

When We Fight **Conversation Guide**



We often watch films alone. Even in movie theaters we have a mostly solitary experience. Don't get us wrong, that's fun too, and a perfectly fine way to watch this film. However if you're holding this conversation guide, you're probably looking for a more collective experience.

In that spirit, we invite you to start the conversation before viewing *When We Fight* with the Pre-Screening Conversation guide below, and to continue the conversation after the film with the Post-Screening Conversation, and perhaps a suggested article or book. If you're able, we recommend bringing snacks or asking attendees to bring snacks to share. Now without further ado, the feature presentation.

-The Filmmakers



SETTING THE STAGE

United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) is the second-largest local educators' union in the country with 34,000 members representing Early Education to Adult Education Teachers, Health and Human Service Professionals, and Substitutes. In 2014, the newly elected leadership of UTLA set out to transform and focus the union on “The Schools LA Students Deserve” through systematic organizing. It took five years to build the union infrastructure and foundation, including thousands of conversations on racial, social, and educational justice issues, to carry out a successful strike around the issues that members cared about most. Watch as one of the largest educator strikes in modern U.S. history unfolds in real-time, highlighting the stories and leadership of some of the women who led it, from union leaders to classroom teachers. Use this guide to plan a facilitated viewing of the 33-minute documentary

Tips for a successful screening: Consider your audience and your local organizing goals. Review the attached discussion guide beforehand. Consider providing the guide to your attendees at or in advance of the screening, or use it as an inspiration to create your own.

Accessibility: English Closed Captions and an Audio Description version of the film are available. Spanish Closed Captions and subtitles are available, and we are working on adding subtitles in other languages, please contact us via our website or email if you have accessibility questions or needs.

Email: whenwefightmovie@gmail.com



PRE-SCREENING CONVERSATION

Before viewing *When We Fight*, either in small groups or as a room as a whole, discuss and reflect on what each of you know and think about unions, strikes, the working conditions of U.S. public school teachers and the learning conditions of students.

What is a union? What is a strike? Write down a few words that come to mind when you think of these words, and then discuss.

As a group, brainstorm a few recent or historical strikes. Do you think these were successes, failures, or mixed results?

What do you think is necessary for a strike to succeed? What do you think are the challenges to striking?

What are the working and learning conditions in public schools where you live? For example, what do you think of the class sizes, staffing, salaries, resources for mental and physical health of students, etc.? How would you rate the quality and equity of education students receive?

What is your relationship to the film? Where are you watching it and why?



POST-SCREENING CONVERSATION

What surprised you the most while watching the film?

Were the learning and working conditions in L.A. public schools similar or different to what you expected?

Was the strike similar to or different than what you expected?

How do you think a strike impacts further union/community wins?

How do you think the strike impacted the teachers, students and parents? How do you think a successful strike can change the dynamics inside a school, workplace, or union? How do you think it would have impacted you if you were living in L.A. at the time?

Do you have time for a longer conversation, or did a particular part of the film resonate most strongly with you? If so, here are questions for each of the five parts of the film.

QUESTIONS BY PARTS

Raising Expectations

What are some of the issues that teachers in L.A. are facing in their schools?

What tactics do we see UTLA organizers use to raise expectations among membership?

What tools do we see UTLA members and leaders use to measure the level of commitment in the union?

As privatization and the charter school industry exert increasing influence and pressure on our education system, what expectations and demands do we have for our school boards and local/state governments?

It Takes a City

How and why do parents, students, and community organizations get involved in a strike?

What are some reasons parents, students or community may oppose a strike? What role do school district leaders play in the dynamic between teachers, the union, parents, students and community?

How can the labor movement, particularly teachers, fight for the needs of students, parents, and their broader community?

What does it mean to be a union committed to social justice?

What does it mean to you that women are at the forefront of this strike? When unions and families work together to advance their needs, what is revealed about the relationship between work life and home life?

