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USA

The UTLA Victory in Context

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The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) have won a big, although limited victory, as detailed in Peter Olson’s on-the-ground account in this issue of *Against the Current*. [1] The strike is part of a nationwide teachers’ upsurge that began with, and was largely made possible by, the 2012 strike of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

Before that pivotal strike, teachers and their unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), had become stuck in a spiral of concessions, as corporate privatizers — supported by both Democrats like Barack Obama and Republicans — expanded the growth of charter schools in major cities across the country.

Cities have the following percentages of students in charter schools: post-Katrina New Orleans 92%, Detroit 53%, the District of Columbia 43%, Philadelphia 32% and Los Angeles has 20%. As the number of charter school students increased, resources devoted to public schools declined and loss of students led to loss of programs — and in the worst case a closure of public schools like the 48 schools closed in Chicago a year after the 2012 strike.

In the two years between the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) winning control of the CTU and going on strike in 2012, the union worked relentlessly to change the CTU’s culture from a service model union into an organizing model under the slogan “The Schools Chicago Students Deserve.” This led to the stunning CTU strike victory, much to the surprise of Mayor Rahm Emanuel and union leaders like Randi Weingarten of the AFT.

Teachers throughout the country then realized it was possible to fight the privatizers and gain public support. The St. Paul Federation of Teachers published their own version of “The Schools St. Paul Students Deserve.” Caucuses in major cities, like Los Angeles, won control of their union and began the preparation to unite their members and build ties with the community needed to win a struggle against formidable foes.

Fruits of Organizing

As one of a dozen or so members of the “UTLA Solidarity Squad,” organized by Labor Notes and the United Caucuses of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE), I was able to compare the level of organization in Los Angeles compared to that of the 2012 Chicago strike.

While in both cities the union members were united and energized by the strike, the level of internal organizing appeared better in LA. Despite its geographical sprawl, there was the eye-popping 80% level of support of LA teachers compared to “only” 67% during the Chicago strike. UTLA clearly did their homework!

UCLA education professor John Rogers commented to the Los Angeles Times that what surprised him was not just how strongly the union message came across, but how ineffective the school district management was in trying to persuade the public that it just didn’t have the money to fix the schools. He noted that “It’s breathtaking how different this conversation is than a decade ago during the recession, when the conversations were so focused on bad teachers.”

The Union Power leadership of UTLA is the result of a decade-long effort of rank and file UTLA members. In 2006

the Progressive Educators for Action (PEAC), a social justice caucus originally founded in the 1990s, formed an alliance with A. J. Duffy; the unified slate won office. But as a leadership it wasn't unified and four years later it was defeated by a slate focused on "bread and butter" issues.

Led by Warren Fletcher, that slate hired a "professional" bargainer and organized a single-focused "Rally for a Raise." Meanwhile PEAC organized a contingent calling for programs that would facilitate a system of quality schools.

The current Union Power leadership, which comes out of the PEAC current, won office in 2014. Its president, Alex Caputo-Pearl, has worked to develop a team committed to internal organizing and linking it to a social justice orientation with strong parent and community alliances.

This, in turn, has transformed the union from bottom to top. The caucus built a union infrastructure in each of 900 schools — even when some schools were quite small. The goal was to establish Contract Action Teams at every school with a ratio of one CAT leader per 10 teachers at each job site.

This very ambitious goal was probably achieved in many, but not all schools. It was the basis on which to establish intermediary leadership structures that could sustain a working coalition, Reclaim Our Schools LA, which over 250 community organizations signed onto.

After almost three years of organizing, 98% of UTLA members voted to strike. A public opinion poll carried out by Loyola Marymount during the strike that showed 81% supported the UTLA. The infrastructure was solid.

Strike Power

The strike was initially called for January 10th but was delayed four days due to the union's decision to postpone it in order to forestall the legal roadblocks.

Mornings there was picketing at every school site. For three days during the week all teachers were urged to join a massive downtown rally, after which teachers would return to schools for afternoon picketing.

This schedule enabled teachers, parents and students to be in the neighborhood but also come together for massive rallies. These rallies grew during the six-day strike from 45,000 to 60,000.

Logistical problems didn't deter people from attending, nor did four days of rain in a normally drought-stricken city. Given that there are only about 33,000 LA teachers, a considerable portion of the crowds were made up of parents and students.

Based in the West Valley, I found the most interesting of the six days were when local actions took place in eight of the city's regions. On Wednesday we were to hold a rally at a regional school board headquarters. I arrived an hour early to find the police had blocked off the main street where we were planning on stretching out with a half-a-mile "billboard" of teachers with their signs. Hundreds had already arrived, clogging up the area.

