

United Teachers Los Angeles
Analysis of a Public Sector Collective Bargaining Agency

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Introduction

United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) is an important collective bargaining agency in the public sector in California. The union is very powerful and is quite politically active, as it services the employees of the public education system in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). Los Angeles is the second largest city in the United States, and LAUSD is also the second largest public school system in the nation. The organization holds an annual budget of over \$8 billion. Within the jurisdiction are over 750 schools which, like the rest of the city, are racially and culturally diverse in terms of the staff as well as the students. So, needless to say, the issues facing this union are quite complex, considering the nature, the size, the diversity and the significance of the agency that it represents.

Representing approximately 48,000 public employees, including educators, librarians, psychologists, social workers, counselors and nurses, UTLA is constantly active, attacking issues in multiple arenas. According to a statement on the website, the organization aims to make LAUSD a better place for its employees while also serving the students and families that rely on the school system to provide a decent education for all students. As Nigro, Nigro and Kellough state, unions are formed to “deliver human resources and to participate in the good faith administration and enforcement of the rules of the workplace as set forth in the contract... the union agrees to follow contractually established appeals procedures for resolving conflicts between management and workers” (pg. 70, 2007).

Affiliates of UTLA include the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers (which are both national labor unions that lobby congress and other federal agencies on behalf of their employees and concerns). UTLA is also affiliated with the California Teacher Association (California’s largest professional employee organization, and the state affiliate of the National Education Association), and California Federation of Teachers (the state affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers).

This study will provide a deeper look into this public sector agency, and will shed light into the issues that affect this organization. The historical context will provide a backdrop for the agency and its concerns and actions. The study will also engage in an investigation into external impacts that the agency has, while also looking into internal issues that are of concern. Interesting data and facts that pertain to UTLA will also be introduced and examined. Finally, the study will delve into collective bargaining issues and recent political involvement of the agency. At the end of the study, the reader will have a deeper understanding of UTLA, and of public collective bargaining agencies and labor unions in general.

Historical Context

Traditionally unions were formed to represent workers rights, primarily as they pertain to wages, hours and working conditions. Before UTLA was formed in 1970, two

rival groups, the American Federation of Teachers Local and the Association of Classroom Teachers of Los Angeles fought for the upper hand in performing the major collective bargaining functions. In total, more than a dozen separate agencies represented the employees of LAUSD. But, the rival groups merged in 1970, and the newly formed UTLA was reinforced by the need for employee representation during that time, which was capped by a teacher strike in the spring of that year.

The agency faced some hardships in its early days due largely to the fact that California lacked a collective bargaining law. The first strike that was handled by UTLA ended up as a nightmare. After 5 weeks on the picket lines and a labor agreement was formed, the courts declared that the terms of the agreement would not be accepted due to the fact that there were no laws in place to support the union's bargaining (United Teacher Los Angeles Web Site, 2009).

Shortly after this, UTLA began to push for adequate laws regarding the union's causes. 1975 saw the formation of the Rodda Act, a collective bargaining policy that would enable the union to form strikes, and engage in other necessary bargaining techniques. The Rodda Act replaced the Winton Act, which did not include adequate negotiation or representation policies. The new law sought to provide the same protection for teachers and faculty that was already provided to members of the private sector. The Rodda Act:

protects school employees in their right to form, join, and participate in employee organizations of their own choosing without interference, restraint, or coercion; it provides election machinery to determine an exclusive representation to negotiate for teachers or classified employees on wages, hours, and conditions of employment; and it requires the public school employer to negotiate with—and only with—the duly recognized or certified employee organization in an appropriate unit (Hinman, pg. 38).

This new law enabled UTLA to have a firmer grasp in the playing field to be able to properly represent the employees of LAUSD. And with the passage of Proposition 13, in 1978, which increased taxes for public school funding, the union would need that edge in order to become more powerful in state politics. In the past four decades, UTLA has fought for the interests of the classroom, which includes not only the interests of the employees, but of the students, as well. And although the fight is never easy, the groundwork laid in the 1970's has provided a firm foundation on which UTLA stands (Untied Teacher Los Angeles Web Site, 2009).

