

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Rain: Perfect Weather for a Strike

Lisbeth Coiman · Wednesday, January 23rd, 2019

On Monday January 13, 2019, the rain washed off the dreams from our sleepy faces. It ran down N Pacific in San Pedro on Day 1 of the six-day long LA teachers' strike. I was late for the morning shift at the picket line, and was surprised to find a significant group of teachers at Harbor Occupational Center in San Pedro, bilingual veterans of multilevel classes, seasoned in the art of delivering instruction to students with limited English skills, and training those needing certificates in the traditional trades.

Our red clothes were hardly visible under the raincoats. A table protected by a red canopy held conchas and coffee donated by the supportive community and local businesses. Chants and slogans gargled through the soaked megaphone of the union rep. We looked pathetic but were encouraged by the horns of the drivers passing by.

It was not an easy decision for me. My 24 hours/week salary barely pays the astronomical rent near the construction site of a new stadium, the car insurance, the deductible from my medical expenses, groceries, and other necessities. I also help support my family in Venezuela. There is little left for anything else.

I have two other small jobs providing me an additional \$250 month, enough for small luxuries like movies and books. A two-week break at the beginning of the year, amid a federal government shutdown, without even my tax return to rely on for backup. I was skeptical because ours is not a mandated program. Nonetheless, I started putting aside a small strike fund since the fall.



I believe in the power of public education to build a strong society. After all I went to an extraordinary elementary school as a child in my home country, Venezuela. The Grupo Escolar Simon Rodriguez had a forestry program, a folk teacher, reading competitions. I'm proud to be part of a well-educated generation of Venezuelans raised in good public as well as private school. Whatever our parents could afford was good. But by the time I had to register my son in first grade, over 30 years ago, I found a pile of broken desks in front of my neighborhood public school.

Instead of picketing or protesting, I turned around and registered my son in a private school.

Eventually, every democratic society has to take a test. When election time arrives, the lessons learned in the classroom determine the wisdom of the electorate. It is a basic principle: arithmetic before algebra, sentence writing before composition, critical thinking before political decisions.

Forget about school; today, Venezuelan children dumpster dive, or fight dogs on the street for scraps of food.

I will not get much from the LA teachers' strike, at most a 3% salary increase. But for adult educators, this is a matter of principles. I will not turn my back on the future of public schools, like I did in Venezuela so many years ago. The generation LA teachers are fighting to educate today is the leadership that will run this city/state/country in 20 years. I will not turn around this time. My siblings' children back home are paying the price for my lack of involvement. Moreover, without public schools, there are not adult schools.

On Monday evening, I brought *arepas* and black bean soup to the night shift in front of Banning High School in Wilmington, and shamelessly offered them to my colleagues to ask for forgiveness. I would not go to the evening shift on day two because I had called my supervisor in one of those two other gigs and asked her for more hours. She said, "You are in luck. I'm needing more people." But my private student canceled. Moneywise it was going to be a lame week. Another teacher told me, "Don't give any explanations. Just do what you have to do."

By Tuesday, the letters dripped off the posters like melting ice-cones. Our toes began to adapt to the shape of the rain running down North Pacific.

The principal came out to bring us coffee, perhaps attracted by the cacophony of noises from the picket line: maracas, whistles, a green pail turned-drum under the beat of a wooden spoon, a loudspeaker, an air horn. Maybe she came to check the weather, only to discover the music of rain falling on red umbrellas. She must have heard our voices too, and those of the students who now joined us in the picket line. The strike began to create a special bond.

On Wednesday, my car door opened into a wet curtain. My scarf dripped rain water onto soggy donuts. Some drops splashed the lukewarm coffee. The paper cup lost integrity. But I was still there, ululating in the rain. We learned about each other's families, what we were sacrificing for the future of public education. We continued to support our fellow k-12 teachers in their struggle to reduce class size and get the support staff. It is the future of Angelino children.

Bertha Macias also had to think hard before deciding to join the strike. As a bread winner, she could not afford a week of strike. However, she diligently took pictures of our small group to post in the UTLA social media sites. She showed up early, left on time without a word of complain.

After the morning shift, my colleagues headed downtown, while I went in search of another gig to earn some money for groceries in February. In the evening, the rain did not budge, and neither did we. Our chants now included a call for the resignation of the superintendent. We had a lot at stake. Without public schools, there are no adult schools, and those K-12 teachers meant business.

On Thursday, a scab revealed a small wound. I breathed a silent prayer hoping it would heal soon. I said quietly to the teacher next to me, "whenever there is a line, people have to choose one side or the other. My job is to stay on the right side. Not to tell others what to do." And this side had 60 thousand loud people, dressed in red, marching in downtown Los Angeles. I forgave the trespasser. Before we left for the night, we learned the superintendent would sit at the negotiating table.

Like rice grains, victory began to sprout under six-inches of rain. We inundated Grand Park with a red river of joy and optimism, and then gathered at the Grand Market for more team-building, sipping local brews. But we are adult teachers, our week is not over.



Sunny and warmer than the rest of the week, Saturday's morning shift went quickly. Two of my students joined us, making me feel like a proud mama. We held our breaths for the entire MLK Day waiting for Tuesday.

When one side is too happy, it is a sign of a bad deal. Today, the mayor wanted to celebrate at the City Hall before the tentative agreement was approved by the 34 thousand teachers on strike. We missed the signal. Granted: it's not a perfect deal, but we can claim victory because we had the support of parents, community, leaders, and small business. Teachers, librarians, and counselors sat at that table, and I know for sure they had our best interests in their hearts when they drafted the document. I voted YES.

Today I am proud of the negotiating team, of my union, UTLA, and even more proud of the 25 members of the Harbor Occupational Center faculty who showed up for six consecutive days, rain or shine, to provide Angelino children a better public school system. I learned that rain is the perfect weather for a strike, and that a picket line is the ultimate team-building activity.

Adult educators had more to lose than anyone else in this now-historic event. Ours is not a mandated program. We can only hope that our students come back to class tomorrow.

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