

California state university system promises steep cuts after passage of meager wage increases for university staff

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The California State University (CSU) system, with an enrollment of nearly half a million students, has been embroiled in controversy after the late August passage of a Senate bill providing below-inflation wage increases to low paid university staff. Senate Bill 410 has yet to be signed by Governor Gavin Newsom, who has until September 30 to do so. The state university system is claiming that even these inadequate increases cannot be funded without raising tuition and cutting back on academic programs and services.

Under the provisions of the bill, employees would earn raises of five percent annually over the next five years, followed by a five percent increase every other year for eight years and with an additional five percent increase in the fifteenth year of the wage cycle. The bill, which has the full support of the trade unions, is a slap in the face to California university employees.

Not only are the raises themselves well below the rate of inflation, but average pay for CSU staff was 12 percent below the market median before the enactment of the bill, meaning that the increases maintain the pay gap. Teamsters Local 2020 and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) represent the majority of non-faculty staff at Cal State and were instrumental in ensuring that staff never received annual cost-of-living increases prior to the latest agreement.

To add insult to injury, the latest wage increases are going to be merit-based for the more than 30,000 staff across the California state system, meaning many workers could be denied even these inadequate increases.

According to *glassdoor.com*, the average hourly wage for a custodian at the 23-campus Cal State system is only \$18 per hour, or slightly more than the state

minimum wage of \$15 per hour. Glassdoor also lists the average Cal State food service worker at \$17 per hour.

According to an August 2022 report of the National Low Income Housing Coalition, Californians need, on average, a full-time hourly salary of \$39.01 to afford a two-bedroom apartment in Los Angeles, \$42.92 an hour to afford the same apartment in San Diego and \$44.69 in Orange County. These figures, moreover, do not take into account additional expenses aside from housing. Even if prices did not increase over the 15-year period of the bill, the university workers would eventually see their wages rise to between \$26 and \$28 per hour, still well below the amount needed to afford adequate housing today.

California is one of the most expensive US states to live in. As of this month, Californians have the third highest average grocery bills after New York and Hawaii, the second highest rents after Hawaii, and the highest gasoline prices in the nation.

The economic status of CSU students is quite similar to that of staff members. Mostly drawn from working class families, the median family income of CSU students is only \$40,300 a year. While only 4.2 percent of students come from families within the top 10 percent of income earners, 22 percent of students come from families in the bottom 20 percent. A 2016 study found that 8 to 12 percent of Cal State students are officially homeless while 21 to 24 percent of them regularly go hungry.

Recognizing that the \$900 million in extra funding needed for the wage increases would involve cuts if new funding sources are not approved, state Democrats and their colleagues in the trade unions have cynically

tried to pit the student population against the workers.

Democrat Connie Leyva, state senator from the Chino district, and the bill's sponsor, stated "Yes, we don't want to see students suffer, but what message are we sending to students, that you get to come and get this education on that backs of these workers. That's not a good life lesson."

Jolene Koester, Cal State's interim chancellor, claimed on the other hand that the bill's passage would lead to the shuttering of 6,300 classes, which would affect more than 19,000 students. "We do not oppose giving staff the salary that they deserve to have," Koester said. "We do oppose being directed to take it from current funds."

In fact, students at Cal State, who were once able to attend the school free of charge, have been subjected to a constant series of tuition increases over the course of the past two decades. Tuition, excluding the cost of room and board and other fees, was \$2,772 in the 2007-2008 academic year, a figure that rose to \$5,742 in the 2022-2023 academic year, an increase of 107 percent over the course of a 10-year period, as the 2022-2023 tuition rates were set at the start of the 2017-2018 academic year.

The pledge to cut programs and raise tuition at Cal State to fund minimal wage increases appears all the more retrograde when considering that California is home to 186 billionaires, more than any other state in the country. However, the CSU cuts are only a regional expression of what is an international phenomenon. Determined to prevent workers from making even the slightest decrease in their colossal fortunes, the capitalist class all over the world is working hand in glove with the trade union bureaucracy to drive down real wages while simultaneously slashing education and social spending.

Workers, however, are finding ways to fight back through the formation of independent rank-and-file committees. Hundreds of the 100,000 US rail workers have begun the formation of rank-and-file committees after the Biden administration blocked strike action and worked with the unions to push through a contract vote with none of the workers' demands for shortened hours and meaningful wages being met. Thousands of auto workers have also rallied to the campaign of Mack Trucks worker Will Lehman for president of the United Auto Workers. Lehman is calling for abolishing the

UAW bureaucracy and placing power in the hands of rank-and-file workers.

Cal State workers should place no confidence in the maneuvers of the Governor Newsom and the state legislature. The fight for adequate funding for higher education requires uniting campus workers with students and the broader working class in a powerful movement independent of the pro-management unions and the Democratic Party. This requires the formation of rank-and-file committees based on a socialist and internationalist perspective. We urge workers and students to contact the *World Socialist Web Site* to get involved with this critical effort today.



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