needed dollars from the L.A. County educational system and into the coffers of the privatizers. Although nominally ?non-profit?, the Charter schools in California, which steal tax dollars from the public schools for every student enrolled in them, can and do enrich the already wealthy CEOs who run the private enterprises that control the Charters.

All of these local, statewide, and national missteps and deliberate frauds since the passing of Prop 13 played a part in creating the conditions in which teachers felt they had no choice but to strike to stop the bleeding. Indeed, such conditions were not exclusive to California and also were primary factors in all of the teacher strikes of 2018.

Workers' Power And The Next Steps

Though local and limited, this settlement is probably the biggest victory for workers in many years, even decades. It's certainly the best deal that teachers have gotten in all of the recent unrest and they, the support staff and the working class community of Los Angeles as a whole should feel proud of their efforts, even if more could have been won. What should not be overlooked is that a strike?s success can boost the confidence that further action can be successful too. With Oakland and other California school districts in the same bind as LA, teachers elsewhere are on the verge of walking out over the very same issues.

Nor is this limited to California. Teachers in Virginia have gone out over many of the same funding and privatization issues that led to the LA strike. Denver, Colorado teachers have already authorized a strike over such national issues that have led to local problems. The response of the Board of Education was to appeal to the state?s Department of Labor, which makes any action illegal until it has ruled on the case.

Nevertheless, it is highly unlikely teachers? unrest will stop with L.A., but will continue to spread until the basic problems that have spurred walk-outs nationwide are resolved.

Positive Lessons

The whole of US Labor needs to learn a lesson from the teachers? actions, and the first of these is that militancy can win, especially if the rank and file take control of the strike and involve the strikers in action, on the picket line, taking collections for strike funds and approaching other sectors of workers.

The LA teachers showed the importance of winning solidarity ? from other unionists and from the wider local communities. If possible we should work for sympathy strikes whenever an entire sector, like the teachers' unions, go out, even if only for a day. Given the legal obstacles to strikes, other action such as ?sick outs? and ?working to the contract? can also be effective first steps towards organisation.

Negative Lessons

There are also negative lessons that need to be learned. Mostly, these revolve around the leadership(s) of the unions. In the interests of holding on to their role as negotiators between workers and bosses they are always too ready to compromise, even betray, the struggle at the first opportunity. They need to be watched and held accountable to the membership at all times. For that, members need not only to understand that they are the power, not the leadership, but they need to be organised themselves, within the unions, in order to hold leaderships to account.

As we saw in the discussion around the teachers' strikes at the Labor Notes conference in Chicago last year, whilst the creativity and initiative of the rank and file is essential to getting and sustaining a strike, control over the final negotiations and what deal is agreed is much more difficult. This requires major reforms, even in the most militant unions.

Strike committees need to be organized that can and will oversee both the strike and the negotiating committee. These strike committees, made up of the actual rank-and-file of the strikers also need to organise meetings to decide whether the strike is ?settled? or not. Such organizational issues have to be resolved through the active participation of the union members themselves, that, ultimately, is what workers' power truly means.

So after the LA strike settlement, we need to ask more of ourselves. Limited victories will not resolve these crises that beset the United States and the world. How can we solve climate change without a planned economy worldwide?

How can we solve rampant inequality without a national and international plan and fightback to do so? How can we even solve the problems in US education nationally without a national plan, since the problems are basically the same in West Virginia as they are in Los Angeles? The answer is the same for all of these and all of the other questions that late stage capitalism brings to the forefront. We can't.

The Problems That Remain

The primary problems that remain are not things that can be satisfied with individual contracts in individual areas, separate from each other. They also cannot be satisfied with ?reforming? a single sector of the general economy and government. The underlying reasons for all of the walkouts are national and interrelated with all of the other problems of senile capitalism.

The lessons learned, not just in LA, but in all of the recent labor unrest, are that workers do have the power, if they are prepared to use it. People today, are increasingly tired of all of the inequities and are willing to fight and support others in their fight. We need to recognize solidarity counts, and an organized working class is a powerful force in society.

Despite all the bluster and noise in Congress and from the White House around the shutdown, all it took was a few hours of northeastern airport shutdowns by air traffic controllers and other support staff, even if it wasn't officially called a ?strike?, to make Trump fold like a cheap suit.

Even talk of a general strike was growing and coming from some in the leadership of even the conservative AFL-CIO unions. The genie of working class resistance is something that is growing and will not be so easy to force back into the bottle. For the first time in many long decades, it's out there now in the mainstream of organized labor. Meanwhile, here and now, we should mobilize in solidarity with the Denver teachers and with every sector that takes action.

