

Growing Strike Wave Engulfs Los Angeles

by Marianna Wertz

Organizers with the LaRouche political movement intervened in the growing strike wave in Los Angeles in the second week in October, presenting Lyndon LaRouche's solutions to the impending financial crisis to meetings of angry workers who are fighting for a living wage in a "New Economy" characterized by out-of-control financial speculation.

The months-long strike by 60,000 actors, and the 24-day-old strike by 4,400 United Transportation Union (UTU) county bus and rail operators, have now been joined by 47,000 striking Los Angeles County workers, who took to the streets for a one-day strike on Oct. 11 to "shut the county down." The county workers, represented by the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 660, had been staging "rolling strikes" for the previous week, with different sectors, from nurses to clerks, striking one day at a time. Los Angeles' 40,000 teachers have also just authorized strike action.

On Oct. 10, leaders of the UTU and SEIU strikes spoke with *New Federalist*, the weekly newspaper of the LaRouche movement, who made clear that they are in it for the long haul, although they are facing difficult situations. Goldy Norton, spokesperson for the bus and rail strikers and a member of the union's bargaining team, said, "As long as our members can hold out, if they can hold out, they're going to win. But, it's tough. It's tough for them to exist."

Norton and Alejandro Stephens, president of SEIU Local 660, pointed out that the strikes are aimed at winning "my fair share" in "the greatest era of economic well-being in years" — or at least, that's how some of their members *perceive* the bubble economy. LaRouche's organizers took on this illusion at a strike rally on Sept. 30. With about 5,000 strikers from the bus drivers, teachers, county workers, and actors, the organizers, with signs reading "Gore and Bush, Dumb and Dumber — They Need Each Other" and "Oil Price Rise Kills, LaRouche Says Governments Must Cut Out Wall Street," peppered the responsive crowd with literature.

At an SEIU rally of about 3,000 striking county workers on Oct. 3, the theme of the speakers was also: "We are in the greatest boom in years," and "we want our fair share." When LaRouche organizers started speaking with strikers about the coming financial blowout, many of them agreed, and asked for literature.

Later in the week, a LaRouche organizer took the microphone at a strike meeting, where the same "progress and pros-

perity" line was being mouthed. She told the strikers that there is no real prosperity for the vast majority of American workers, and that we are heading into a huge financial blowout, with the oil price rise being only the leading edge of disaster. Many of the unionists were paying rapt attention to what LaRouche has proposed as a solution to this crisis.

A Livable Wage

One of the SEIU strikers attending the LaRouche movement's town hall meeting on Oct. 7 explained that the strike is really about the need for a livable wage. Indeed, most county workers are part of what LaRouche has called the 80% of the population that is not sharing in the instant cash that came with the speculative economy — and which is now fast disappearing, along with the Nasdaq.

On Oct. 10, the *Los Angeles Times* profiled three fairly typical county workers, who are earning so little that they can barely afford housing or other essentials, because of the real inflation in living costs over the last few years.

A health department worker who makes \$47,000 a year lives in a studio apartment and drives a five-year-old car, because "Los Angeles is an expensive town." A clerk had to drop out of night school so she can pay for her son's college tuition and the \$120 monthly parking costs for her job. A welfare-to-work graduate, who now works as a clerk in the welfare office, makes only \$300 per month more than the highest welfare check; she has \$50 left after expenses, to get her and her two children through the week. And these people have full-time jobs!

The leading issue in the bus and rail strike is the attempt by the County Board of Supervisors to gut work rules and cut overtime by 15%, thereby destroying the drivers' middle-class wage levels. In the county workers' strike, Stephens pointed to the many sacrifices which his union members have made since 1990, when a wage freeze was imposed. The SEIU wants a 15.5% raise over three years, which is just enough to bring members' pay back to the inflation-adjusted 1990 level, but the Supervisors are offering only 9%. The Supervisors are also attempting to introduce a \$10-15 health benefits co-pay for medical visits, which the union rejects.

Another sticking point for both unions is the \$15,000 pay raise which the Supervisors were recently granted by Gov. Gray Davis (D); this will raise their salaries to \$133,000 when it takes effect next year. These kinds of disparities — the result of the bubble economy — make the difficult task of raising a family and making ends meet that most working people confront, all the more bitter.

The other source of bitterness is the waning support for the strikers among the even more down-and-out Los Angeles population of bus riders and recipients of county services. As Norton said, "Basically the public's concern is, 'I don't give a damn about you or the other people. I want my bus.'"

The only solution to this lies in adopting LaRouche's fight for a real solution to the global economic crisis.