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Too Much “On the Line”: My LAUSD Strike Experience

Grace McCullough¹

At first, we were being yanked around in regards to the exact dates of the strike. When will it be? Are we on strike yet? The strike was pushed back maybe three times before we began on a Monday morning. I was a part of a small group of people, including all of the four or five chapter chairs of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) at our campus, as well as two or three additional teachers interested in being involved. We wanted to support however we could to make the strike effective for our school in South Los Angeles, and for Los Angeles Unified School District’s (LAUSD) Local District South, as well as for our entire city. I grew up in this city and was a student here, but as teachers here, we are aware that our district serves over 600,000 children and families in Los Angeles. So we knew there was a lot at stake. The year before, the doors had closed at the charter school I had worked at for three years. Neither the Los Angeles County Office of Education nor LAUSD were willing to reauthorize our charter because our test scores growth, which would affect our students long-term. Our parents, staff, students, and the entire community were devastated. Although the years we spent building that school were invaluable to me as an educator, I was grateful to join the ranks of unionized LAUSD teachers with the support of a district. I was shocked by our closure, but simultaneously I could see the disservice our charter school was doing to our students in terms of low test performance. I looked forward to joining a system of district accountability that had been tried and true for many years, such as LAUSD.

At the charter school, I had been fortunate to work with several newer educators with passion and creativity. After our charter closed, these educators disseminated throughout various LAUSD schools and became key players in their schools’ activism efforts. When the strike began, some of them became chant leaders, art/banner creators, early morning arrivers, and Facebook group coordinators for their various new staffs. At our charter school, we had worked so hard together, without much support or any certain rights. I was so grateful we were all finally part of a union that would support us to earn more of what we deserved, both in terms of working conditions and direct compensation. I was so happy that all of these young educators would now potentially have the guidance of more veteran teachers and the protection and feedback of district procedures, with basic structures—such as regular evaluations—that our charter school had not implemented consistently.

However, as my first year in LAUSD began, I quickly learned devastating numbers. The second largest district in the nation—serving the second largest population of our country’s children/students/citizens/next agents-of-change—has one of the lowest per-pupil and teacher-compensation scales in the country. Amazing and incredibly sad.

Every day on the line, we got angrier and angrier about how hard the district was fighting to keep basic and equitable resources from our students. We set up fold-up tables, our posters, signs, supplies to make new signs, food scraps and coffee donations, and each afternoon we stored them in one of our teacher's parents' house across the street from our site. Day by day, we arrived by 7:00 a.m., rain or shine (usually rain). First, we fueled up with coffee and whatever food was brought for us that day by parents, other teachers, or bought by donations from our friends and family. Then we walked around the perimeters of the school entrances, picketing for hours. Around 10:00 a.m., we would clean up and head out to a regional or city-wide action organized each day by UTLA. At the larger action events, we would meet up with strike participants from all over the city, gathering new energy to take back to our sites for

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afternoon pickets from around 2:00 p.m. to 4:00 or 5:00 p.m. These larger actions were in different locations around the city and each day we either carpooled, caravanned, or took public transit together to the next location. A few times we met up at City Hall downtown and took part in major events with music, speeches, marching, and tens of thousands of supporters!

One day we had an action at our Local District South office in Gardena, and we planned a social event afterward with our staff at a bowling alley using union funds we had to buy our union members lunch that day. Another day we walked around our neighborhood to spread the word about our students' and schools' needs, handing out flyers to our neighbors. On one of the last days, we marched around our larger neighborhood area and met up with several schools. This occurred at an intersection nearly a mile from us, and it was possibly one of the most fun days. Together with teachers from schools from a few-mile radius around us, we danced and made music throughout the streets. Every day, people brought out drums, speakers, and more advanced or creative rain gear. Many of us waterproofed our signage using duct tape or lamination provided for free by Lakeshore (a teaching supply store) to teachers on strike.

