

Skilled trades workers carry out one-day strike at California State University system

Norisa Diaz

13 November 2023

Over 1,100 skilled trades workers at the California State University system are participating in a one day strike today across 22 of the 23 campuses. The workers striking include plumbers, locksmiths, electricians, carpenters, and an array of technicians and mechanics among other skilled trades. The union, Teamsters Local 2010, reports that workers have been denied annual step increases for the past 28 years and the 15 percent offered by CSU over the life of the contract is grossly inadequate to make up for years of stagnant wages and increased inflation.

The CSU skilled trade workers are part of a growing wave of opposition to declining wages and austerity across the globe and the entire CSU system - the largest institution of higher learning in the world. At the CSU system this includes academic workers, faculty, staff, librarians, administrative employees, and the array of skilled trades workers on strike today that comprise at least four unions.

Despite the potential power of the 60,000 strong workforce, Teamsters Local 2010, CSUEU/SEIU Local 2579, California Faculty Association, and the United Auto Workers have worked to isolate each struggle.

Teamsters Local 2010 has limited today's strike to a single day and the union has kept workers on the job under an expired contract since June 30. Meanwhile, the California Faculty Association has just announced four, one-day strikes limited to four individual campuses.

The 29,000 faculty and staff, lecturers, librarians and counselors with the CFA recently voted by 95 percent to strike. They are seeking significant wage increases, smaller class sizes and workloads, and an end to the exploitation of low paid lecturers. The union, however, announced on Thursday that out of 23 campuses, it will only strike at four facilities during the first week of December. Cal Poly Pomona on December 4, San Francisco State on December 5, CSU Los Angeles on December 6, and Sacramento State on December 7.

The faculty and staff at other campuses are meanwhile told they can choose to spend hours bussing to the four locations rather than striking at their own campus. At San Diego State University faculty and lecturers were informed "Our chapter is not yet on the list to go on strike in December, so we are heading to CSU Los Angeles on December 6th ... If you are not teaching or have committee assignments on Wednesday, December 6th between 7:30am and 5pm, please join us on the strike line." Adding insult to injury they were told by CFA officials via email, "If you need to, you can ask for approval to use your one day per calendar year personal day."

In plain language this means that the CFA bureaucracy is informing workers at each of the other 19 campuses that they need to work, to cross the line, to keep the CSU system running. The word for this is scabbing. Who does this benefit other than the CSU administration?

The last time the CFA was set to strike was in 2016 when the union called off strike action at the last minute, accepting a tentative agreement. The WSWs called for a "no" vote at the time, explaining that the struggle was at a crossroads and that the TA betrayed demands for transformative wage increases, health care, pensions and job security. Time has proven this analysis correct, as wages have declined against rising costs of living in some of the most expensive areas in the country.

Meanwhile, another 16,000 CSU support staff that include clerical, healthcare, administrative and academic support, and custodial workers are themselves calling for a powerful "no" vote on the similarly substandard tentative agreement brought to them by their union, CSUEU/SEIU Local 2579. The rank and file comments section on the CSUEU's Instagram page are filled with workers explaining why they are planning to reject the deal.

Knowing the agreement which CSUE/SEIU accepted

and announced back on October 12 will likely be voted down, the actual vote was scheduled far into the future and voting won't begin until November 20 to 30 to allow even more time for the bureaucracies and Board of Trustees to drag its feet and stagger it from the Teamsters strike and CFA struggle to keep workers isolated.

Today's strike comes a little over one month since the United Auto Workers Union (UAW) Local 4123 in California, announced an agreement to prevent strike action for 10,000 academic workers. The paltry wage "increases" accepted by the UAW were made negligible as they will be eaten up by inflation and increases in university fees and tuition. In September the California State University Board of Trustees voted unanimously for a multi-year plan to raise tuition 6 percent for the upcoming school year, and by a total of 34 percent by the end of the plan.

The 5 percent annual raise for academic workers already earning poverty wages means that many academic workers making \$17 dollars an hour under their 20 hour week will only see a monthly increase of \$73.67. The UAW announced the deal passed by 98.8 percent, but never released any specific information on the vote totals or campus breakdown. Significant opposition to the agreement had taken shape and was expressed in the founding of the Academic Workers Rank and File Committee at SDSU, which called for a "no" vote and to unify their powerful 10,000 strong workforce with faculty, staff and employees.

The Academic Workers Rank and file Committee stated:

"We founded this rank-and-file committee in opposition to the UAW Local 4123 bureaucracy which made clear it was never going to wage a fight for transformative wage demands...Local 4123 representatives told us we should avoid using the word "strike" and made toothless calls for "more than 4 percent." Having "won" an annual 5 percent raise—a measly 1 percent more—the union apparatus believes that we should celebrate, but this will leave the rank-and-file food and housing insecure."

All workers must be warned that across the board the trade union bureaucracies, which are tied to the Democratic Party that controls the CSU Board of Trustees, are working to prevent coordinated struggle, drag out the process, limit strikes to single days and keep them isolated.

The 25-member CSU Board of Trustees, is composed of state officials at the upper echelons of the Democratic Party, including California Governor Gavin Newsom,

Lieutenant Governor Eleni Kounalakis, Speaker of the Assembly Robert Rivas, Speaker of the Assembly, State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tony K. Thurmond, and CSU Interim Chancellor Jolene Koester. In California it is the Democratic Party, which has been at the forefront of attacks on public education.

Just last month Gavin Newsom vetoed numerous bills in what amounted to a major assault on the working class. One bill vetoed by Newsom would have capped the cost of insulin for diabetics, primarily affecting the poorest layers, while another vetoed bill would have ensured that workers who were fired for striking or carrying out workplace action could not access unemployment benefits.

To be successful these individual struggles must break free from the stranglehold of the union apparatus and unite into a powerful industrial and political counteroffensive in defense of adequate funding for public education. The universal claims by the Democrats and Republicans—that there is no money for secure and good paying jobs, affordable education, etc.—must be rejected. The ruling elite is able to find trillions to fund endless wars including the war in Ukraine and the genocide being carried out against the Palestinian people, criminal wars that the unions have embraced.

In order for workers across the CSU system to win their demands and organize a coordinated effort against the sabotage of their struggles, they must begin organizing and building rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade union bureaucracies. Such committees will take up critical political questions as well that include the demand to free public education and to dissolve the ties between institutions of higher learning to militarism and imperialist war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact