

Teachers' Strikes spread in the USA¹

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Teacher strikes stormed across the US in early 2019, following the statewide walkouts of the previous year. The first was in Los Angeles in early January that led to some contract gains, along with an energy that swept across the city and led to a major moral victory. The strike was a popular setback for the billionaires who have spent tens of millions to privatize Los Angeles schools.

The UTLA strike was followed by strikes in Denver, Colorado, West Virginia and Oakland, California, as well as successful walkouts by Charter school teachers in Los Angeles and in Chicago where they are part of the Chicago Teachers' Union. More are anticipated as

the year develops as teachers across the US are fed up with the low salaries and the attack on public schools.

The United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) strike extended the success of the earlier strikes in the US against an aggressive neo-liberal national campaign to make education serve corporate interests. The state-by-state corporate attack has cut funding and budgets for public education services, weakened public sector unions, and slashed corporate taxes. State governors and the federal government have claimed they are "saving public schools by privatizing them" through imposing charter schools and vouchers.

The real story is that corporations manage most charter schools for profit. They are commonly tied to real estate schemes that drive poor people from their communities. Unlike private schools, which are required by law to accept all children, charters are not legally required to do so. Government allows charter schools to "cherry-pick" high achieving students, and routinely drive out English language learners, children with

1. We present a selection from the original article: "Portfolio Schools: the Latest Corporate Scheme to Commodify Education; that deals with the Los Angeles teachers' Strike that took place in early 2019.

2. Teachers in Los Angeles, California and members of the US Section of the Trinacional Coalition to Defend Public Education.

special needs, and children who challenge the routine.

Los Angeles has the largest concentration of corporate charter schools in the US. One in five students attends a charter school and the charter industry costs the district \$600 million a year. Diverting money to charters severely reduces the ability of schools to provide students the basic necessities to succeed. Yet the government is supposed to help all children, many of whom have their only meal of the day at school.

It was in this context that the union in Los Angeles went on strike for much more than teacher salaries. They won demands for reduced class sizes, the hiring of more school nurses, counsellors and school librarians, as well as providing access to immigration services for students and their families.

The strike also brought the issue of the future of charter schools to the centre of political discussion. To settle the strike, the Los Angeles school board had to agree to vote to ask the state to put a cap on the number of charter schools and the governor of the state initiated a study on whether charters are having a negative impact on public schools in California.

Charter schools are only one of the tools being used to privatize the public schools and Los Angeles is the latest site of another attempt to bring business approaches and profits into public education—“portfolio schools.”

The portfolio schools approach is based on the way the stock market works—where an investor holds a portfolio of stocks, selling those they don’t think are performing and acquiring new ones that they hope will be profitable. Except, instead of stocks, the managers are acquiring or dumping schools, trimming the “failures” as determined by standardized testing by privatizing or closing them and opening alternatives, like charters.

Students are the revenue sources in the system, with vouchers that follow them to the school as they are moved around the system.

Already there are 25 cities in the US that have adopted the portfolio schools model aimed, in their own words, at “disrupting” urban school districts. Portfolio districts replace democratic public control of schools by local



PHOTO: AFP

school boards with corporate-controlled Community Education Councils.

The portfolio model opens up a bonanza of new investment opportunities for privatizers. Corporations and foundations—like Bill Gates and the Waltons of Walmart-- provide consultations and grants for reorganizing districts. The Cities for Educational Entrepreneurship Trust defines itself clearly as “a network of city-based education reform organizations, initiatives and foundations dedicated to accelerating the growth of entrepreneurial education ventures.” Money is also made from behavioral programs that track students’ entire education history used in tandem with portfolio schools.

Capitalism’s drive is relentless and takes advantage of crises and evolves new forms in seeking profit and public funding of education presents attractive opportunities. Portfolio schools are another of these. Maintaining public control of public education requires vigilance and making the public aware of the challenges of those who seek to privatize education.

Charter schools and privatization were major factors in the strike in Los Angeles and they are significant issues around the US and in the rest of the world as public education is under attack. The UTLA strike helped to raise public consciousness and public debate about privatization in its community as well as beyond LA, an important contribution to the struggle for public education everywhere.