



Analysis of The 1989 Teacher Strike **UTLA and LAUSD**

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Table of Contents

The Boycott.....	3
Demonstrations	6
UTLA Members Vote Against Settlement.....	8
"Nothing Short of Extortion".....	11
The Strike Begins	12
The Second Week.....	13
Pluses and Minuses of the Settlement.....	14
Bibliography.....	19

Analysis of The 1989 Teacher Strike

"Britton did not comprehend that school politics of the Los Angeles Unified School District was no longer that of an "all powerful superintendent" who was a benefactor of a comparatively weak teachers union."

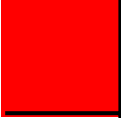
The Boycott

The 1988-89 school year could be dubbed "The Year of the Teachers' Strikes" in California. Up and down the coast, from Anaheim to Sacramento, there were serious labor disputes. Districts as large as Los Angeles and as small as suburban Bonita Unified in La Verne and San Dimas faced the threat of strikes. These districts spent months teetering on the edge of chaos, enduring increasing hostility on all sides, and causing rifts that would be difficult to heal. While a majority of these districts were able to avoid an actual walkout, quite a few had to endure angry picket lines and student unrest. The strike that held the greatest interest around the state and even the country was the one staged in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD).

While the strike took place in May of 1989, the events leading up to it began over a year before. The teachers' three-year contract expired at the end of June 1988 and negotiations for the 1988-89 contract had begun a few months before. By September of 1988, LAUSD had offered a 4.1% raise and maintenance of existing medical and health benefits. The United Teacher-Los Angeles (UTLA), however, wanted a more substantial raise of 12% and the adoption of a school-based management model. Both offers would mean an increase in the district's already stretched budget and substantial cuts to many programs.¹

The union's response to the district's lower offers was twofold. One took place in the schools where teachers were encouraged to stop any unpaid activity. This included, but was not limited to, filling out attendance sheets, attending after school meetings, and supervising playgrounds. While this boycott was ostensibly

¹ Woo, "L.A. School District, Teachers' Union Negotiate Contract Issues," *LAT*, Sept. 10 1988. The old contract was extended until a new contract was signed or until either party cancelled it.



implemented to cause problems for the district, it also played well in the media and therefore worked as part of the union's other tactic, positive media coverage. This coverage was planned to gain the sympathy of parents and voters by portraying teachers as underpaid and overworked, unlike district management which was overpaid and not responsible for the actual purpose of the district: educating children.²

The district responded with indifference towards the boycott and a better offer. They began the last week of September by reassuring parents that school operations were not hindered by the boycott and they accused teachers of forgetting that the well-being of the children should come above their own interests. By the first week of October, however, the district presented a substantially higher offer of 16.9% over three years and a tentative agreement to school-decision councils. This offer was "flatly rejected" by the union hours after it was announced. UTLA President Wayne Johnson reiterated his demand that the district give the teachers a 12% raise for the current school year and a two-year contract.³

Superintendent Leonard Britton waded into the fray a few days later by upping the stakes for union teachers. He announced that teachers who continued to boycott their duties were "violating the state Education Code and endangering state funding." This statement was prompted by the addition of state mandated tests to the roster of teacher boycotts. Teachers, incensed over allegations of test tampering, refused to handle the CTBS or CAP tests in any way. It was quickly becoming clear that more than money was at issue in the labor negotiations.⁴

Shortly after testing was suspended, the board attempted to end the boycott. They informed the teachers that they would file unfair labor practice charges with the Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) over the boycott. The district viewed these after-hours assignments as "a mandatory part of the basic paid assignment" and that not performing them was therefore breaking the existing contract. The union, for its part, decided to stick to the strictest interpretation of the contract by asserting that teachers were paid for 120 hours a month and anything over that time was unpaid and not part of the contract. Therefore, UTLA defined the status of its members' jobs as hourly not salary like the district claimed.⁵

² Staff, "New Strategy by Teachers Union," *LAT*, Sept. 29 1988.

³ Staff, "New Strategy," *LAT*, Sept. 29 1988 & Woo, "Teachers Union Rejects 3-Year, 16.9% Pay Hike," *LAT*, Oct. 6 1988.

⁴ Woo, "L.A. School District Threatens to Dock Pay of Teachers if They Boycott Activities," *LAT*, Oct. 11 1988 & Woo, "Tests Postponed: Teachers Refuse to Handle Exams," *LAT*, Oct. 18 1988; "...thousands of members of [UTLA] demonstrated outside of most of the district's 600...schools to deny accusations..."

⁵ Woo, "Teachers Union Faces Charges Over Boycott of Certain Chores," *LAT*, Oct. 26 1988.

