

# Why America's Teachers Are On Strike, and How They're Winning

By Kim Kelly

2019 has barely begun to find its footing, yet it's already proving to be an incredibly important year for organized labor in the US. Following **20 months**<sup>1</sup> of stalled contract negotiations, on January 14, 2019, over 30,000 teachers in the second-largest school system in the country went out on strike. Called by the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), the action marked the Los Angeles' first teacher strike since 1989. This is far from the first time that LA teachers have hit the picket line in pursuit of better working conditions—a **1970**<sup>2</sup> walkout lasted a grueling five weeks—but this recent strike took special significance given its sheer size, as well as the part it now played in the growing wave of teachers and other educational workers across the country, who have been standing up for themselves—and their students—via collective action.

This movement—known as “#RedforEd”—kicked off in West Virginia in February 2018, and has since spread through a number of Republican-controlled “red” states like Oklahoma, Arizona, and Kentucky, as well as into more liberal ones like North Carolina, Colorado, and California. Each action has been different—with some having come from unions, while others have been independently organized by teachers directly. One thing they all have in common is that they owe a hell-of-a-lot to a group of broke, fed-up teachers in West Virginia who risked everything to make things better.

Their strike that started it all began on February 22, one day after West Virginia's Republican governor, Jim Justice, signed into law a bill that

would give the state's struggling teachers and school service personnel a two percent raise for the year, with one percent increases for 2020 and 2021. According to the **Bureau of Labor Statistics**<sup>3</sup>, with an average salary of \$45,240, West Virginia high school teachers are ranked 47th in the nation in pay, while elementary and middle school teachers in the Mountain State fare nominally better at 46th in the nation.

West Virginia teachers' unions—whose members had not received an across the board raise in the four previous years—said that Justice's bill would barely cover cost of living increases, much less address other issues like employee insurance programs, payroll deduction options, and relief from rising health care costs. So, despite the fact that it is illegal for public employees to strike in the state of West Virginia, and under the **threat of legal recourse**<sup>4</sup> from the State Attorney General, 35,000 teachers walked out anyway. They stayed on the picket lines for nine full days, during which schools remained closed in all 55 West Virginia counties .

As the strike went on, the nation became riveted to their story as the teachers faced numerous obstacles, the most daunting of which was perhaps the state legislature. The West Virginia House of Delegates passed a bill that would have authorized a five percent pay increase (and ended the strike), but the Senate shot it down, offering up a four percent counter offer, which the House then refused.

As this back-and-forth game played out in the halls of governance the teachers stood firm.

They concerned themselves with taking care of their students, many of whom came from low-income families. **One in four students**<sup>5</sup> in West Virginia live in poverty. There was a reason that the teachers' union announced their strike in advance. They wanted to make sure that the families of undernourished students would have time to plan. These students depend on the free lunches that their schools provided. That is why many of the teachers **packed lunches**<sup>6</sup> ahead of the strike, sending their students home with backpacks stuffed with sustenance for the days ahead. Some teachers continued these efforts during the strike, delivering food door-to-door. "One of the reasons that we didn't just go out overnight was to give people time to plan, to think about this food issue, and to also allow parents time to sort out what they would do with their children for two days," Kym Randolph, spokeswoman for the West Virginia Education Association, told the *Huffington Post*<sup>7</sup>. "We tried to make allowances so that no one would go hungry."

Stories like these helped to turn public sentiment in the teachers' favor and bolstered support during what became a knock-down, drag-out fight by anyone's standards, even in a place with the kind of rich, bloody labor history that helps define West Virginia. By the time the strike had ended, the West Virginia teachers had become a *cause celebre* in and outside the labor movement. Their direct action served as inspiration for many, many more teachers across the country as soon after teachers in Oklahoma and Kentucky followed suit, with **267,000**<sup>8</sup> more teachers in Arizona, Colorado, and North Carolina joining them as the year went on.

