

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lessons From the Picket Line

Noriko Nakada · Wednesday, January 23rd, 2019

On the Sunday before the strike, all of the signs were stapled to their pickets and packed into the car. The kids were in bed asleep and my partner and I had our red shirts, rain boots, and umbrellas laid out and ready to go.

We are both UTLA members and we had been bracing for this day since December 19th when our winter break was interrupted by the setting of the strike date. Over the holidays we talked with friends and family about the strike and made plans for our kids during the work stoppage. Then, we worried and waited. After the new year, we went back to work at our school sites, and the strike was postponed, and maybe wouldn't even happen, but that Sunday night, when the strike was definitely happening, new levels of anxiety rose to the surface: Would all of the teachers who had committed to strike show up to the picket? Would the lines hold? Would the community support us?

We went to sleep, and then the rain began. This is Los Angeles. Los Angeles doesn't do rain. Traffic slows to a crawl as sigalerts flash across the city like lightning. Kids don't go to recess in the rain. Outdoor events are cancelled. How would the rain change the strike?

That Monday morning, my partner and I loaded our kids up before dawn and made our way to our different schools' picket lines in the wet darkness. This was not a drizzle or a Southern California flash of wet. It was significant rain that didn't stop, but when my daughter and I arrived at my school site, they were there: the early-morning crew had set up, just as we'd rehearsed, and parents had already brought boxes of donuts and coffee.



The rain came down as we unloaded picket signs and umbrellas. The wind blew my roster for attendance into the wet and soon we were all drenched. My daughter wanted to hide out in the car. The police officer wanted me to move my car for drop off. And soon it was seven o'clock and the LA Teacher strike began. In the dark, in torrential rains, on more than a thousand of campuses all over our city, signs began to disintegrate as chants of *UTLA!* and *Whose schools? Our schools! What kind of schools? Public schools!* were carried away on the wind. Then, from our picket lines, striking teachers and nurses, librarians and psychologists, made their way onto trains and into carpools that brought tens of thousands downtown.



My train filled with teachers and community as we trekked to the center of the city. Chant leaders led us all in cheers of: *Teachers united, we'll never be divided*, and when a trumpet player asked, we sang “When the Teachers Go Marching In” to his sweet accompaniment. When the train doors opened, we rose from the tunnel and into Grand Park where tens of thousands waited, and it was still raining.

I was a teacher on strike, but I was also a mom, and I quickly found out that holding an umbrella, my TEACHER ON STRIKE FOR MY STUDENTS picket sign, and the hand of my small child was nearly impossible. My little one learned to stay close under my umbrella instead of holding her own; that way she could keep her hands in her pockets.

We quickly found the teachers from my school, but my girl needed to use the restroom. It was the first day of the strike. We didn't know yet how critical it would become to use the bathroom before entering crowds in the tens of thousands. And while in that crowd, with all of those teachers, all of those women, my little one saw her maestra, her teacher from kindergarten who is the biggest celebrity in her small world. And then, after that long wait for the bathroom, my girl saw her first grade teacher, a sub who is on the line with the rest of us after taking over for a giant of a teacher who had to leave the classroom to battle cancer. What were the chances that in a crowd of 50,000 people, my daughter would see both of her teachers?



After those lucky encounters, my daughter and I walked together, shoulder to shoulder with UTLA and a sea of community support through LA's rain-soaked streets. We chanted for teachers, and nurses, librarians and counselors. She was tired and hungry, but she is the daughter of teachers, and she didn't complain. She walked with me in the wet, in her red puffy vest and pink headband and by the time we reached the end of the march we knew, being on strike was hard work.

The rain kept up for the rest of the week, so we found childcare for my little one for the duration of the strike. She joined her teachers on the line one day, and asked every day, “When is the strike over?” She, like so many of us in Los Angeles, want to know this, but change comes slowly, and we just don't know yet.

But what she does know is this: a large group of people can come together to work for change, and when they do, the weather doesn't matter. Being cold and wet and hungry doesn't matter as much when you are standing with those you love. She knows that when she's not at school, she still learns, but not in the same way. There are observations to make and questions to ask, but there won't be a quiz, and the questions won't come easily. But the lessons we all started this week are the same ones we are carrying into next week, and we will continue to learn from these days forever.

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