More posturing took place in November when the district made its next offer. Promising the teachers a 17% raise over three years, the district hoped to avoid major cuts in school programs. The union, however, held on to its 12% demand and announced that they planned to request an official declaration of an impasse. This led to the request for a state-appointed mediator and was a step closer to a strike. The district itself was still pursuing a court order against the boycott. Board members Julie Korenstein and Warren Furutani led an attempt to get the two sides to meet face to face without negotiators and Mayor Tom Bradley offered to serve as a mediator. Meanwhile, UTLA President Johnson went on the offensive and challenged Superintendent Britton to a debate on the issues, which was summarily dismissed by Britton as a stunt. The two sides were gearing up for more conflict.⁶

UTLA did an excellent job of presenting its case to the media. Quite a few articles, beginning in November and running throughout the negotiations, contained information on salaries for both administrators and teachers. While the comparisons often included the number of days worked, the teachers still came out as the losers and were often portrayed as being forced to work several jobs or extra assignments in order to make a decent wage. These arguments were clearly over a perceived lack of respect and the low regard that many teachers felt that their salaries symbolized.⁷


The district responded to the continuing boycott with a move that angered many union members. Having been denied by PERB its request to take UTLA to court over the boycott in mid-November, the district decided to take matters into its own hands. Basing its rationale on the conviction that teachers were salaried employees, the district began to dock teachers' salaries. This, in the words of one union official, did "nothing but reinforce teacher frustration." It also placed the district where the union wanted it: aggressive and unsympathetic.⁸

The union's legal cause got bleaker in December when PERB reversed its earlier decision and filed a complaint with the state over the teacher boycott. This was touted as a victory by the district, but soon afterwards the union filed its own complaint against the district in regards to pay docking. This policy amounted to \$250 to \$300 per teacher who refused to file student grade reports. The union was

⁶ Staff, "Schools, Teachers Seek Mediator," *LAT*, Nov. 4 1988; Woo, "'Negative Tactics' by L.A. School Board Cited by 2 Members," *LAT*, Nov 10 1988; Woo, "Bradley Offers to Mediate School Talks," *LAT*, Nov 11 1988; & Staff, "Debate Challenge for Schools Chief," *LAT*, Nov 12 1988.

⁷ Woo, "District, Union Disagree on Funds Available for Salaries," *LAT*, Nov. 27 1988 & Connell, "Some Teachers Take Extra Duties to Boost Salaries," *LAT*, Jan. 1 1989.

⁸ Staff, "Board Denies Bid to Sue Teachers Union," *LAT*, Nov. 17 1988; Bernstein, "L.A. School Board-Teacher Harmony Is a Possible Dream," *LAT*, Dec. 6 1988; & Connell, "California Issues Complaint on L.A. Teachers' Boycott," *LAT*, Dec. 8 1988.



also offered up to 10% a year, but the offer was dependent upon Proposition 98 funds. Realizing that this was not a substantial offer, UTLA refused.⁹

Demonstrations

The first month of 1989 saw a great deal of unrest in LAUSD. The teachers started the trend on January 11th by marching down the sidewalks of the Los Angeles Civic Center during rush hour traffic. Their demonstration had both begun and ended at LAUSD headquarters. A week later, the union announced that it would not file semester grades with the district, which were due February 3rd, unless a settlement had been reached. At the time, a settlement seemed unlikely due to the contentions surrounding shared-decision councils and the status of docked wages.¹⁰

While the teachers' demonstration had been controlled and organized, the same could not be said for the subsequent student protests. Fremont High School students, angered by the union threat to withhold grades, walked out of classes January 18th. Many of the 200 students felt that they were caught in the middle of two powerful groups who truly were not concerned with student welfare. LAUSD officials condemned the teachers' plan and stated that it would hurt seniors' chances of getting into college. UTLA officials refuted this by setting up a plan that would allow counselors to verify grades with colleges. This statement was backed up by the UC system whose officials said that no student would be affected by the boycott.¹¹

Despite these assurances, high school and junior high school students continued to stage walkouts throughout January. A week after the first protest, students had participated in seven demonstrations. One of the largest of these was at George Washington High School. Held on January 20th, this walkout comprised of roughly 1,000 students and was quite peaceful. The district, having been portrayed in a bad light by the students, began to voice suspicions that the union was behind these events. The union, of course, denied the allegations, but the focus of the student rallies had shifted from concerns over grades to support of teachers. It is clear that the union did not instigate the first protest. However, it is entirely possible that

⁹ Connell, "California Issues," *LAT*, Dec. 8 1988; Staff, "Boycotting Teachers Get Smaller Checks," *LAT*, Dec. 9 1988; & Connell, "Take Pay Offer, Honig Tells Teachers," *LAT*, Feb. 8 1989.

¹⁰ Staff, "Teachers Conduct Rush-Hour March," *LAT*, Jan. 12 1989 & Connell, "Contract Talk Rumors Trigger Student Protest," *LAT*, Jan. 19 1989.

¹¹ Connell, "Contract Talk," *LAT*, Jan. 19 1989; Connell, "Teachers Urged to Not Withhold Grades as Student Protests Spread," *LAT*, Jan. 24 1989; & Connell & Garcia, "Students Widen Protests in Teachers' Dispute," *LAT*, Jan. 25 1989.

teachers encouraged students to voice their opinions in a manner that would put the district on the defensive.¹²

As the deadline for grades approached, the demonstrations increased in number and intensity. While no one was injured, students threw rocks and bottles at police while they marched down Laurel Canyon Boulevard during one walkout. Unfortunately these violent outbursts spread to other protests. Students were also suspected of skipping homeroom so that the district would not receive funds for their attendance and for also causing trouble in their neighborhoods when they were not in class. While community members pleaded with students to stay in school, district officials were afraid that confrontations with police would cause rioting.¹³