Strike!

How did you feel seeing the teachers out on strike? How do you think you would feel on strike?

How do the superintendent and anti-public school narratives frame the strike and the teachers? How do teachers, parents and students combat these narratives and fuel solidarity?

What is the point of picketing and blocking substitutes and others from entering the schools?

What are the laws about picketing where you live? What do you think the laws are about picketing in L.A.?

Hold the Line

Was the strike longer or shorter than you expected it to be? Why do you think that is? What contributed to it being the length it was?

What is the relationship between the bargaining team and the picket lines?

If you were on strike, what would you say to a coworker who is feeling financial or other pressure to go back to work?

Democracy is an Endless Meeting

The contract didn't include everything the teachers demanded, and some members were disappointed. What factors does a bargaining team have to take into consideration when negotiating a contract while on strike? What are the dynamics between a bargaining team and the members out on the lines?

What would the pros and cons have been if a majority of the teachers voted to reject the contract, and continue to strike?

How would you determine whether to accept a less-than perfect contract? How would you explain this to your co-workers?

How would you continue the organizing with your co-workers and/or community after the strike?



After the strike, the film team stopped film (and started editing). However lots of changes took place in L.A., UTLA and LAUSD. During the 2020-2021 wave of the Black Lives Matter movement, students led a campaign and succeeded in reducing the school police budget and increasing funds for Black student achievement. The COVID-19 pandemic closed schools and disrupted plans to reduce standardized testing and to hire more school nurses and school staff. UTLA members elected the first Black/Latinx female President to lead UTLA, Cecily Myart-Cruz. Myart-Cruz was one of the union Vice Presidents at the time of the 2019 strike. Los Angelenos elected Dr. Rocio Rivas, one of the parent leaders in the film, to the LA School Board. The union expanded their contract bargaining team from 15 to 85 members. In 2023, 30,000 custodians, bus drivers and other school staff represented by SEIU 99 went on a 3-day Unfair Labor Practice strike. In a rare event, UTLA members conducted what is sometimes known as a "sympathy strike" or "solidarity strike", and refused to cross their co-workers picket lines. SEIU 99 members won a 30% wage increase and increased health benefits, among many other contract terms, and a few months later UTLA and LAUSD reached a new contract without a strike, that included class size reductions and salary increases for teachers, nurses, and more.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Articles:

[“The Resurgence of Teachers Unions”](#) - The Forge

[“LA Teachers Run on a Bigger Vision”](#) - Labor Notes

[“Teachers’ Unions are Demanding Police-Free Schools”](#) - Jacobin

[“The Union Has to be about Social Justice”](#) - Jacobin

[“The Strike as the Ultimate Structure Test”](#) - Catalyst

[“What Message Does a ‘Vote No’ Campaign Send”](#) - Labor Notes

[“When You’re Winning in the Streets, Don’t Lose at the Bargaining Table”](#) - Labor Notes

“The Teachers’ Strikes of 2018-2019: A Gendered Rebellion”, by Gillian Russom, in *Strike for the Common Good*, edited by Rebecca Kolins Givan and Amy Schragger Lang.

Books: *Secrets of a Successful Organizer*, *It Started in Wisconsin*, *Strike for the Common Good*, and more.

Check out <https://www.whenwefightmovie.com/bookstore> for more book ideas. P.S. Using this bookshop link donates a small portion of your purchase toward supporting the film and its continued release.

Notes: The pre-viewing questions section of this conversation guide was inspired by the study guide for *United in Anger: A History of ACT UP*. To find out more, check out: <https://www.unitedinanger.com/study-guide>

For a digital version of this guide and more, check out: www.whenwefightfilm.org/extras

Did you have a great screening? If so, please tag us on Instagram! [@whenwefightmovie](https://www.instagram.com/whenwefightmovie), and/or email us photos we can post. You can email us at whenwefightmovie@gmail.com. Thank you!