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USA

# Los Angeles School Employees Strike and Win

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**Workers in the Los Angeles Unified School District—custodians, gardeners, bus drivers, cafeteria workers and special education assistants—struck for three days in March and won major wage gains. The striking workers, 30,000 members of Local 99 of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), also had the support of 35,000 members of the Los Angeles Teacher Union who refused to cross the workers’ picket line. With a total of 65,000 workers on strike, the district was forced to shut down hundreds of campuses that serve some 422,000 students.**

Angelinos could see themselves in the strikers. The school workers—an ethnically diverse group, white, Black, Latino, and Asian—had the support of most parents and of the general public who recognize that after three years of the COVID pandemic, two years of working with no contract, and the rising rate of inflation, school employees needed a raise. Some school workers’ pay was so low that they couldn’t afford to pay the rent in Los Angeles’ expensive housing market.

So SEIU Local 99 called a three-day strike—a demonstration of power. The brevity of the strike meant that parents didn’t suffer too much disruption to their lives, making it easier for them to support the workers. And during the strike, the school district, school workers and teachers provided food to parents for their children, 80 percent of whom depend upon the school for lunch every day. The city also opened 30 recreation centers with free child care for children in first through fifth grade (ages 6 to 11).

Shortly after the strike, the district and the union reached agreement on a 30% wage-gain—lifting some from \$15 an hour to \$22 per hours. Workers average annual salaries will go from \$25,000 to \$33,000. Workers will also receive retroactive pay of \$4000-\$8000, depending on job classification and years of service, as well as a \$1,000 bonus for each worker employed in 2020. And workers will have fully paid health care benefits for those working at least 4 hours a day.

“You don’t even know how happy I am,” said Erika Rioverde, who has worked in the L.A. schools for nine years. “Finally, something is changing.”

Max Arias, head of Local 99 told the media, “This has the potential for transformational change. We want this to be a spark to rethink our schools, our values around education. When 65,000 education workers are telling the parents that we need to do this to improve the conditions, that’s powerful.”

Los Angeles’ new progressive mayor Karen Bass, pressured the district to negotiate with the union and intervened in the negotiations herself. “I am grateful that we were able to find an agreement to move forward today,” she said. “I am hopeful that this is the beginning of a new relationship that will lead to a stronger school district and a better future for its workers and students in the years ahead.”

The school workers victory is also important for the L.A. teachers who will themselves soon enter contract negotiations and may have to strike.

Since 2018, the United States has seen a resurgence of the teachers and school employees union movement with hundreds of thousands of teachers walking out on strike from one end of the country to the other. Teachers have often engaged in short strikes—two-thirds of them under five days and some for only one day or even half a day.

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These strikes are giving a whole new generation of teachers and other school workers the experience of strategizing, of building solidarity, and of winning.

The Democratic Socialists of America, the largest left group in the United States with tens of thousands of members nationally, mobilized its comrades in Los Angeles to support the strike. DSA has encouraged its members to become teachers and to become active in the teachers unions and in some places they have become officers in the union. This forms part of DSA's long-term strategy of transforming itself into a working-class organization and, some argue, eventually a working-class political party.

*26 March 2023*

*PS:*

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