These events prompted school board members Warren Furutani, Julie Korenstein, and Jackie Goldberg to call for around-the-clock negotiations. It soon became apparent that this was not an option for Superintendent Britton. After a closed door meeting with the board on January 30th, Britton announced that teachers who withheld grades would not get paychecks. The board, while having been consulted on the matter, could not legally countermand his decision had they wanted to. UTLA reacted by threatening a strike vote and a sickout. The two sides seemed to be set on starting an internecine war.¹⁴

While protests had occurred on the days leading up to the end of the semester, February 3rd was relatively quiet. Teachers gave students “union report cards” to take home and roughly 85% of teachers did not file grades with the district. Despite the threat of not getting paid, teachers showed a remarkable solidarity. It was during this time that the school board began to listen to UTLA President Johnson’s requests for more contact with the board instead of Britton. They proposed a plan for nonstop face-to-face negotiations to begin Sunday, February 5th and the union accepted.¹⁵

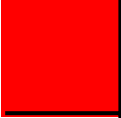
Unfortunately, this did not prove to be the solution to the escalating crisis. Instead, the meeting ended late Sunday night after the union refused to accept what board

¹² Staff, “Another Walkout by Students in L.A.” *LAT*, Jan. 21 1989; Connell & Garcia. “Students Widen Protests,” *LAT*, Jan. 25 1989; & Connell, “Teachers,” *LAT*, Jan. 24 1989.

¹³ Connell & Garcia. “Students Widen Protests,” *LAT*, Jan. 25 1989; Connell, “Student Unrest in Teacher Pay Dispute Grows,” *LAT*, Jan. 26 1989; Connell & Enriquez, “Walkouts at Schools Called at a ‘Crisis’,” *LAT*, Jan. 28 1989; & Connell & Gordon, “Teachers, District Raise Stakes in Contract Dispute,” *LAT*, Jan. 31 1989.

¹⁴ Connell & Enriquez, “Walkouts,” *LAT*, Jan. 28 1989; Connell & Gordon, “Teachers, District,” *LAT*, Jan. 31 1989; & Connell, “As Showdown Nears, Lull in Action Marks Teachers Pay Dispute,” *LAT*, Feb. 1 1989.

¹⁵ Connell & Enriquez. “Parents Demand End to School Turmoil,” *LAT*, Feb. 2 1989; Connell & Gordon, “Grade Showdown at Hand in Schools,” *LAT*, Feb. 3 1989; & Connell, “L.A. Teachers Agree to Board Plan for Talks,” *LAT*, Feb. 4 1989.



President Roberta Weintraub called “our very best offer...I think it’s our last offer.” This did not mean that talks were off; instead, they were shifted back to staff and professional negotiators. Meanwhile, UTLA did not believe that this was the district’s best and final offer. To reinforce the impression that they were serious in their demands, the union unanimously authorized a strike vote on February 8th.¹⁶

In contrast to this move by the union or perhaps because of it, UTLA President Johnson began to back down on a key issue. He advised teachers to turn in grades if the union was unsuccessful in court and the district was allowed to withhold paychecks. Thus Johnson recognized that they were not legally able to withhold grades without repercussions nor were they in a position to carry out their threats of a strike. The union had also by this time lowered their demands to an 11% raise for the current year, 10% for the next, and a two-year contract. The district’s offer still relied on state funds and an agreement to a three-year contract.¹⁷

UTLA soon lost their case in court. A Los Angeles Superior Court judge ruled on February 17th that she did not have jurisdiction over the matter and the union should address their grievances to PERB. Teachers were then urged by the union to turn in grades in order to be paid on March 3rd. Most complied and it looked like Britton had successfully made the union back down. Unfortunately, he had also alienated many teachers in the process and elicited more angry rhetoric from UTLA President Johnson.¹⁸

UTLA Members Vote Against Settlement

A month after the battle over grades had been resolved; UTLA presented the district’s offer to its members. The vote was 89.4% against the 20% raise over three years and an authorization for the union to prepare for a strike. The strike was tentatively set for the end of the current school year, which Superintendent Britton stated would interfere with graduation and promotions. There was, however, one more step that had to be completed before a strike could be called. LAUSD and UTLA had to agree on a fact-finding commission and its report would have to be released before the union could call a strike. Considering that the previous contract negotiations had been resolved in the “11th hour” many observers and participants still had hopes for a resolution.¹⁹

¹⁶ Connell, “Board, Teachers Edge Closer but Outlook Dim,” *LAT*, Feb. 6 1989; Connell, “Take Pay Offer,” *LAT*, Feb. 8 1989; & Connell, “Teachers’ Representatives Authorize Strike Vote,” *LAT*, Feb. 9 1989.

¹⁷ Connell, “Teachers’ Representatives,” *LAT*, Feb. 9 1989.

¹⁸ Staff, “L.A. Teachers’ Challenge to Pay Withholding Over Grades Denied,” *LAT*, Feb. 17 1989 & Connell, “Teachers Yield, Turn Grades In,” *LAT*, Feb. 18 1989.

¹⁹ Woo, “L.A. Teachers Reject Contract Offer, OK Strike Preparations,” *LAT*, Mar. 14 1989.

