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by GLENN SACKS
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On the Picket Lines: Los Angeles Teachers Go On Strike for First Time in 30 Years

On Monday, the Los Angeles Unified School District teachers strike for the first time in 30 years. United Teachers of Los Angeles is demanding significantly lower class sizes and proper staffing of schools. LAUSD claims it agrees with most of our demands, but simply can't afford them. The "we have no money" mantra is so powerful, it's practically LAUSD's only negotiating position. However, there is much evidence which contradicts LAUSD's cries of poverty. For example:

+ According to UTLA, "Beutner and his allies at the LA County Office of Education (LACOE) continue to claim that LAUSD is in a financial crisis and has had a running deficit for many years. [This]...is false: The district has had surpluses every year ranging from \$210 million to \$517 million since 2013-14."

+ 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. How does one run a deficit every year and then quadruple one's reserve in a five-year period?

+ LAUSD currently has the largest reserve in the history of California education. This reserve is 26 times as big as what is legally required. (The required reserve is 1% of annual revenue. LAUSD's is 26% of annual revenue).

+ Three years ago LAUSD projected that their 2018-2019 reserve would be only \$100 million—it's actually \$1.98 billion.

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+ LAUSD now has another \$140 million coming from Sacramento. This is 70% of the amount they would need to bring class sizes down to 2008 levels. With that money, they could achieve these levels with only \$60 million more—a mere 1/33rd of their current reserve, and 1/127th of their overall operating budget.

+ According to UTLA, “LAUSD CFO Scott Price was shown his own budget documents that unambiguously substantiate that LAUSD does not have a deficit now and has not had a deficit in the past five years. With those documents in front of him, he refused to answer the simple question, ‘Has LAUSD had a deficit in the last five years?’”

+ In August the Los Angeles press carried headlines such as “‘LAUSD is not too big to fail’: School board members alarmed by LA County official’s dire financial projections.” We were told “LAUSD could lose control of its finances if it agrees to a teachers contract that depletes reserves, county warns.” Dr. Candi Clark, the chief financial officer of the Los Angeles County Office of Education, gave board members a devastating speech about district finances at an Aug. 21 meeting. Except, as UTLA later learned, it was not her speech at all—it had been written by LAUSD. UTLA got its hands on the email stream between LAUSD and LACOE (courtesy of a Public Records Act request) and learned that an LAUSD official wrote the speech for Clark—“a fact that completely undercuts its value as an independent analysis of the district’s fiscal state,” UTLA explains. UTLA says, “A review of the metadata in the email attachment ‘lausd speech’ sent from LAUSD budget official Cheryl Simpson to Clark reveals that Simpson was the actual author of the speech and discloses the amount of time Simpson spent writing it.”

+ In a 2016 study, the MGT consulting group estimated that the diversion of students to charter schools costs LAUSD \$508 million a year. Yet in the recent state fact-finding report, one panel member found that LAUSD “does not even collect the legally authorized 3% oversight fee from co-located charter schools”—charters using LAUSD facilities. The member notes this amounts to a district subsidy of charters at a time when LAUSD claims to have catastrophic financial problems.

+ LAUSD has not been forthright about its reserve. Just within the past nine months, we had first been told that it was around \$700 million, then \$1.2 billion, then \$1.86 billion, and now \$1.98 billion.

+ The Los Angeles Times’ Editorial Board correctly noted last year, “L.A. Unified’s finances have always been a murky business that few people have claimed to understand fully... It’s difficult for any outsider, including this editorial board, to say yes, the district can afford to do this, or no, it can’t.” To Beutner’s credit, when he came in he said “he

intends to change” this. But if Beutner himself claims that the district’s finances are opaque, it seems odd that he would be surprised that UTLA—which has every reason to be suspicious—would be suspicious.

UTLA has never denied that part of the money needed has to come from Sacramento, and has made efforts towards this end. But we demand that LAUSD meet us halfway. LAUSD can’t resolve the entire problem, but it can resolve some of it. When it is willing to do that, our strike will end.

UPDATE...

“We Shut LAUSD Down!”

Yesterday Los Angeles Unified School District teachers struck for the first time in 30 years. Over 50,000 strikers and strike supporters rallied in downtown LA and marched to LAUSD headquarters.

Superintendent Austin Beutner held a press conference and with a straight face actually said that only 3,500 teachers participated. In reality, 30,000 UTLA members manned picketlines in the morning. We shut Beutner’s schools down.

For example, at my high school:

- + 106 out of 107 UTLA members honored our picketline
- + 75+ students joined our picketline in the rain, as well as many parents
- + Only 246 out of 2,200 students came to school today. We had almost as many people on our picketline as were in school.

LAUSD Claims of Poverty Debunked

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