

The crisis of public education in California: Budget cuts, layoffs, and the role of the Democrats and trade unions

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California, once celebrated as a hub of education excellence, innovation and progressivism, is now the epicenter of a deepening crisis. School districts, community colleges and public universities across the state are grappling with budget cuts, layoffs and campus closures.

The crisis is not merely a reflection of fiscal challenges but also a stark indictment of the priorities of the ruling class. It exposes both the hypocrisy of the Democratic Party, which dominates state politics, and the treachery of the trade unions. It also underscores the looming threats posed by the incoming Trump administration.

Social services such as public education are considered an unacceptable drain from the profits of the ruling elite. Furthermore, in the case of education, a knowledgeable, informed population is considered a mortal threat to the bourgeoisie's plans for world war and police state dictatorship.

At its core, the assault on education is a class issue, rooted in the subordination of social needs to corporate profits and military spending. California's education crisis exemplifies how both major parties, despite rhetorical differences, work in concert to dismantle public education, restrict democratic rights, and suppress opposition from workers and students.

Across California, the scale of cuts to education is staggering. The below are only a few examples of the cuts either being prepared or already enacted.

K–12 Education

• **Oakland Unified School District (OUSD):** A plan for merging 10 schools into five was announced at a school board meeting this month and met with major protest by teachers, students and parents. The mergers, which will be voted on in December would cover only an estimated \$3 million of \$95 million budget in budget cuts looming for the upcoming school year.

• **Berkeley Unified School District (BUSD):** Facing a \$214 million budget, BUSD has implemented layoffs, freezing of positions and other cuts totaling nearly \$8 million. These cuts disproportionately harm low-income and minority students, exacerbating existing inequalities.

• **Live Oak School District:** In Santa Cruz County, administrators are preparing for layoffs to address a \$700,000 budget shortfall. This will directly impact teachers, support staff and student services.

• **Modesto City Schools:** Financial deficits have led to potential

layoffs, threatening arts programs and extracurricular activities.

California's largest school districts are also under siege. **Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD)** administrators recently approved a \$20 billion budget for 2024–2025 without immediate layoffs, but escalating costs for pensions and healthcare signal future cuts. Like many California school districts, LAUSD also faces declining enrollment which portends further funding losses.

The **San Diego Unified School District** is also facing a \$176 million shortfall in the current school year and is planning teacher layoffs as a way to address it. The district's executive director, Nicole DeWitt, suggested that city schools sort programs into "must do's" versus "may do's," suggesting that the district is looking at program cuts in addition to the layoffs.

San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD), has already begun closing schools, citing declining enrollment—a trend mirrored in Oakland and San Jose. The closures disproportionately impact working class communities, where schools often serve as vital neighborhood hubs.

Higher Education

California's public colleges and universities are equally embattled:

• **California State University (CSU):** Budget cuts across the CSU system have led to reduced course offerings, mass layoffs and increased tuition. The nation's largest university system is facing a \$1 billion shortfall as a result of dwindling state support for higher education. Lecturers at **San Francisco State University (SFSU)** have been laid off due to the budget crisis. The university announced it will not rehire lecturers for the Spring 2025 semester, citing declining enrollment. While the total number of layoffs is unknown, SFSU spokesperson Bobby King confirmed that 19 lecturers have been laid off in the English department alone.

Speaking to the university board of trustees recently, CSU Chief Financial Officer Steve Relyea anticipated greater cuts in the works. "We anticipate negative impacts on academic offerings and student support offerings," he said. The California legislature is projected to worsen the problem with a proposed 8 percent cut in state funding for the 2025-2026 academic year.

• **University of California (UC):** UC Santa Cruz has announced potential staff reductions to close its budget gap, while other campuses face similar austerity measures. Faculty and students

have staged protests, accusing the administration of labor violations and eroding educational quality.

Statewide, the UC system is grappling with a projected budget shortfall of \$504.7 million for the 2025-2026 academic year. Tuition for both in-state and out-of-state students is expected to rise sharply as a result.