As the deadline for the next grading period neared, the union again urged its members to boycott. Due April 7th, UTLA President Johnson set up the mid-term grades as the union's line in the sand. This move was prompted by a rumor that these grades would be used as final grades if teachers struck at the end of the school year, which would render a strike virtually ineffective. Johnson stated that if paychecks were withheld from boycotters, the strike would be moved up to May 1st. The district responded by saying that they did not plan to withhold paychecks, but would dock teachers' pay for withholding grades. Unfortunately, this threat only angered teachers and threw up another stumbling block. By docking pay again, the district kept the issue of pay restoration a key UTLA demand in negotiations. This stalemate prompted the state mediator to recommend that the two sides request a fact-finder from PERB in order to begin the last stages of negotiation.²⁰

For most of the month of April the attentions of both the school board and the union were focused on the school board races. While the race for President Roberta Weintraub's seat was without union participation, the races for Julie Korenstein's seat and Alan Gershman's seat were characterized by heavy involvement by UTLA. Korenstein was fortunate to have union support, which was a tremendous help in her heavily conservative district. Gershman, meanwhile, faced a union backed challenger who actually polled higher than him in the April 11th elections. Weintraub avoided a run-off, but Korenstein and Gershman were not so lucky. Their behavior during the strike was therefore doubly important.²¹

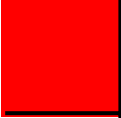
The lull in activity after the school board primaries was shattered when students at Huntington Park High School staged a walk out Friday, April 21st. Students demanded that LAUSD and UTLA resolve the labor dispute so that they could receive their final grades. District officials reported that roughly half of instructors had withheld grades. Instead, these teachers sent grades home with their students on a UTLA supplied report card. As for the walkout, it was thought that some teachers had encouraged students to protest, but the union denied this accusation.²²

The rest of April continued in this vein of accusations and posturing. LAUSD seemed ready to relieve elementary school teachers of yard duty, but they were set against giving these teachers an hour of preparatory time. These political impediments were also reflected in the negotiations surrounding shared-decision making councils. The union wanted teacher control and the district was extremely reluctant to give it to them. The school board wanted to either retain veto power for

²⁰ Woo, "Teachers' Union Warns It Will Withhold Grades," *LAT*, Mar. 24 1989 & Pasternak, "May 30 Slated for Teacher Strike if Accord Is Lacking," *LAT*, Apr. 3 1989.

²¹ Connell, "Teachers Union Marks Gershman for Board Defeat," *LAT*, Feb. 10 1989; Connell, "L.A. Schools Election: It's a Three-Way Tug of War," *LAT*, Mar. 21 1989; & Connell, "2 School Board Members Look Like Winners," *LAT*, Apr. 12 1989.

²² Woo, "Students Demand That Labor Dispute End," *LAT*, Apr. 22 1989.



the principal or give administrators, parents, and teachers equal authority. Superintendent Britton's experience in the matter was either undervalued or ignored by the board and the union successfully appropriated the plan.²³

While these non-monetary differences were important, the major difficulty was in the disparity between the district's offers and UTLA's demands. In the last week of April, the district offered teachers a 20% raise over three years, but the union was still demanding a 21% raise over two years. Both sides seemed to have never been further apart. Board President Weintraub called the offer "the best offer in the state of California." The union, on the other hand, was threatening to "shut this system down" if it did not receive its demands. Union teachers set the strike date for May 30th making the contract deadline May 29th. To observers, this still seemed like plenty of time to turn negotiations around.²⁴

The two sides were waiting for the fact-finder's report and the state budget. The fact-finder's mission was to evaluate the district's finances and decide whether or not there was money for a raise and if so, what the value of this raise could be. The non-binding report was due May 15th. Meanwhile, the board continued deliberations over the proposed \$80 million budget cuts needed to meet their offer to the union. These cuts could be offset by the allocation of the state tax surplus, which was to be decided by the governor and legislature the first week of June. While this would not be in time to stop a strike, there would most likely be a release of general numbers that could be used in a tentative agreement. This was widely anticipated to divert a strike.²⁵

During budget deliberations, the board decided that it could afford to raise their offer to 21.5% over three years. This was unacceptable to UTLA and the union prepared to strike on May 30th. Part of their preparations was to withhold final grades from the district. The board's response was to adopt a plan that would lead towards less pay discrepancies between administrators and teachers. UTLA was not in favor of these proposals due to its position against career ladders. The union also claimed this district design was only a "philosophical statement" and should not be taken seriously.²⁶

²³ Woo, "Tired of Having Little Say, Teachers Pushing for Shared Authority," *LAT*, Apr. 23 1989.

²⁴ Woo, "Teachers OK Strike by Large Margin, Set May 30 as Deadline," *LAT*, Apr. 25 1989.

²⁵ *Ibid.* & Woo, "Teachers See Tax Windfall as Way of Avoiding Strike," *LAT*, Apr. 29 1989.

²⁶ Woo, "L.A. School Board Hikes Wage Offer to Teachers 1.5%," *LAT*, May 2 1989; Woo, "Sweeping Moves to Aid Teachers Will Get Hearing," *LAT*, May 8 1989; Woo, "Board Approves Changes to Upgrade Teacher Status, Pay," *LAT*, May 9 1989; & Woo, "L.A. Teacher Strike Moves Step Closer," *LAT*, May 9 1989.

