

# Sacramento, California educators strike over short staffing and lack of COVID safety measures

**David Brown**  
23 March 2022

*All educators in Sacramento and others are urged to attend the West Coast Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee meeting at noon this Saturday, March 26.*

On Wednesday, 4,900 teachers and support staff in Sacramento City Unified School District (SCUSD) began an open-ended strike over chronic short staffing and COVID safety. Teachers in California's state capital have been working under an expired contract since June 2019, before the beginning of the pandemic. The continuing health crisis has only exacerbated longstanding issues of low pay, underfunding and short staffing in the 40,000-student district.

The chronic lack of substitute teachers, coupled with the decision to resume in-person instruction during the pandemic, has meant many students have repeatedly come to school only to find that there is no one to teach them. Students without teachers are kept in large groups in communal areas like the cafeteria or added to classes that do have teachers. Both methods make a complete mockery of any attempt to limit the spread of COVID-19. According to the Sacramento City Teachers Association (SCTA), on average a quarter of the district's students are without a permanent teacher, and 3,000 do not even have a substitute.

The lack of teaching staff also impacts the district's independent study program that was put into place as a remote option. Families could theoretically opt-in as a way of continuing distance learning and avoid risk of infection in school, but due to a lack of teaching staff, an estimated 600 students remain on waiting lists.

On March 10, the 2,800 teachers and certificated staff in the SCTA and 2,100 non-credentialed staff in Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1021, voted by more than 90 percent to authorize an indefinite strike.

Runaway inflation in California, exacerbated by the war

crisis, and coupled with the ongoing dangers of the pandemic, has sparked opposition among educators and workers throughout the state as working conditions become increasingly untenable, and the cost of living unaffordable. The rate of inflation has risen to 7.9 percent nationally. Gas prices in California are the highest in the nation, with Los Angeles the first major US city to hit \$6 a gallon.

Over 47,000 grocery workers in southern California are currently voting to authorize a strike in opposition to low pay and poor working conditions. Workers overwhelmingly oppose the recent offer of a 60-cent raise. Nearly 600 oil workers at Chevron's Richmond refinery in the San Francisco Bay Area struck Monday demanding higher wages, shorter work hours, and better health and safety protections.

In Contra Costa, California, teachers in the Mt. Diablo Unified School district recently voted to authorize a strike vote after working without a contract this whole school year. Facing a 6.6 percent decline in enrollment and a \$22 million budget deficit, the district has offered teachers a 7 percent raise over three years plus a 3 percent bonus. This is predicated on a reduction in positions by the district. The cuts would include 22 elementary teachers, five secondary teachers, three librarians and 14 instructional aides, and save the district over \$10 million. Layoff notices were already issued to 99 Mt. Diablo school employees in early March. The Mt. Diablo Education Association is threatening to strike for a bigger raise.

In Sonoma County, California, teachers in the Cotati-Rohnert Park school district recently ended a six-day strike between March 10 and 17. An estimated 300 teachers struck for higher pay and better working conditions. To end the strike, the Rohnert Park Cotati Educators Association agreed to austerity measures in

exchange for a minimal pay increase. Teachers were offered a three-year deal with a staggered pay raise of 6 percent this year, 5 percent next year and 3.6 percent in 2023-2024. Also offered was a \$2,000 off-schedule bonus this year and a \$1,000 bonus next year. The deal ultimately amounts to a cut in real pay.

Significantly, a GoFundMe page was established for the Cotati-Rohnert Park striking teachers after the strike. According to an educator on Facebook, teachers lost about a million dollars in wages during the walkout and did not receive any strike pay from the union. In shameless fashion, the Sacramento City Teachers Association, a local affiliate of the California Teachers Association (CTA) and the National Education Association (NEA), has preemptively put up a strike donation page of its own, noting, "This fund would be used to provide financial support for SCTA folks struggling to make ends meet while on strike."

The growing strike wave by educators in California is part of a broader trend. In Minneapolis, 4,500 teachers and support staff have been on strike since March 8 to demand a substantial wage increase even as the unions come close to a deal with the Democratic Party that would tie any raises to deep budget cuts.

The decades-long bipartisan assault on public education, the siphoning off of public resources for for-profit charter schools, the impact of the pandemic and now the universal demands for austerity are provoking a direct conflict against the Biden administration, with teacher contracts expiring this year in New York City, Los Angeles and other Democratic Party-run big cities. While federal, state and local officials claim there are no resources to ensure high quality education and sufficient pay for educators, Democrats and Republicans have squandered trillions on corporate bailouts and the military buildup against Russia and China.

As they come into struggle, teachers and staff, students and families, are immediately running into the efforts of the unions to isolate these struggles and prevent a political fight to end the pandemic and defend public education. Allied with the Democratic Party, the unions have fully supported and facilitated the systematic relaxation of COVID safety measures in schools, leaving educators and students under deadly conditions in the classrooms. The unions are also responsible for forcing multi-year contracts with minimal pay increases far below the rate of inflation, ensuring that workers pay the cost of rising prices through cuts to real wages.

From the beginning, the SCTA is trying to limit the

strike to demands that will solve nothing. The district declared an impasse in negotiations over COVID measures on December 10, after announcing that vaccine mandates for students would not be enforced this school year, and that in-school masking would be made optional as early as April. When students returned from winter break in January, in the middle of the Omicron surge, widespread illness made the teacher and substitute shortage significantly worse.

Sacramento teachers have not had a raise since the end of their 2019 contract, which makes for an effective 11 percent pay cut due to inflation. At the same time, according to the union, teachers have had an effective pay cut of \$10,000 a year in higher health care expenses. Yet they have embraced a fact finder report that endorses a cost-of-living increase for only one year.

The lack of staffing in Sacramento and other districts comes from decades of underfunding and the bipartisan political decision to remove public health measures. As part of Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom's plan to make COVID "endemic," school mask mandates were ended statewide on March 11. Federally, funding for COVID response has dried up, including for treating and vaccinating the uninsured. At the same time, COVID cases and hospitalizations are spiking again in Europe and there is every indication that the next surge in the US, driven by the Omicron subvariant BA.2, has already begun.

Opposition is mounting throughout the working class over the rise of inflation, overwork and the ongoing dangers of the pandemic. Teachers in Sacramento must break from the stranglehold of the union and build independent rank-and-file committees to make demands based on their own interests, including adequate staffing ratios, a livable wage, and the right to remote learning until the pandemic is contained.



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