External Environment Impacts

UTLA has always aimed to be a strong support system for LAUSD. According to Jeffrey Pfeffer, "unions can be, and frequently are important advocates of change and can be helpful in communicating the need for change and in mobilizing support from the firm's people" (pg. 244-245). The fact is that the Los Angeles Unified School District has often been ridiculed for being a poor example of a public school system, with below averages test scores and graduation rates.

UTLA focuses on a wide variety of issues that go beyond fighting for teacher's salaries, and preventing layoffs. The external impact that the agency has is quite far-reaching. UTLA is active in many classroom causes including school safety issues, standardized testing policy, discipline policy, merit pay for teachers, charter schools, and class size. Many of these issues have a direct impact on student performance. For example, with class size, "fewer students means more individual attention from the teacher, calmer classrooms, and consequently, higher test scores" (United Teacher Los Angeles Web Site, 2009).

With support from agencies such as UTLA, progress has been made in recent years due to the surging efforts of the faculties, administrators, students, and supporting agencies such as UTLA. According to a statement made by Superintendent Ramon C. Cortines on the LAUSD website, the organization has made significant advances in 2009. Test scores rose 13 points on California's Academic Performance Index (API) in 2009, marking the second straight year with a double-digit improvement in performance (LAUSD website, 2009). One aspect of UTLA that makes the agency successful is the fact that they have not lost sight of the big picture. They realize that the staff of LAUSD aims to educate and support the children in school system, and UTLA holds that as one of their primary aims as well, providing several scholarships that reward students for exemplary work.

Internal Organizational Issues

Like any other agencies, UTLA has internal issues and concerns that can affect its ability to make an impact on the external environment. The 350 member House of Representatives oversees many of the internal issues that face UTLA. All UTLA policy is set by members directly or through the representatives who meet eight times annually to discuss and vote on important decisions that will impact the organization and its future direction. The agency also consists of a 50-member Board of Directors, which also meets eight times a year, and seven officers within that Board, who govern the daily operations. The Board consists of three to four members from eight geographical regions, and one representative from nine occupational divisions. UTLA has formed a constitution and by-laws which also play a key role in terms of the manner in which the organization is run (United Teacher Los Angeles Web Site, 2009)..

Six departments come together to form UTLA: (1) The Professional Staff, which helps organize individual school sites, (2) Information Services and Technology, servicing all hardware, software and networking issues, (3) The Communications Department, which is in charge of public relations, newsletters, and advertising, (4) The Support Services Department, providing secretarial and administrative staffing in the UTLA offices, (5) The Government Relations Department, conducting all political related activity, such as lobbying government offices and elected officials, (6) The Business Office, which is in charge of accounting and bookkeeping functions. (United Teacher Los Angeles Web Site, 2009).

In order to limit the number of negative internal issues, UTLA must maintain a competent staff. As Dennis Dresang points out, “failure to manage human resources effectively risks low productivity and a lack of accountability to the public” (1999, pg. 3). In this case, that translates into a lack of accountability to the employees of LAUSD. For this reason, UTLA aims to provide a positive working environment through a spirit of teamwork, and by offering a very attractive benefits package.

Organizational Data

UTLA represents nearly 48,000 members, who are employees of LAUSD through a 350 member House of Representatives, a 50 member Board of Directors, 33 Standing Committees, and seven citywide officers. UTLA contains six departments, as laid out in the previous section of the study. The agency is divided into 8 geographic regions based on the locations of the school sites: North, South, East, West, Central, Harbor, Valley East, and Valley West. LAUSD encompasses an area of 710 square miles, which includes several surrounding cities, as well as portions of other cities (LAUSD Website, 2009). The members of UTLA are spread over the districts more than 750 schools (UTLA Website, 2009).

Since UTLA services the employees of LAUSD, much of the important data pertaining to the agency is related to the school district. During the current economic recession, the public school system has not been spared from hardships and cutbacks. The Los Angeles Board of Education recently approved a new budget that could cut back over \$1.6 Billion over the next three years. LAUSD Superintendent Ramon Cortines is tasked with balancing a budget that is nearly half a billion dollars in deficit (Granda, 2009). 43.6 percent of LAUSD expenditures are for certified salaries, and 13.7 percent are for classified salaries. Another 18.3 percent are set aside for employee benefits (LAUSD Website, 2009). These numbers are very relevant for UTLA, as the organization must continue to fight for the salaries and benefits that the employees of LAUSD deserve.