"Nothing Short of Extortion"

Superintendent Britton, for his part, took UTLA's threats over grades very seriously. He ordered all teachers to turn in final grades by 4 p.m. on May 15th or lose their May paycheck. He had made the decision without consulting the board, which brought some criticism, but Alan Gershman praised him. Britton then described the "conduct by the UTLA leadership as nothing short of extortion" and vowed to do "everything within my legal powers to stop it." In response to Britton's ultimatum, Johnson maneuvered to get the strike moved up to May 15th. The timeline for the talks was thus severely shortened.²⁷

The second week of May was therefore one of preparation for both sides of the negotiations. No meetings were conducted, but LAUSD geared up to employ as many substitute teachers as possible and to place administrators with credentials in schools so that the district would not shut down. UTLA, not possessing a strike fund, arranged for loans of \$70 a day repayable over two years for striking teachers. They also prepared picket line schedules, rallies, and signs. Britton may not have been aware of it yet, but he had shaken the beehive.²⁸

The Friday before the deadline proved difficult for both LAUSD and UTLA. In many schools, attendance dropped by as much as 15%. Both groups were concerned that violence might break out on campuses during a strike and neither seemed to be making headway in negotiations. It seemed that the district offered the union a 24% raise over three years, but again it was contingent on state funding. The union labeled this offer a "trial balloon" and stated that they would not comment on it. Meanwhile, it was very probable that if the union struck before the fact-finding report was delivered they would be breaking state law. The day ended with all teachers turning in their room keys after the majority of them had stripped their rooms.²⁹

The weekend did not improve the situation at all. The two parties remained deadlocked, but UTLA had budged on one issue. It finally acquiesced to the district's desire for a three-year contract. The union then went on the offensive and sent a report to the state arbiter claiming that the district could afford the demands of the union without state funds. UTLA President Johnson blamed school board politics for the protracted contract wrangling. The district again tried to avert a strike

²⁷ Woo, "L.A. Teacher Strike," *LAT*, May 9 1989.

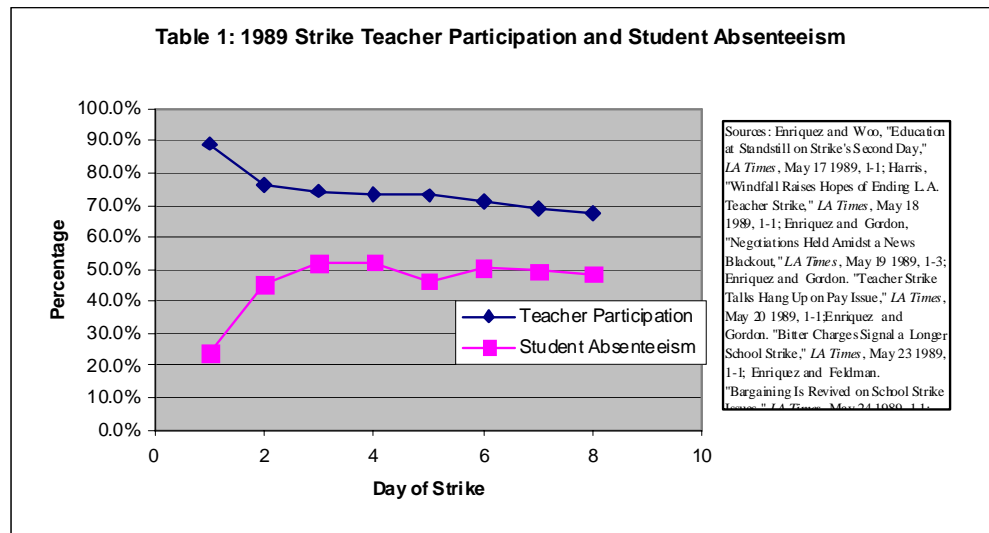
²⁸ Woo, "Teachers, Schools Move Strike Plans Into Higher Gear," *LAT*, May 10 1989. UTLA did, however, spend tens of thousands of dollars in the school board races in support of Korenstein and Slavkin.

²⁹ Enriquez & Gordon. "Pressure Mounts to Avert Strike by L.A. Teachers," *LAT*, May 13 1989.

by threatening teachers. This time they said that they would force striking teachers to pay their own insurance premiums. Fortunately for teachers, the union's threat of a lawsuit forced the district to drop that tactic. There seemed to be no way to avoid the impending strike.³⁰

The Strike Begins

The first day of the strike dawned to find LAUSD frantic to find people to place in classrooms and UTLA holding eight rallies. The strike was seen to have "crippled" the district and to have sent schools into "an atmosphere of high emotion and confusion." This was due to the large numbers of teachers and other union staff who decided to walk the picket lines (see Table 1). The union was now demanding a 10% retroactive raise for the current year, 5.5% to 9% the next year, and 8% for the year after that. In response, the board announced that it was looking to cut the budget by \$120 million for the next two years, but would not consider more cuts. Ironically, the difference between the two offers amounted to 2.5% or as much pay as teachers would lose in a week of striking.³¹



After several hours of negotiations Monday night, LAUSD and UTLA reported that they were closer to an agreement. In order to keep schools open, the district tried to

³⁰ Woo, "Personalities, Complexities; 2 Men and 3 Major Issues Snarl L.A. School Talks," *LAT*, May 14 1989.