The West Virginia wildcat strike was the spark that lit a quickly-spreading spate of teacher strikes that soon came to define 2018, and made it "the biggest year for worker protest in a generation," according to the *Washington Post*, which also noted that, "485,200 work-

ers were involved in major work stoppages in 2018." This is the highest figure since 1986, five years after President Reagan famously broke the 1981 Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike—delivering a major blow to organized labor.

2019 is already off to a roaring start. The #RedforEd movement has continued to gather steam, and shows no sign of slowing down. The public is overwhelmingly on the side of the teachers, who continue to emphasize their desire to give their students the best education possible. According to the 2018 Phi Delta Kappan (PDK) Poll of the Public's Attitudes Toward the Public School, two-thirds of Americans believe that teachers are not paid enough.<sup>78</sup> percent of public school parents and 73 percent of the general public say that they would support striking teachers in their own communities.

Oh, how things change.

The 2019 LA teachers' strike was the largest such action since West Virginia, but the LA strike shows just how far teachers must be willing to go—and how much harder they need to fight.

For some background: Teachers in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) serve about 640,000 students. This makes up nine percent of all California students total. In the district, 75 percent of the students are Latinx, and 85 percent live below the poverty line. UTLA member demands ranged from higher pay (their initial demand was a six percent pay increase) and smaller class sizes to more support staff in schools, less standardized testing, a cap on charter schools, and an increase in statewide per-student funding (California currently **ranks**<sup>9</sup> 43rd in the nation). These demands are all commonly-cited issues seen throughout #RedforEd movement, with one caveat: The focus on charter schools as a root cause of underfunding opened a new front in

the war on privatization. Their determination to fight to halt charter schools often predatory proliferation is even more significant when juxtaposed with the current presidential administration, which has made its preference for charter schools clear.

According to *The Atlantic*, "Education experts generally agree that academic achievement improves with fewer students in the classroom, especially for kids in kindergarten to third grade," and classroom size is a particular issue that the striking teachers were prepared to go to the mat for, as both they and the children they were responsible for were suffering under the current arrangement.<sup>10</sup> For example, in many LAUSD middle schools, class size can range<sup>11</sup> from 37 to as many as 46 students in one classroom. Some LA schools cramped<sup>12</sup> over 50 students into a classroom, almost double the national average<sup>13</sup> of 26-28 students. UTLA teachers were proposing a plan to cap classes at 35 students for fourth to sixth grades, 39 for middle and high school English and Math classes, and 34 at middle schools with more severe needs.

As the Union President Alex Caputo-Pearl said, "Class size is a fundamental issue." He went on to say, "[class size] is about student learning conditions. [Class size] is about educator working conditions."<sup>14</sup>

As the teachers stood by their demands, both sides acknowledged<sup>15</sup> that class size was an issue that could only properly be resolved via action<sup>16</sup> from the state legislature. At this impasse, Caputo-Pearl called on California governor Gavin Newsom to direct more substantial resources into the state's public educational system in an interview<sup>17</sup> with the *New York Times*. "In the bigger picture we need to see a real commitment to reinvesting in neighborhood public schools," he said. "We need to see that there is willingness to substantially invest in that, to use the \$140 million from the

governor. We need to see that there is really reinvestment in class size reduction, staffing issues, counselors."

The first day of the UTLA strike was long, damp, and politically charged. As the skies opened up and rain drenched the usually dry Los Angeles, teachers were joined on the picket lines by thousands<sup>18</sup> of parents and students who came out in droves to show their solidarity.

Teachers were not the only ones frustrated by conditions at their cash-strapped schools; local parent Joanna Belson told<sup>19</sup> CBS2 that, "I support this strike because it's important to me and my family that my kids get a proper education. I'm sick and tired of my kid only having art half of the year, having a gym teacher only if we give additional funds to pay for it."