A significant driver of these crises is the Biden administration's decision to cut funding from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) program, which had provided districts with critical pandemic relief. The funding rollback has thrown school districts into financial disarray, exposing the hollowness of Democratic promises to prioritize education.

California Governor Gavin Newsom and State Superintendent Tony Thurmond have verbally postured as defenders of education, but their actions tell a different story. Newsom's so-called creative budget solutions—such as delaying infrastructure projects—are merely stopgap measures that fail to address systemic underfunding.

The state of California itself now faces a projected \$2 billion budget deficit for the upcoming 2025-2026 fiscal year, while the state's legislative analyst's office projects greater deficits in subsequent years, possibly rising as high as \$30 billion annually for the 2028-2029 fiscal year. The incoming Trump administration has also made it clear that it will target California and its public services, including education.

Newsom's statement that "California will seek to work with the incoming president—but let there be no mistake, we intend to stand...to defend our Constitution and uphold the rule of law" is emblematic of the Democrats' double-talk. While presenting themselves as defenders of democracy, they have overseen an unprecedented assault on public education and democratic rights, and are ready to make an alliance with the fascist Trump administration.

In fact, the Democratic party at both the state and national level has been instrumental at implementing the very framework that the incoming Trump administration will use to impose its cuts and other repressive anti-democratic measures.

On K-12 and university campuses alike, protests against budget cuts have already been met with increasingly brutal and antidemocratic police state measures. For example, students protesting labor violations and cuts at UC campuses have faced administrative crackdowns, including police intervention and disciplinary actions. These antidemocratic measures expose the Democratic Party's role in suppressing grassroots resistance while enabling austerity policies.

Despite these attacks, resistance is growing across California and beyond.

Teachers in California have waged significant battles against layoffs and cuts. Educators recently pushed back against 2,000 planned layoffs statewide, reflecting a determination to defend their livelihoods and their students' futures. Meanwhile, strikes in Albany, Oregon, and Massachusetts have highlighted nationwide opposition to deteriorating conditions in public education.

Students, too, have mobilized against school closures and austerity. In Oakland, San Francisco, Chicago and Seattle, workers and students are fighting to save neighborhood schools from

closure. These efforts underscore the widespread anger over policies that prioritize budgetary constraints over educational access.

California's crisis mirrors global struggles against education cuts. In the Netherlands, tens of thousands have taken to the streets to oppose austerity in schools and universities. Ongoing protests in Argentina highlight the worldwide impact of neoliberal policies that erode public education while enriching the ruling class.

Like their counterparts abroad, the trade union apparatus in California, including the California Teachers Association (CTA) and the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), have played a critical role in containing opposition. While unions have organized protests and strikes, mainly as a way for teachers to let off steam, their role remains committed to defending existing conditions and avoiding a confrontation with the Democratic Party, rather than challenging the broader system of austerity and privatization.

Furthermore, the national teacher unions are preparing the way for the devastating attacks by the incoming Trump administration which threatens the very existence of public education. Newly nominated secretary of Education, Linda McMahon, is an ardent supporter of school choice and far-right 'parents' rights' legislation in schools. Her role will be to dismantle the Department of Education and carry out monumental attacks on public schools. Both the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) continue to downplay the dangers of the Trump administration, making empty calls for unity.

The union bureaucracy's close ties to the Democratic Party explains why it seeks to prevent an independent struggle by workers. By aligning with the very politicians responsible for education cuts, they have allowed attacks on public education to continue unchallenged.

The education crisis in California is not an isolated issue but a symptom of the broader contradictions of capitalism. Both major parties, beholden to corporate and military interests, have systematically dismantled public education in order to fund tax cuts for the wealthy and expand the military-industrial complex.

The education crisis in California is a class war in the most quintessential sense, pitting the needs of workers and students against the priorities of the ruling elite. The hypocrisy of the Democrats, the complicity of the trade unions and the looming threat of Trump's return to power underscore the urgency of building a socialist movement to defend public education and democratic rights.

Only by rejecting the false choices offered by the two-party system and organizing independently can workers and students secure the resources needed to ensure a future where education is a basic social right for all, and not a privilege for the wealthy few.



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