Bargaining Issues

It is clear that UTLA has a wide variety of issues that affect the employees which it represents. Many of the bargaining issues that the agency deals with are related to budget and financial issues. The “Cut Waste Not Teachers” initiative was formulated by the agency in January 2009; it provides five ways that LAUSD can cut costs without minimizing the number of educators in the classroom: (1) Canceling contracts with outside contracts, which UTLA proposes will save approximately \$845 million over the next three years, (2) Put an end to required student assessments, which could save about \$150 million annually, (3) Closing local mini-districts, which would save \$60 million a year, (4) Lowering the number of administrators instead of cutting teachers (5) Refurbishing old schools instead of opening new ones, which could save approximately \$20 million annually (UTLA Website, 2009).

UTLA has also recently been involved in a court battle with LAUSD over a collective bargaining issue pertaining to charter schools. According to the text on UTLA v. LAUSD, the agency alleges that the school district violated terms of the collective bargaining agreement regarding the conversion of Locke High School. UTLA originally filed a grievance against LA Unified that was denied soon after, alleging that the complete charter was not presented to employees, and the full conditions were not explained and presented to the union. Furthermore, the grievance alleged that adequate time was not given for the community and employees to analyze and have a dialogue about the proposal. In the most recent case, UTLA appealed a decision that denied its petition to compel arbitration in this dispute. The appellate court ruled that the previous decision would be reversed, and the petition to compel arbitration would be allowed (Turner, 2009).

Perhaps the most important bargaining issue currently for the union involves the LAUSD school board vote scheduled to take place on December 8, 2009. UTLA has developed a bulletin entitled "We're Mad as Hell and We're Fighting Back!" The flyer states that the school district is in danger of being run by outside operators who will decrease the quality of education for students. Furthermore, UTLA is fighting for the proposed salary cuts which could result in good teachers fleeing for higher paying jobs in other districts, and could result in a further decrease in the quality of education. UTLA is encouraging its members and supporters to protest the changes by picketing outside the LAUSD office on the day that they Board is supposed to vote on the budget. The flyer ends with a statement that sums up the bargaining issues of the union: "Fight for your students. Fight for your profession" (UTLA website, 2009).

Political Impact and Involvement

Because of the scope of the issues and because of the size of LAUSD, UTLA must be involved politically in order to achieve any of its goals. UTLA runs the Political Action Council for Educators. As of June 2009, PACE had a balance of \$919,075 in contributions according to Electiontrack.com (2009). Another political web source, Maplight.org shows campaign contributions to Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa totaling over \$250,000 in 2005 (2009).

UTLA is also involved in protesting at the state and local government levels, lobbying the causes. They have recently organized picketing to oppose both state and local budget cuts. The union also makes its voice heard on various political levels through its actions. The union often successfully raises awareness about issues in LAUSD, that otherwise could have gone unnoticed. Last year, the Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) agreed with UTLA that the school district had violated state law by canceling buy-back days (UTLA Website, 2009).

Historically, UTLA has never been afraid to tackle issues in the political arena, beginning with the formation of the statewide collective bargaining agreement that became the Rodda act of 1975, which was signed by Governor Jerry Brown. More recently, in the 1990's UTLA helped defeat a political agenda which attempted to break

up LAUSD through the use of school vouchers. UTLA will continue to support candidates, initiatives and policies that seek to improve classroom conditions, and improve the public education system in Los Angeles and California (UTLA website, 2009).

Conclusion

In conclusion, UTLA performs a very important function for employees of the public school system in Los Angeles. Few would argue that the noble educators and faculty members that seek to mentor and teach young students deserve a union that can be successful in fighting for their rights in the workplace. UTLA has proven to be effective on many different levels, since being formed in 1970.

Whether the union is arranging strikes and picket lines, or whether they are lobbying for policy change, or informing the public or other institutions on the actions of LAUSD, UTLA is constantly representing the interests of its members. In advocating for issues such as wages, hours and work conditions for the employees of LAUSD, the agency is also advocating for the best interests of the students. After all, if the teachers in the classroom are happy, they are more likely to be successful and effective in their jobs as educators. In turn, society as a whole is positively impacted by the work of UTLA, as an increase in the quality of public education translates into an increase in quality of life for us all.

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