

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Those Who Can, Teach...and Strike

Lisa Cheby · Friday, January 25th, 2019

On January 14th, a rainy Monday morning, I suited up in a red poncho and hiking boots that by the end of the day would be ruined by rain, drove to work a half hour earlier than my normal start time, and picketed with the faculty of Verdugo Hills High School in Tujunga, CA. Across Los Angeles, other teachers did the same. Thirty-two thousand of us. I have participated in protests – from rallies against pro-lifers while in college in Florida, to peace marches in Manhattan after 9/11, to the recent Women’s Marches and protests against the inhumane separation of families at the border (an injustice I later learned is larger in scope than I imagined). However, in those cases, I always knew come the next weekday I’d have my job to return to, my day to day normal. This time, my sign was about how the day to day normal in our schools was not acceptable — buildings with no heat, class sizes that could not fit into a classroom with room to think and move, students who could spend 75% of their schooling without a librarian and start high school not knowing that a library is free to use. Even though our union took measures to be sure the strike was within the bounds of the law, the return to even this unacceptable level of normal was not guaranteed. In a world where there is a lack of respect for due process and billionaires have no qualms about circumventing justice, I genuinely wondered if we would have jobs. More than the risk, though, this teacher strike is different in that it forced an entire city to stop and listen to what is happening in our schools and classrooms and demanding change. The injustices are not being committed by someone in Washington or at a border we cannot see, but in our schools in our neighborhoods. We are the reliable adults who come in each morning for less pay than our qualifications justify to teach and nurture our city’s children. On January 14th, we refused to be taken for granted and to let our students’ needs be ignored under the pretense of another trumped up financial crisis while we watched corporate interests steal taxpayer money and resources from our schools. We refused to work until our side of the story was heard and recognized.

Eight days later our afternoon rally outside City Hall turned into a hesitant celebration. Unlike a football game, a strike does not end with a victorious touchdown. It required every member to step away from the picket line into cafes and homes and libraries to get online to read a 40-page tentative agreement. After all the classroom time we gave up, after the 121,000 steps walked and the seven days of pay we will never recover, reducing classes by a handful of students over a few years, a salary increase that does not match cost of living increases, and a two-year wait for full staffing demands to be met did not leave me with the victorious feeling I imagined I would have at that moment.



The truth is, as loud as we were and as much as we pushed back against corporate interests, our

demands are far less than what we need to have thriving public schools. Compromise and negotiation. When I remember those two key words, I admit to myself that this is about what I expected. “There is no way one contract can fix all the problems in public education,” says fellow Teacher Librarian, Paula Fonseca.

We knew this going in. We knew that we could only fit so much of what needed to be fixed in Tweet-sized soundbites. Like in our classrooms, we had to chunk the information to fit the short attention span of the public to counter the misinformation from the politicians. This brings me back to all those dinner parties with friends and friends of friends where I start off as the noble public school teacher. Then after some wine, I am just another guest at the table as the dinner conversation turns to the political issue of the day and how elemental education is to causing or solving the problem. Someone distills the woes of society down to “Those who can do, those who can’t teach.” When someone remembers I am a teacher, someone apologizes and attempts to backtrack. They insist I am an exception and ask for my opinion on how to fix the flaws. But it’s really more of a rhetorical question so they could be smart and right in how they would save public education based on their experience as a high school student. Besides, I don’t have an answer that fits neatly into a polite dinner party as the answer is that we as a society need to confront and dismantle our biases against public education and public school teachers.

This past week, however, with striking teachers, as [Sarah Jaffe stated on Twitter](#), “on message ... and showing up to fight,” we forced the billionaire superintendent and the public to acknowledge the crisis in public education in Los Angeles. We are all on point because these are real issues we have been struggling to compensate for or resist for decades. This January, with a most unqualified superintendent appointed by a corrupt board, we could no longer tolerate fabricated budget shortfalls and hard times. We could no longer tolerate those from outside the field of education explaining to us how to do a job that requires multiple degrees and years of training. [Trevor Noah](#) called our demands “the most reasonable list of demands I ever heard.” [Saturday Night Live’s opening monologue](#) referenced UTLA’s strike in the opening monologue along with other killjoy events of 2019 like the shutdown and Brexit.

Prior to that rainy Monday morning, the local newspapers largely ignored the real issues in public education. The *Los Angeles Times* failed Los Angeles residents by not providing thorough coverage of the dispute between LAUSD and UTLA. All summer and into the fall leading up to the strike, the press failed to fact-check statements from Superintendent Austin Beutner and continued to frame the dispute as one mainly about salary rather than about decades of educational injustices and the threat of private interests intent on dismantling our public school system. Few media outlets bothered to clarify the difference between an LAUSD affiliated charter with unionized teachers accountable to the public and a privatized charter that uses public funds without required transparency, replaces principals with CEOs at inflated salaries, and cherry picks students leaving behind the most at-risk, high-needs students. They did not report how projected deficits never came as our public schools starved.



It took walking out of our classrooms, counseling offices, and libraries and onto the picket lines to ignite real investigations and conversations about education in our city and nation. Our strike was not only about demands in the negotiation room, but also about demanding that our voices and stories not be ignored. We are the voice for our schools and students. When the citizens and leaders of Los Angeles would not listen to us from our classrooms, we took our message to the sidewalks

in front of our schools, to the streets of downtown Los Angeles, to journalists from *L.A. Taco*, *The Nation*, and *The Philadelphia Inquirer* who were willing to help us tell our truth.

The focus of the campaign, the clarity of the message, and the creative organization of the strike demonstrates teachers not only can do, but we teach and advocate for the right of our students to discover what they can do. We used this moment to show our students how facts, creativity, and voices united may wake up a city once apathetic to our needs. Even our Mayor, who has been like an absent parent campaigning for his dream job in Washington D.C., was forced to return home and address the union's demands. We made our demands with the same passion and engagement we do in our classrooms. We used the music of the [UTLA marching band and mariachi band](#) to sustain tired marchers and invite the community to celebrate our power. [We used dance](#) to keep warm and bring joy on the early rainy days and to tell a story of hope and resistance to thousands online. We saw how [the art of public speaking](#) could bring together tens of thousands to stand strong and fight for the schools students deserve. We used the [power of the pen](#) to bring the world into our classrooms to see their strengths and to feel the challenges that we will continue to fight to change.

Though many of us felt a bit deflated after 2.5 years of bargaining, 6 days of striking, and 5 days of negotiating to be forced to compromise, this is really the start of the movement to reform education. This is our moment to re-write how we as a nation talk about teachers and public education. This is the year we remember public education is not just stuffing students in a room for supervision, but is the art of instilling in each other the hope to pursue dreams and the skills to follow through. This is the year we educate and inspire those outside our classrooms that education is worth our investment.

And we won.

We won the match for the public's support. We won back our voice in the narrative of why public education matters and deserves better. There are small victories in the contract. The real victory will be in the sustained unity of the community of Los Angeles fighting for public education as a human right. In January 2019, the United Teachers Los Angeles members joined together to debunk an old adage for a new one: Those who can, teach. We teach so all others may do and do well. This is our victory.

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