³¹ Enriquez & Gordon. "L.A. Teachers Strike as Talks With District Fail," *LAT*, May 15 1989; & Gordon, "Half of Students in L.A. District Stay Home as 21,000 Teachers Walk Out," *LAT*, May 15 1989.

recruit more substitutes by raising the daily rate from \$137 (which was already \$39 above the normal rate) to \$169. The new sticking point seemed to be the union's desire to impose agency fees on teachers who were not union members. Yet the argument over how much the state surplus could be contributed to teacher raises was still at the forefront. The union raised its demand to 26% raise over three years, while the district contended that it could not promise anything without knowing how the Legislature would designate the state surplus.³²

The first week of the strike again saw victories and defeats for both sides. LAUSD officials were somewhat vindicated by the fact-finder's report which sided with the district and supported its offer. The union dismissed the head of the report as biased and took heart from the numbers of teachers who participated in the strike. Not only were the numbers high, but they were also relatively steady. Teacher participation was reflected in student absenteeism. Not only were attendance rates decreasing, older students had adopted the habit of leaving school whenever the mood struck them just like students in the 1970s strike. The district had reports and the law on their side, but the union was going strong.³³

The weekend saw a substantial change in negotiations. The district and the union had begun closed-door negotiations with the state mediator and had agreed to a news blackout. The two sides seemed to be stuck on a 2% difference when talks broke down Sunday. After three consecutive nights of negotiations tempers had flared up and were rumored to have gotten out of control. Unfortunately, the relationship between the two sides had broken down to the point where neither side was prepared to continue negotiations.³⁴


The Second Week

The second week of the strike was more intense than the first. While relatively few altercations occurred the first week, Monday of the second week saw UTLA Vice President Helen Bernstein and ten other union officials arrested outside district headquarters. There was also arguing in the *Los Angeles Times* over what had really been offered during weekend negotiations. The district claimed that they had offered the union a 24% raise over three years regardless of new state funds, but

³² Enriquez & Gordon, "Teachers' Strike Cripples Schools," *LAT*, May 16 1989; Enriquez & Woo, "Education at Standstill on Strike's Second Day," *LAT*, May 17 1989; & Harris, "Windfall Raises Hopes of Ending L.A. Teacher Strike," *LAT* May 18 1989.

³³ Harris, "Windfall," *LAT*, May 18 1989 & Enriquez & Gordon, "Negotiations Held Amidst a News Blackout," *LAT*, May 19 1989.

³⁴ Enriquez & Gordon, "Negotiations Held," *LAT*, May 19 1989; Enriquez & Gordon, "Teacher Strike Talks Hang Up on Pay Issue," *LAT*, May 20 1989; Enriquez & Gordon, "Settlement Still Eludes Bargainers," *LAT*, May 21 1989; & Enriquez & Gordon, "Angry Break in Talks Extends Teacher Strike," *LAT*, May 22 1989.



the union denied these assertions. While it is possible that the district floated the idea, the two parties very likely fell out over the union's insistence on the reinstatement of pay withheld due to the boycott.³⁵

After this fallout, the two sides had no plans to meet again. Their problems had caught the attention of Los Angeles state legislators, however. Assembly members and senators called both sides Monday, May 22nd, to have them fly up to Sacramento to meet. The meetings were informal and closed-door, but afterwards the two sides were still not talking. The issue continued to be the payment of withheld wages, which the state Court of Appeals denied as a reason to grant the union's request for relief.³⁶

Despite the behavior of the district and union leaders immediately after the Sacramento meeting, it was the turning point for negotiations. Talks held Wednesday lasted until early Thursday morning and those involved seemed optimistic. It was later revealed that a tentative agreement of 24% over three-years had been reached at 1 a.m. Thursday morning. Union members at a rally in the Sports Arena ratified the agreement later that afternoon. The majority of teachers "seemed relieved to see the strike end." Considering how chaotic the schools had become, it's safe to say that most of those involved were pleased that the strike was over.³⁷

Pluses and Minuses of the Settlement

The contract had positive and negative aspects for the teachers. Most seemed to be optimistic about the shared-decision councils that were to be set up at all schools. Elementary school teachers were also gratified to have their demands for the elimination of yard duty and an addition of 40 minutes of paid preparatory time were met. Not everyone was pleased with the new contract, though. UTLA's board of directors and quite a few teachers were not happy because it did not have a provision regarding the reimbursement of docked pay. The district did agree to restore May paychecks and allow teachers to make up lost pay through extra duty. However, if the strike had lasted any longer it would have ultimately been a monetary wash for the teachers.³⁸

³⁵ Enriquez & Gordon, "Angry Break," *LAT*, May 22 1989 & Enriquez & Gordon, "Bitter Charges Signal a Longer School Strike," *LAT*, May 23 1989.

³⁶ Enriquez & Gordon, "Bitter Charges," *LAT*, May 23 1989 & Enriquez & Feldman, "Bargaining Is Revived on School Strike Issues." *LAT*, May 24 1989.