On the second day of the strike, upwards of 50,000<sup>20</sup> people rallied in support, and those numbers remained high throughout the entire six-day action. As the strike continued, politicians and celebrities<sup>21</sup> also lent their support. The teachers kept their spirits with songs, speeches, dancing,<sup>22</sup> and even bagpipes<sup>23</sup> at various locations around the city. As the strike went on, schools stayed mostly empty, and the district brought in 400 substitute teachers, 2,000 credentialed administrators,<sup>24</sup> and, controversially,<sup>25</sup> a number of parent volunteers to help oversee the (for once) uncrowded classrooms.

At its heart, the strike was about an existential threat: the continued dwindling of public resources in America. The decline in public education funding has long plagued American schools, but it only continues to worsen under the Trump regime and its billionaire, pro-charter, billionaire Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos.

The battle over charter schools is an especially pressing one in Los Angeles, where charters

have been welcomed with open arms by state officials and the city counts 138,000 charter school students—the highest number in the country.

This rush towards school privatization should worry everyone, but is especially concerning given charter schools' often detrimental impact on **poor and working class students of color**.<sup>26</sup> In California and nationwide, civil rights activists and **independent studies**<sup>27</sup> have shown that charter schools foster segregation and racial discrimination. Additionally, without a mandate to serve special needs children, severely disabled students predominantly **attend**<sup>28</sup> traditional public schools, so it is those schools—not charters—that bear an **increased amount**<sup>29</sup> of the district's special education costs. Couple this with a general lack of resources and already large class sizes as well as the amount of specialized attention a teacher can give each child, which is of particular concern when considering the needs of special education students becomes minimal.

The UTLA **pointed towards**<sup>30</sup> the proliferation of charter schools as a major reason behind the state's lack of investment in its traditional public schools, and sought to eliminate *Section 1.5* in its current contract, which, **according**<sup>31</sup> to *Labor Notes*, allowed the district to “declare a ‘fiscal emergency’ and override class size limits, cramming more students into a classroom,” which then often led to teacher layoffs and student absorption into the charter school system. As *Labor Notes* explained, “The more the charters grow, the more money they drain from the public schools budget ... and the worse the budget looks, the more the district can justify saving money by squashing even more students into a class.”

While it's no surprise that most of the city's charter schools steered clear of the strike, during its second day, teachers at LA-area charter school network Accelerated Schools **joined**<sup>32</sup> the strike,

marking only the second instance of charter school teachers striking in US history. The vast majority of charter school teachers are not unionized; **Accelerated Schools is an outlier**,<sup>33</sup> but their teachers share similar concerns with their UTLA counterparts, and are demanding job security, binding arbitration, and better health benefits.

Across the board, the teachers of Los Angeles seemed intent on making history that week. When, finally, six days after the strike had been called, news came that a tentative **deal**<sup>34</sup> had been reached, and the teachers headed back to work. They did so under a contract that was ratified by 81% of the vote (with over 20,000 teachers voting yes) and included a number of gains. These ranged from a six percent pay raise, a significant increase in numbers of school nurses, full-time librarians, and counselors; community schools being granted with local control by 2020; the creation of an Immigrant Defense Fund; the cessation of a “random search” program—and, perhaps most importantly, the **elimination**<sup>35</sup> of the hated *Section 1.5*. Above all this last point is seen as a major win.

However, some teachers were dissatisfied with the new contract, and felt that they should have been able to secure bigger concessions given the scope and support of the strike. The UTLA characterized the new contract as a “**victory**,”<sup>36</sup> but acknowledged that there was still much work to be done. Caputo-Pearl said in a statement to *Los Angeles Magazine* that,

*Six days and one contract can't immediately solve 40 years of disinvestment in public education, but what this strike has taught us is that we can dare to raise our hopes and expectations for our schools. The fight for fully funded schools is not over, and we have activated a community of parents, students, and supporters who are willing to fight for public education with us well into the future.*<sup>37</sup>

That future has already come sooner than even the most militant LA teacher might have

expected, because exactly a month after the UTLA strike, teachers in Denver, Colorado, and in Oakland, California, concurrently answered the call. And to bring it home again, West Virginia teachers, too, found themselves back on the picket line—but this time, instead of nine days, it took them only one to achieve their goal.

