

California State University faculty union votes to authorize strike

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The California Faculty Association (CFA) union conducted a vote to authorize a strike in October after rejecting an offer for a 2 percent wage raise. More than 94 percent of the members who voted approved strike action in the event negotiations with the chancellor's office break down.

The CFA represents approximately 25,000 university employees, including professors, counselors, and sports coaches in 23 California State University (CSU) campuses—the largest state school system in the United States with approximately 460,000 students.

The strike authorization vote is the fourth the union has held in the past eight years.

The union is demanding a 5 percent general salary increase (GSI) with the possibility of additional increases for specific employee categories that are currently substantially underpaid. The CSU administration has responded with a counteroffer of 2 percent GSI.

The head of the CFA's bargaining team Kevin Wehr has stated, "We do not want to strike, but we will if we're forced to." All 23 California State University campuses participated in the vote and have named the struggle "The Fight for Five" campaign.

There is strong discontent amongst the faculty after years of minimal pay raises that failed to compensate for inflation, or no raises at all, and the recent imposition of furloughs.

Predictably, the position of the CSU administration is that a strike by the faculty would harm the students. The administration also stated that a two percent increase is a compromise as they manage an annual funding gap of \$70 million.

The proposed 10-day strike would occur in early 2016 according to CFA union president Jennifer Eagan.

The union membership authorized strike action in

2007, 2011 and 2012. However in 2007 and 2012 strikes were avoided when the CSU administration and the union reached an agreement.

One-day strikes were held in 2011 at CSU Dominguez Hills and at CSU East Bay. The limited actions were harmless stunts that had no effect on contract negotiations and were called for frustrated faculty members to blow off steam.

Despite the call of the union to authorize a strike for better pay, the CFA's past behavior indicates that it has no intention of conducting a serious struggle to defend the wages of its members, or public education more broadly.

In 2012, when the CFA membership last voted for strike action, CFA representative Liza Cara at San Jose State University stated, "Essentially, we'd like to prevent a strike. We feel the strike vote will show that we're serious in our intent, in our vision and that we see that public education is really seriously in trouble."

In 2010, confronted with a student movement in defense of public education, the CFA actively worked to channel students and faculty behind the Democratic Party, supporting the campaign of current California Governor Jerry Brown, who subsequently carried out new rounds of attacks and austerity measures targeting public education.

In the throes of the 2009 budget crisis, the CFA agreed to and actively promoted state-mandated furloughs, which resulted in its members sustaining a wage reduction of approximately 10% during that academic year. That money has never been returned.

San Jose State University CFA chapter vice president Richard Francisco said at the time, "What we did was we took a voluntary cut in pay. Furlough days were not forced—we volunteered in order to help—in essence, to save the CSU so that the Chancellor's Office could

figure out ways to keep us afloat without having to cut personnel.”

With the exception of a paltry 1.65% GSI last year (with some relatively underpaid sections of the faculty receiving a slightly larger amount through equity increases), CSU employees have not received a wage increase since 2007.

The CFA has thus proved incapable of defending the interests of its membership. Rather, it seeks to work as labor management for the CSU administration imposing reactionary measures on faculty members, while at the same time providing political cover for the Democratic Party.

A currently proposed two-day rolling strikes across the 23 campuses, if carried out, would in essence be a symbolic gesture by the CFA which has no intention to carry out a serious struggle to advance the interests of faculty members.

The CFA and the CSU administration are in the midst of a fact-finding process that began on November 23. Afterwards both organizations will then have 10 days to decide on a settlement. Finally, the CSU chancellor will propose a final offer to the CFA. Should the union reject the proposal offered by the Chancellor, they would be legally allowed to strike.

Nearly one thousand members of the CFA recently held a march at the CSU Chancellor’s Office in Long Beach. The campaign launched by the union instructed the membership to wear red t-shirts with the words, “I Don’t Want to Strike But I Will.” The membership was told that their presence would create pressure on the Trustees to grant the CFA’s demands.

The Democratic Party, with the financial backing and support of unions like the CFA, has controlled California politics for decades. Their role in carrying out the assault on public education, including imposing the onerous conditions which CFA employees have been subjected to for the last eight years went unmentioned at the rally. Moreover various Democratic politicians, including California Assembly Speaker-Elect, Anthony Rendon, addressed the rally and offered “support” to the workers.

In fact, the CSU Board of Trustees consists of several Democratic Party officials, including Governor Jerry Brown, who serves as its president, the Lieutenant Governor, the Speaker of the Assembly, and the State Superintendent of Public Instruction, as well as others

who have been directly appointed by the Governor.

WSWS reporters interviewed several workers who participated in the protest.

When asked on her thoughts about the current contract, Melinda Keller, a mechanical engineering professor from California Polytechnic at San Luis Obispo, stated, “I’ve had no raise since 2007 other than 2% last year. I’m making 50% less than what I was making in the private sector. The proposed 5% does not even catch up for this year, let alone making up for the past years. It’s very disappointing.”

Jeremy Shellhase, librarian for California State Humboldt, characterized his working condition over the previous ten years as “starved.” He said, “The library is starved for resources and my salary has not changed, plus I was furloughed in 2009, resulting in a 20% cut.” He also indicated that he did not support the Democratic Party and voted for the Greens in the last presidential election.

Shellhase agreed that the one-day strike in 2011 that took place on just two campuses was nothing more than a stunt. He stated, “I hope that the union calls for a strike on all the campuses. But I am not very confident that it will happen.”

When asked about the union’s support for the Democratic Party, stated, “It has been grim.” Noting the enormous levels of social inequality in the state, he added, “Calling for the unity of the working class to fight for education makes sense to me. There is tremendous wealth in California and a huge poverty rate. This is a bad distribution of income.”



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