³⁷ Enriquez & Gordon, "Talks Resume in Teachers' Strike; End May Be In Sight," *LAT*, May 25 1989 & Enriquez & Gordon, "Teachers, Board OK Pact; Classes Resume Today," *LAT*, May 26 1989.

³⁸ Enriquez & Gordon, "Teachers, Board OK Pact," *LAT*, May 26 1989.

The financial gains were still not as great as the contractual changes mainly because striking teachers lost 4.5% of their annual salaries during the strike. Yet these contractual alterations were met with great confidence. These changes, planning time, dropping of yard duty, and school-decision councils were symbols of respect that teachers felt were “denied them in the past.” Negotiations over contract provisions continued on over the summer and shared-decision making policies were fine-tuned. The result was that councils would at first have control over small matters, which would gradually be extended. These councils would consist of 50% teachers and the other half would be filled by parents, staff, and administrators. The council decisions would be based on a majority vote and therefore the teachers would have a greater say than any other contingency.³⁹

The local schools were not the only place that teachers and UTLA had gained increased influence that spring. The school board races, decided less than two weeks after the strike ended, proved to be a great victory for the union. Incumbent Julie Korenstein was reelected with union help and incumbent Alan Gershman was defeated by his union backed competitor, Mark Slavkin. UTLA and its members showed a remarkable commitment to change the system, both through negotiations and through political avenues.⁴⁰

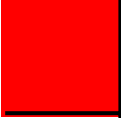
Unfortunately for the union, the tipping of the scales in board membership would not occur until July 1st. In the meantime, UTLA officials complained that the district was renegeing on key elements and language regarding shared-decision making. The union was also angered by the school board’s approval of salary increases equal to the new teachers contract for most administrators. This led Vice President Bernstein to speculate that the district was not “sincere in its desire for the councils” and many felt they were not serious about placing teachers and administrators on even footing.⁴¹

One of the four board members to approve of the administrators’ raise was Alan Gershman. It is hard to tell if he would have approved of this action if he had not been a lame duck member, but it certainly reinforced UTLA’s mission to have substantial influence with board members. After Slavkin gained Gershman’s seat a major change of position on a key union issue was made. For almost two decades the union had wanted to charge non-union teachers agency fees stating that these teachers were receiving services they were not paying for. District officials and the school board had been opposed to the idea since it had been proposed. With

³⁹ Enriquez & Gordon, “Acrimony, Unsolved Issues Remain After Teachers Strike,” *LAT*, May 28 1989 & Woo, “Success of Strike By L.A. Teachers Felt Across U.S.,” *LAT*, June 12 1989.

⁴⁰ Enriquez & Woo, “Teachers Give a Lesson in Power at the Polls,” *LAT*, June 8 1989 & Bernstein, “Union Nudges L.A. School Board Toward Power Sharing,” *LAT*, June 13 1989.

⁴¹ Woo, “Board Accused of Trying to Renege on Teacher Pact,” *LAT*, June 21 1989.



Slavkin's election, the union had four members sympathetic to them. This paved the way for the passage of agency fees in August.⁴²

One of the major questions that the 1989 strike raises is how could relations between a seemingly pro-teacher superintendent and a strong union deteriorated so quickly and so seriously. The answer seems to lie in the conflicting goals and mindsets of the two prominent leaders of the negotiations, Superintendent Britton and UTLA President Wayne Johnson. On the surface, both men wanted shared-decision making to be implemented in Los Angeles and both men wanted a fair contract. The difference was that Britton viewed himself as the head of the district, while Johnson saw the negotiations as one more way to solidify union power.

Britton did not comprehend that school politics of the Los Angeles Unified School District was no longer that of the "all-powerful superintendent" who was a benefactor of the comparatively weak teachers union. Instead, he faced a union president, Wayne Johnson, who fully comprehended his authority as the head of the largest liberal interest group in the school system. Johnson was able to play the media to his advantage at all times. He kept the union's image as that of the underdog fighting the system and continually placed Britton on the defensive.

The union came up with clever devices to pique the interest of the media and portray their struggle in a positive light. As early as January 1989, the union placed ads on buses and in newspapers attacking the disparity in pay scales for administrators and teachers. Newspapers picked up the story and discussed the two separate pay scales with the administrators' salaries seeming extravagant for a cash-strapped system. Teachers also expressed solidarity throughout the negotiations. They wore red union t-shirts, buttons that said "Make My Day. Dock My Pay," buttons that had Britton's face with a red slash through it and buttons that said "I Don't Want to Strike, But I Will."⁴³

LAUSD by contrast had no such luck in the media. They tried to explain that they relied on money managers for how the budget would be spent, but that did not make much of an impression. Instead, Britton came under increasing scrutiny for not being able to work the same kind of magic in Los Angeles that he had in Florida. He labored under the onus of having less teacher trust than the union president and a

⁴² Woo, "Board Accused," *LAT*, June 21 1989 & Woo, "Non-Union Teacher Fees Approved by School Board," *LAT*, August 8 1989.