The weekend was ours, and somehow our strike fell on the Martin Luther King, Jr., holiday, which—though unpaid—was our time as well. And we needed it. We were tired. But we were strong. Every day I thought that someone wouldn't show up, or that fewer people would come to the central action, because it was cold or we were losing steam. But every day I was proven wrong, and everyone showed. My staff morale was high. And we could feel that the city was with us. From honking cars, to donations from strangers, to the mayor of our city beginning to join in on negotiations between our district and union leadership, every day we felt tired but stronger. We marched our local streets. We marched on downtown Los Angeles. We marched around our school. We engaged parents and local community organizations that let us use their toilets, or donated parking, snacks, coffee, or honks in support of our movement. On the days we marched through our neighborhood, community members offered us water bottles, came out of their homes banging pots and pans in support of us, took our flyers, and offered us food.

At first, students felt conflicted about how to support us—their teachers—because LAUSD was messaging families, telling them to send their children to school regardless of the strike. However, our union and state attorney general reminded students of their right to have absences during a strike excused from their records. Students started to join us on the picket lines in the mornings, and some even joined our actions in the afternoon downtown, riding public transportation alongside us. They were tired of watching movies projected on the school walls. To this day, however, the district has counted those absences against our school's attendance records, which has affected our funding this school year.

Finally, on Tuesday morning—our sixth morning on the picket lines—the contract was announced as settled. We all listened to the press conference announcement together, huddled up in the cold around the speaker, on the front curb of our school, at 9am waiting for directions about what was to come. Some of us cried. We hugged. We were all so happy and excited.

We then separated to read the contract specifics and potentially return to school later to vote. A few of us went out to lunch to celebrate. Several of us had become physically ill from our time on the line due to the cold weather and were eager to vote and go home.

Because we all lived in different places, we were able to sign the contract at any local LAUSD school, even if we were not a staff member of that site. This is what I did. Through conversation with my staff via GroupMe, I learned that some of the more politicized teachers I trusted in the district planned to vote *no* on the contract. They said they had fought too hard to settle for “this”: an agreement on class-size caps, a nurse every day on school sites, a student-counselor ratio of 500:1, and more. Now that we had built this movement of organizing, we felt we deserved more. We didn't want to settle for 38 students in a classroom. We wanted to use our power to ask our union organizers to bargain for more on our behalf because we were ready to fight for all that our kids deserved! I was convinced that we could win even more from our district for kids in Los Angeles than we had originally even asked for or intended.

However, this idea upset some veteran organizers. Some teachers wanted to get back to the classroom and felt pressure to get paid again. They felt we were not celebrating enough, we were being too negative, and we needed to take this “win.” There were some upset text messages and conversations had, and in the end the contract passed, and we all went back to our classrooms the very next day.

TOO MUCH

Regardless, we had to party. So we hosted a "victory party" for union members from our site. The students, other staff, and the union members from our site were all elated to be reunited.

We all celebrated and had a lot of love to share upon our return. However, it had been a very taxing experience. Several of us had to take one to five days off of work after that due to severe illness, likely caused by stress on our bodies from six days outside, not to mention the organizing work done before and after. We hosted a celebration for teachers at a local restaurant with the funds donated from friends and family. We rented out a local restaurant just for our staff and bought them food and drinks with some of the funds we had donated. We had not socialized much as a whole staff from all four of our small schools combined, but we all bonded so much while enduring the cold and harsh conditions during the strike; we were happy to be done and celebrating together. We attempted to keep up this mixer once a month, but it has been challenging to maintain. We hope to have monthly meetings with our union, but some disagree with this strategy, or—more accurately—they are tired of meetings. It is very challenging to do our work as teachers, to take on extra duties, and to be educated about how to organize as a staff or union. On top of our extremely demanding workweeks, teachers can feel that these expectations are impossible—a valid and pervasive feeling in our schools.

We all knew this was an important moment in her/history. We knew that Oakland's teacher strike would be equally important, and we supported the efforts of all teachers across the nation to stand up for equitable conditions for their students. It is horrifying to know that some teachers do not have this right to strike in their states. I hope we can work toward better conditions in all of our schools, especially for enabling people's rights to demand the education they deserve.