The West Virginia educators went on strike after Republican lawmakers in the State Senate passed a bill that would enable the first charter schools to set up shop in the state. This would have opened up West Virginia to the kind of school privatization that their fellow teachers had fought so hard to prevent (and which, as *Vox* explains,<sup>38</sup> would also mean that some of the money previously destined for public schools would be used to fund privately run charter schools, homeschooling, and online classes). Following a call from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), 19,000 West Virginia teachers walked off the job in protest on February 19. A [press release](#) from the union read in part:

*Given the Senate's actions—ramming through a secret bill on a purely partisan vote, after the House has rejected it and the governor has said he would veto these type of retaliatory measures—the educators of West Virginia have no choice but to once again walk out for our students and our public schools. We won't let outside interests rig West Virginia's politics; silence the voices of teachers, parents and our communities; and defund our students' public schools. West Virginians want to fund our future, and that's what the Senate should be focused on.*<sup>39</sup>

In a burst of *déjà vu*, nearly all of the state's 55 counties cancelled school in anticipation of the strike. Thousands of teachers flooded the West Virginia Capitol to protest, and, [only hours after](#)<sup>40</sup> the bill was sent to the House of Delegates, word came that it had been effectively shot down with a motion to indefinitely delay a vote.

On February 14, 2019, Teachers in Denver walked off in protest of low pay and what they called an unpredictable and unwieldy [incentive](#)

[pay system](#).<sup>41</sup> On what would have been the strike's [fourth](#)<sup>42</sup> day, they reached an agreement with Denver Public Schools, [winning](#)<sup>43</sup> a jaw-dropping average 11.7% pay increase for 5,353 teachers and support staff as well as a standard base salary, access to professional development courses, and a more streamlined incentive pay structure.

As of this writing, Oakland's teachers are on the fifth day of their strike, which was called on February 22—a portentous date given that it marked the one year anniversary of the start of the 2018 West Virginia strike. The Oakland Education Association (OEA) [cited](#)<sup>44</sup> low pay, crowded classrooms, and scant support staff as reasons behind the strike. These were compounded by the problem of charter schools snatching public education dollars away from poorly-funded schools, but OEA's members faced a distinct separate problem from the other striking teachers: the desperate, runaway economic inequality in the Bay Area—now the country's most expensive area—driving away teachers who could not afford to live and work there anymore.

While tech [billionaires](#)<sup>45</sup> happily thrive and continue to remake the region into their gluttonous capitalist ideal, a starting teacher's salary in Oakland is only \$46,500. In 2018, the [median](#)<sup>46</sup> monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment in the city was approximately \$2,100, and affordable housing remains scarce. The OEA [says](#) that, "one in five Oakland educators leaves the district each year due to low pay, leaving nearly 600 classrooms without an experienced teacher last school year."<sup>47</sup>

Boots Riley—iconic Oakland artist, rapper, community organizer, and the award-winning director of *Sorry to Bother You*—[came out to support](#) the striking teachers on February 26, saying,

*That's what y'all are doing, teaching the students how to fight. You're not just teaching them the facts*

*of what happened: you're teaching them to make something happen. And that's very important because otherwise ... they won't know—when they get out in the real world—what to do with it, how to do anything but wish that things were different.*<sup>48</sup>

The union's president, Keith Brown, laid out the crisis succinctly in an **open letter**: "We are in a struggle for the soul of public education in Oakland, and billionaires can't teach our kids."<sup>49</sup>

That struggle continues, and will continue to rage for many years to come, but it's obvious that something bigger is happening within the American labor movement, and it's being led by America's teachers. By fighting so hard for themselves and for future generations, they have shown the rest of the labor movement—and the world—that there is still great power in a union, and we are always stronger together.

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Published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office, March 2019.

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With support from the German Foreign Office.

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