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Obama's Education Secretary Arne Duncan Slams LA Teachers for Strike

The closer we get to a strike, the more pressure is put on us to call it off. In a recent article in The Hill, pro-charter/anti-union former Education secretary Arne Duncan criticizes United Teachers of Los Angeles, citing the Los Angeles Unified School District's alleged financial problems. Yet the neutral, state-appointed factfinder on the dispute contradicts many of LAUSD's (and Duncan's) claims.

For example, Duncan tells us LAUSD "is headed toward insolvency in about two years if nothing changes...It simply does not have the money to fund UTLA's demands." But arbitrator David A. Weinberg, the Neutral Chair of the California Public Employment Relations Board fact-finding panel, while noting the challenges LAUSD faces, found that the District's reserves skyrocketed from \$500 million in 2013-2014 to \$1.8 billion in 2017-2018. Three years ago LAUSD projected that their 2018-2019 reserve would be only \$100 million—it's actually \$1.98 billion. We've heard these alarming claims for many years—for LAUSD, the sky is always falling, but somehow it never falls.

Duncan tells us LAUSD "has an average of 26 students per class. Of the 10 largest school districts in California, only one has a smaller average class size than Los Angeles." These numbers are disputed by UTLA. Moreover, even if 26 is correct on paper, Duncan should know that student-to-teacher ratios count special education and other specialized teachers who normally have much smaller classes than regular classroom teachers. Class sizes are significantly larger than standard student-teacher ratios indicate.

At my high school, for example, we have over 30 academic classes with 41 or more students, including nine English/writing classes with as many as 49 students, and three AP classes with 46 or more students. One English teacher has well over 206 students—41+ per class. A US Government teacher has 52 students in his AP government class. Writing is a key component of both classes—the sizes make it impossible for these teachers to properly review and help students with their essays.

Checking my rosters over the past five years, I've had 25 classes—four of them with 26 or fewer students. I've had many more classes with 40 or more students than with the number LAUSD and Duncan want us to believe is the “average.” The problem is not my school—which is actually well run—it's the lack of sufficient funding from LAUSD.

Duncan endorses LAUSD's offer of a six percent raise—“the exact same size of the raise that was agreed to by every other union that the district works with.” Yet LAUSD originally proposed no raise at all, and it took almost a year and a half to get the increase Duncan praises. The inflation rate is 2.8%—a 6% increase over three years does nothing more than keep up with rising prices.

Duncan reminds us of the “ten percent raise they received in 2015” but fails to mention that we had previously gone almost a decade without a raise. Our buying power is still roughly 1/6th less than it was in 2008.

Moreover, LAUSD's offer of a raise—really just a cost of living adjustment—comes with strings attached, such as requiring teachers to do extra professional development. The neutral factfinder agreed with UTLA that this requirement should be dropped.

Contradicting Duncan's view, the neutral factfinder wrote, “I agree with the Union's argument that the bargaining unit deserves to be higher ranked in comparison to other jurisdictions given the combination of a higher cost of living in the LA metro area, and the difficulty in teaching a population of students with so many needs and challenges.”

Regarding the LAUSD/UTLA conflict and potential strike, Duncan concludes, “It's just like a family, when adults fight, it's kids that lose.” Yes, some who haven't been paying attention to the LAUSD/UTLA labor dispute may see it that way. What they haven't seen is that UTLA patiently negotiated with LAUSD for 20 months. UTLA grievances include inflated class sizes, a lack of full-time nurses in 80 percent of Los Angeles schools, a lack of librarians, and a student-counselor ratio so bad that UTLA's demand is to bring it down to 500-1. Our demands are hardly radical, and the neutral factfinder generally sided with us. By contrast, LAUSD has offered little to address these critical issues for our children.

Los Angeles teachers have been working without a contract for 18 months now, and it has been 30 years since the last UTLA strike. Reporters ask us, “Why are you willing to go on strike?” Given the conditions in our schools, I couldn’t look my students in the eye if I weren’t.

Subs Told ‘We Expect You to Honor Our Picket Lines’

Many UTLA teachers have pledged that we will never call substitutes who scab on our strike. Because UTLA also represents substitutes, it is unlikely LAUSD will find many willing to scab in our ranks. The 400 new substitutes LAUSD claims it has probably come from outside of the district.

What We Do the Day Before the Strike

After school today teachers will be making sure we either lock up or take with us all valuables and sensitive items in our classrooms. Many teachers, being the dedicated suckers we are, are tempted to leave lesson plans or assignments for our students. UTLA has been clear—scabs, if there are any, are on their own. The point of a strike is to withhold our labor until the district offers us a real contract.

What We Do the Day of the Strike

Striking teachers will be at our school site at 6:45 AM—early, because employers usually move the scabs in early, so they don’t have to face the wrath of their striking colleagues. At my school we will also have many students and former students on the picket line with us before school.

We will take down the picket lines at 8:30 AM and rally at Grand Park in downtown LA at 10:30 AM. UTLA president Alex Caputo-Pearl says that these rallies—the media coverage, the overhead helicopter shots, etc.—are critical, because no matter what happens, the district’s narrative will be “students are going to class and learning, many teachers are at work, and everything is fine.” We will need to demonstrate the sheer magnitude of our strike.

‘Whether we win or lose will have a huge effect on education throughout the US for years if not decades’

Our teachers understand the importance of what we’re doing. At a recent UTLA meeting at our high school one of them, Jim, said:

Whether we win or lose will have a huge effect on education throughout the United States for years if not decades to come. All labor disputes and strikes have a ripple effect—we’re the second largest school district in the US. A victory here would be a big boost for

teachers, students and unions throughout the country. Conversely, a defeat here will hurt many people beyond LAUSD.

Another, Esperanza, explained:

This strike is not just about us and our students. It is for the future generations of teachers and students that will be a part of LAUSD. We are currently benefiting from the previous teachers' strike. Twenty years from now, teachers and students will benefit from this fight right here right now. We are not only protecting public education but the teaching profession as well.

Bernie Sanders' Statement of Support

Past and probably future presidential candidate Bernie Sanders issued a statement in support of UTLA last week. Sanders said:

The Los Angeles teachers, and teachers throughout our country, deserve decent salaries with no pay freezes. I stand with the Los Angeles teachers in their fight for justice and dignity.