

Strikes and shutdowns

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Before she hit the picket lines last week, Nataly Santos, a third-grade teacher in Los Angeles, packed hundreds of snack bags for students at her school. Most of her students live in poverty, as do more than 80 percent of students in Los Angeles. Nataly didn't want to go on strike; she felt she had to, because her students need so much more than her care packages.

United Teachers Los Angeles has been negotiating for nearly two years. Of course, members want the school district to pay them fairly, but most of their demands are about strengthening their schools: smaller class sizes; less testing; and more art, music, counselors, nurses and librarians. At its heart, this strike—like those last year in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and elsewhere—is about confronting years of disinvestment and scarcity in education, and prioritizing public education as an opportunity agent for all children.

That's why thousands of parents and students have joined educators on rain-drenched picket lines in Los Angeles and have filled "strike backpacks" for teachers with snacks, water and supportive notes from students. A recent poll found that 82 percent of Los Angeles County residents support the strike.

Everything teachers are demanding would strengthen Los Angeles' public schools, which paradoxically puts them at cross-purposes with the leadership of the school district. A member of the fact-finding panel mediating the standoff between the union and district leaders was confounded: "I have never seen an employer that was intent on its own demise."

The seeds of the austerity plaguing the state's public schools go back four decades to Proposition 13, a property tax revolt largely responsible for California—the world's fifth-largest economy—plummeting to 43rd in the nation for per-pupil spending. In Los Angeles, austerity has been made much worse by the efforts of a group of wealthy individuals and foundations to move half the students in the city into charter schools, which drain nearly \$600 million from neighborhood schools every year. The group spent nearly \$10 million in 2017 to elect a pro-privatization majority on the school board, who then rammed through the appointment of Superintendent Austin Beutner, an investment banker with no education experience.

But this is not a debate over charter versus public schools; it's about ensuring that all public schools have the conditions they need for student success. In fact, AFT members at a Los Angeles charter

school chain also went on strike this week, calling for improvements in teaching and learning conditions.

We hear a lot about "choice" in education. Failure to invest in children and their schools is a choice. Beutner holds the purse strings to a nearly \$2 billion surplus, yet he is claiming the district is broke. He chose to force a strike rather than address the legitimate problems that teachers—with

Failure to invest in children and schools—forcing their teachers to strike—is a choice.

parents' and students' support—have raised. To shake essential resources loose, educators are finding they have no choice but to use vehicles like strikes, walkouts and demonstrations.

This standoff sounds an awful lot like what's going on in Washington, D.C., where Donald Trump has manufactured a crisis by shutting down the government to secure his border wall. Trump initially agreed to a bipartisan solution to avert a shutdown, but he flip-flopped after conservative commentators goaded him.

Trump has shrugged off the effects of the shutdown, but he is causing countless Americans to cut back on lifesaving medicines, rely on food pantries, miss mortgage payments, and endure overwhelming stress and uncertainty. My union is offering interest-free loans for furloughed members; one recipient immediately rushed to pay his past-due rent with his loan. And among

the many groups trying to help federal workers stay afloat, one charity has set up a food bank for FBI agents working without pay.

Democratic congressional leaders have passed numerous bills to end the shutdown with bipartisan support. But Trump veers between playing a strongman and a toddler, and definitely not a problem-solver. He is risking the essential functions of government—food safety, airline security,

disaster preparedness and many others—for his self-serving purposes. As Trump said last month, he "owns" the shutdown. The onus is on him to end it, as it is on Beutner to end the crisis in Los Angeles.

Our democratic society is made possible by the social contract between citizens and our government. In return for our consent to a democratic government, to pay taxes and obey laws, that government agrees to protect our rights and promote our common good. When our elected leaders fail, whether by not funding public schools or by shutting down services that provide for our safety and freedom, they strike at the very heart of what makes us a democratic republic.

That is why 31,000 teachers like Nataly Santos are taking a stand, and why Americans increasingly are denouncing Trump for dividing and destabilizing the country.



Weingarten, second from right, marching with 50,000 supporters of adequately funding Los Angeles public schools.

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