

Teachers unions push concessions contracts to prevent strikes in Fresno and San Francisco

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Amid a soaring cost of living crisis and deteriorating conditions inside public schools across the US, thousands of teachers in two of the largest districts in California, Fresno and San Francisco, were prepared to strike in late October to fight for improvements in their pay and working conditions.

Despite overwhelming strike authorization votes, 93.5 percent in Fresno and 97 percent in San Francisco, the Fresno Teachers Association (FTA) and the United Teachers of San Francisco (UTSF) announced last minute concessions deals to prevent strikes in California's third and sixth largest districts, respectively.

In Fresno, a district with 74,000 students, 4,000 teachers voted to strike in late October, following 18 months of negotiations between the union and district. The strike was announced for November 1 but was called off at the last hour, with the FTA announcing a three-year tentative agreement (TA) on October 31. Teachers were forced to vote on the contract less than 24 hours later, allowing virtually no time for the membership to study and debate the proposal. The union stated the agreement passed by 92 percent but has not released details on how many members voted.

Despite the claims from the FTA bureaucracy that the deal is "the most historic" in the union's history, the TA falls short of what educators actually demanded. The district had already prepared for a bitter struggle, announcing that it would hire subs at \$500 in the event of a strike.

Beginning with pay raises, the deal makes significant concessions. Having initially proposed a 27 percent salary increase over the course of three years, in addition to \$27,500 in one-time bonuses, the FTA agreed to slash this by 40 percent down to 16 percent raises over three years, with 2.5 percent bonuses in years two and three alone.

On the pressing issue of reducing class sizes, the union dropped the demand for enforceable class size caps and agreed to toothless staffing ratio "guidelines" that guarantee nothing. Regarding individual class sizes, the contract states that the district will "make reasonable effort to maintain individual class sizes at or below the following guidelines

based on factors, including, but not limited to, financial constraints, student allocations, class scheduling, instructional and student needs."

Moreover, the district has already warned that meeting the salary increases in the contract means massive budget cuts in the coming years. Superintendent Bob Nelson told local news that the district is preparing to slash \$38 million from the district in years two and three of the contract.

While the union succeeded in ramming through the contract, including by giving rank-and-file teachers no time to study the deal and by insisting this was the "best" deal the teachers could expect, teachers voiced significant opposition to the deal and the undemocratic maneuvers of the union bureaucracy on social media.

On the FTA's Facebook page, one teacher wrote, "I hope FTA doesn't ask us to approve a strike vote again without actually having the courage to follow through. We left a lot on the table and we didn't go after it. We blinked first in this negotiation and our members won't forget."

Special Education (SPED) teachers were particularly alarmed that the agreement on class sizes would do nothing to reduce their workloads. "I'm a SPED teacher and it seems we are getting thrown under the bus again."

Multiple teachers also reported that they never received the email to vote on the contract and had difficulty getting through to the union's phone, raising questions as to how many members were unable to cast a ballot.

Union officials responded to angry comments by trying to intimidate and pressure teachers into accepting the deal. Jon Bath, a member of the FTA executive board, responded to one teacher's criticisms by condescendingly writing, "In bargaining you push as far as you can ... this is far as FUSD would go. We cannot strike with this offer ... do you get that part?"

Another union official, Tamara Smith, goaded teachers who criticized the contract by implying that the contract's shortcoming was their own fault for not being more involved in the union. To one teacher's concerns, she wrote, "So shall we expect you to run an elected FTA position next?"

In San Francisco, with 55,000 students, teachers had voted by 97 percent to strike earlier in October after working under an expired contract since June. The union delayed calling a strike, instead returning to negotiations and stating that a second authorization vote would be required to strike. On October 20, the UTSF announced a TA had been reached with the district, which teachers are currently voting on through November 8.

As has become standard practice, the union officialdom declared its agreement “historic,” though teachers clearly feel differently.

One teacher wrote on the UTSF’s Facebook page, “I think it’s disgraceful that, once again, the paraeducators with longevity get dreadfully shortchanged! Going from the original 20 percent for 20 years of service that the Union asked for to a measly 4 percent is in one word: DESPICABLE. I think that the paraeducators should go on strike!”

Another paraeducator wrote, “Paraeducators deserve way more and still NO PENSION! \$30 or 8 percent (\$2.16) that’s not even raise at all. Very disappointing, once again we get very little for ALL the work we do.”

One thousand school workers in the district, including custodial and clerical staff, were also prevented from striking by their union leadership, the SEIU Local 1021, despite having authorized a strike by 99.5 percent at the beginning of October. The SEIU never called a strike, stalling until it announced a TA on October 17. The agreement retreats on the initial demands for 16 percent raises back-dated to 2020, the last time the workers had a new contract or raise. Instead, the agreement includes a paltry 6 percent retroactive raise back to 2022, and a 10 percent raise for the current school year.

Educators across California, like workers across the US and internationally, confront a growing cost of living crisis that is compounding issues built up over decades of budget cuts and austerity. In California, the third most expensive state in the country, inland areas—once considered more affordable than the state’s coastal cities—are rapidly becoming unaffordable. In Fresno, the cost of rent has skyrocketed 38 percent since 2020, according to an analysis by news website CalMatters.

These conditions are driving growing militancy among the working class, which is entering into the largest strike wave in decades. Far from securing agreements that guarantee a high standard of living and fully-resourced schools, the trade union bureaucracies are working to blind and bind educators ahead of looming attacks to public education that will dwarf the attacks of years prior. These include the expiration of \$190 billion in emergency pandemic funding next year, and the proposals by the Republicans to slash 80 percent of Title

I funding, which provides federal funding to low-income districts, or roughly 70 percent of districts in the US.

The bipartisan imperative to gut public education, along with Medicare and Social Security, is a necessary measure on the part of American imperialism as it escalates war against Russia in Ukraine while deepening its direct involvement in Israeli’s genocide against the Palestinians in Gaza. In October, Biden requested another \$105 billion in military spending, on top of the record 1 trillion military budget, to fund these wars and to further militarize the US-Mexico border.

Within this context, the ruling class cannot allow any interruption to these plans and is relying on the trade union bureaucracies to discipline workers and keep them in line. That is why on the first day of the strike by 3,700 educators in Portland, Oregon—the first in the city’s history—the National Education Association flew in high level bureaucrats, including NEA President Becky Pringle and United Teachers of Los Angeles President Cecily Myart-Cruz who pushed through a sellout deal among teachers in LA earlier this year.

The struggles of educators cannot be left in the bureaucracy’s hands. Educators in Fresno, San Francisco and beyond must build rank-and-file committees to take control of their struggle, to defeat these sellout agreements and to join in a unified struggle with school workers.

Moreover, the growing movement of the working class against social inequality and attacks on its living standards is beginning to collide with the mass opposition among workers and youth, including among educators, to the criminal war being carried out against Gaza. This developing mass movement must break out of the confines of the trade union apparatus, which wholly supports the war, and build a conscious leadership that connects the fight for social equality with the fight to end war.



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