The crowd of 3000 — with more constantly arriving — spontaneously marched toward each end of the street, waving signs, banging on drums and chanting. Having established a major presence on a major thoroughfare, we

eventually pulled everyone back to a central point prior to going back to afternoon picketing.

On Thursday there was both a community meeting and another rally at an intersection. This time, with about 500 assembled, about 100-150 would assemble on each corner. Half waited to get for the light and then march to the other side. They continued in a clockwise pattern that allowed traffic on one street while being visible with picket signs, and loudly drumming and chanting.

People danced at each corner to improvised sound systems. The spirit and spontaneity was inspiring and completely self-generated. Throughout motorists honked their support, and so the action continued for a couple of hours.

The day the settlement was announced, the final rally in downtown LA became a victory celebration. Police estimated that 60,000 attended. It was a memorable event soon followed by a rushed ratification process forced on UTLA by LA mayor Eric Garcetti, who wanted students back in class the next day. The agreement was ratified by 81% voting in favor.

What Was Won, What Remains

Although the settlement was a victory, and despite the unprecedented unity of teachers and the support of the community, many of the 19% voting against the agreement probably felt that they should have gotten more.

Over the course of the contract, class size would drop by one during the first two years, and by two for the final year. This is movement in the right direction, but not sufficient. A number of teachers, especially in the K-3rd grade levels were bitter that “they didn’t win anything.” (Their class size wouldn’t be reduced, but the elimination of the hated “1.5 Clause” protects them from egregious crowding.)

A magnificent struggle that so fully involved both teachers and parents now comes up against the issue of whence the funding comes. LAUSD had been hoarding a growing pot of money that amounted to almost \$2 billion this year. It is unclear how much they will have to dip into that to fund this agreement, but parts of the agreement are delayed for a year or two because of the cost.

Despite the power that UTLA mobilized, it was unable to force a redistribution of wealth towards public education. That is a struggle that no single union or strike can win. The Los Angeles Times estimates that the district will have to spend \$400 million over the course of the contract, but that might be a low-ball estimate.

Since most funding comes from the state, changes to the way schools are funded mean challenging Prop 13, which gave property tax relief not only to individuals, but to commercial and industrial properties.

Without another source of revenue, schools in LA and across the state will continue to be underfunded. The issue of funding is a fight that teachers face all across the country.

But If we take a slightly longer view “ starting with the CTU strike in 2012 and then considering the 2018 strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona “ we can see similar strengths and limitations.

All those strikes “ whether carried out by a militant union leadership or by rank and file teachers organized outside the traditional and weak union structures in right-to-work states “ ran up against the intransigence of corporate

power.

Regardless of how internally organized they were, or how much support they received from the public, only those that had leadership with a radical vision as in Chicago and Los Angeles were able to push beyond winning more than wage increases for extremely underpaid and exploited teachers and staff.

Both the Chicago and LA examples “where the leadership used its resources, where rank-and-file teachers set policy and mobilized themselves, where parents, students and the community joined” provide models of how the struggle can be sustained.

Chicago had a magnificent strike, yet within the year the mayor closed 48 public schools and continued to expand charters. The support that Chicago teachers won by championing the schools that students deserve is still there, but it is a continual struggle to keep the teachers united to be able to fight the next battle “and there will be another one.

If teachers are unable to remain united and outward looking, they will be vulnerable to the pressure of the corporate powers. All movements are subject to a continual pressure that tries to deflate the movements by making partial concessions with a view to taking them back in the future.

What’s different today is the growing number of teachers and union locals willing to buck the conservative approach that has dominated the labor movement since concessionary attacks on unions increased over 30 years ago. That includes teacher unions aggressively organizing charter school teachers and defusing the threat charter schools pose to public education.

The transformative struggles within the established AFT and NEA local unions to become versions of “the unions our teachers deserve” are ongoing and difficult. But now there are enough examples with Chicago, LA, St Paul, West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and hopefully places like Oakland and Denver, to provide a template of what is needed: a union committed to social justice for its students and community, a leadership (and better still a caucus) that embodies those principles and organizes within the union, and a union that strives to involve its members in community struggles that build lasting alliances.

We need to trust the creativity of our members and build on translating our growing strength into one that will be capable of taking on the inequality of our society.

PS:

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[1] <https://solidarity-us.org/atc/199/utla-teacher-win/>.