⁴³ Connell, "Contract Talk," *LAT*, Jan. 19 1989; Woo, "L.A. Teachers See Pay Gap, Take Battle Positions in Contract Talks," *LAT*, Nov. 27 1988; Connell & Gordon, "Teachers, District," *LAT*, Jan. 31 1989; & Gordon, "The L.A. Teachers' Labor Dispute: Informal Talks Held as Strike Day Nears," *LAT*, May 11 1989.

school board that was reluctant to implement his ground breaking program of shared-decision making. The deck was stacked against him.⁴⁴

Britton's real problems started when he tried to take matters into his own hands. As negotiations progressed, the district was unsure what to do about the work actions of the teachers. When teachers refused to turn in fall mid-term grades, Britton reacted by docking teachers' pay. This drew some grumbling and created another roadblock for negotiators, but it seemed to be surmountable. Britton's next reaction to the teacher boycott was something else. In a misguided attempt to end the boycott and perhaps resolve negotiations, Britton threatened to withhold paychecks if teachers did not turn in semester grades. This not only infuriated teachers, it alienated them even further.⁴⁵

Britton's actions led to a spat in the media, which Johnson won. Britton accused the union of trying to by-pass him and get at the less cohesive school board. Meanwhile, Johnson was taking on bigger fish by advising State Superintendent Bill Honig to "stay in Sacramento and butt out of things that don't concern you." After the paycheck debacle was sorted out, the union went after Britton with a vengeance. They accused him of having a "union-busting, anti-teacher record" and published the "Taxpayers Petition to Terminate the Services of Superintendent Britton" in their newspaper. Whatever hopes the district had for an effective superintendent was ended when UTLA turned on him.⁴⁶

Britton was not their only target of intimidation. The union also went after those who did or could side with the district. As the potential for a strike increased, the union wished to make its position clear to possible district recruits. UTLA sent letters to surrounding colleges and universities with education programs to inform students that scabs would be "identified and tracked" and would have "extremely strained relations with union teachers." Days before the strike the union organized picketing outside district headquarters to harass potential substitute teachers. The union was intent on preventing the district from replacing its members.⁴⁷


These tactics only increased after the strike began. Johnson continued his portrayal of administrators as the "enemy" and pressed the issue in the newspapers. Gimmicks, like strike songs helped morale. Threats to a current board member, Rita Walters, pledging that the union "won't forget" and a rally in front of the district's

⁴⁴ Bernstein, "L.A. School Board-Teacher," *LAT*, Dec. 6 1988.

⁴⁵ Connell & Gordon, "Teachers, District," *LAT*, Jan. 31 1989.

⁴⁶ Connell, "Grade 'Crisis' Leaves Vague Tension in School," *LAT*, Feb. 9 1989; Connell, "Take Pay Offer," *LAT*, Feb 8 1989; & Staff, "Teachers Press Bid for Britton Ouster," *LAT*, Mar 16 1989.

⁴⁷ Enriquez, "District Accused," *LAT*, Apr. 22 1989 & Enriquez & Gordon, "Both Sides Say School Strike Appears Sure," *LAT*, May 14 1989.



prominent law firm reminded people that the union would take on anyone, but was still the underdog. All of these tactics kept up the assertion that UTLA was the David in this tale.⁴⁸

For his part, Britton did nothing to counter this portrayal. District insiders explained his actions as attempts to “outgun Wayne Johnson...instead of trying to win the hearts and minds of teachers.” He created his role in the media as the “heavy” and on occasion acted without securing the board’s goodwill first. His behavior not only alienated teachers, but public opinion as well. When Johnson accused him of lying about an offer, Britton was unable to effectively counter it. Johnson also utilized the underdog image to praise teachers after the negotiations ended by saying, “You have taken on a \$3.5-billion bureaucracy and you have whipped (district officials) all over town for a year and a half.” Tensions ran high, but while Johnson was purposefully heightening teachers’ emotions, Britton seemed to do it with the opposite intention.⁴⁹

The reasons for the escalations in talks can be attributed to various sources. The district had hired Britton thinking that he would be able to bring the Florida plan to Los Angeles thereby diffusing tensions that had built during the 1987 contract negotiations. Unfortunately, the members of the 1989 school board were not open to the shared-decision making model and undermined Britton’s authority. Another key factor was the growing influence of UTLA. The district was accused of wanting a walkout so that the union’s power would be reduced. Yet the district was not the only side that thought a walkout would be politically advantageous. It was surmised by district officials that UTLA leadership correctly gauged the attitude of its members and knew a strike would not only be successful, but would help teachers blow off pent up frustrations. Both sides gambled with a risky negotiation gambit and in terms of power, UTLA won.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Woo, “Personalities, Complexities,” *LAT*, May 14 1989; Staff, “Teachers’ Strike Notebook: When Union Chief Dreams, It’s About Pickets,” *LAT*, May 18 1989; Enriquez & Gordon, “Teacher Strike Talks,” *LAT*, May 20 1989; & Enriquez & Gordon, “Bitter Charges,” *LAT*, May 23 1989.

⁴⁹ Woo, “Personalities, Complexities,” *LAT*, May 14 1989; Enriquez & Gordon, “Bitter Charges,” *LAT*, May 23 1989; & Enriquez & Gordon, “Teachers, Board OK Pact,” *LAT*, May 26 1989.

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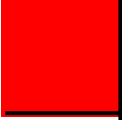
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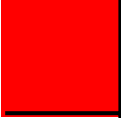
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