

# San Francisco teachers to walk out Monday against austerity in the richest tech enclave on the planet

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On Monday, San Francisco teachers will launch the first district-wide strike since 1979. The walkout by 6,400 educators is a direct rebellion against decades of bipartisan austerity in public education.

The educators, para educators and school staff are members of the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF) and teach in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD). They voted 97.6 percent for strike action last month, following a 99.34 strike authorization in December, expressing the deep anger in the schools over poverty wages, chronic understaffing and relentless cuts.

Strike action was also overwhelmingly authorized last week by 35,000 teachers in the United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), raising the potential for a statewide and national movement in defense of public education. The outrage over cuts to schools has even led the San Francisco principals and administrators union to hold an emergency vote this weekend, raising the potential of a sympathy strike.

For 11 months, educators in San Francisco and almost every other major district in the state have been kept on the job by the California Teachers Association, amid conditions of historic cuts to school funding at both the local and state level by the Democratic Party and the federal level under Trump. But the fact that the union has been compelled to call a strike shows educators' patience is coming to an end.

The strike coincides with a growing wave of working-class resistance, including the strike by 31,000 Kaiser Permanente nurses and health care professionals in California and Hawaii, and 15,000 New York City nurses. Around 4,000 Kaiser pharmacy and lab workers are set to also walk out on Monday. Tens of thousands of graduate students across the University of California are also voting on strike action.

The common thread binding these fights—from the hospital wards to the public schools—is the subordinating of essential social services to profit and balanced-budget dictates imposed throughout the Democratic Party-run state.

In San Francisco, the immediate trigger is the district's provocative offer of 6 percent wage increases over 3 years, in one of the most expensive cities in the world. This would be

combined with limited, short-term family health coverage loaded with "take-backs." Currently, teachers on family medical plans are paying between \$1,200 and \$1,500 monthly. Educators are also demanding fully funded family health care, enforceable class-size limits and more support for special education.

San Francisco's public schools confront a projected budget shortfall of more than \$100 million next year, on top of earlier cuts and layoffs that have already shredded programs.

In a recent commentary, one city teacher described a gig-economy lifestyle for educators. They said they rent their family home in the summer, work a second job and relay on their spouse teaching extra summer classes just to remain in the city. This is the norm for thousands of teachers who confront spiraling Bay Area housing costs.

Classrooms are overcrowded and understaffed, with severe shortages of special education staff, counselors and support personnel. Earlier reports already documented that around a quarter of positions in San Francisco schools remained vacant, leaving schools scrambling to cover classes with substitutes and pushing remaining staff to exhaustion. Support staff—custodians, cafeteria workers, and others—have gone years without meaningful raises, even as their workloads increase.

A San Francisco educator summed up the situation plainly: "People talk about the 'tech boom' and the cranes in the sky, but they don't see what's happening inside our schools. We're short counselors, we're short paras, we're losing teachers every year who just can't afford to stay. We're striking because they are bleeding the schools dry while this city gets richer and richer."

## A city of billionaires, starving its schools

The looming strike is rooted in the obscene social inequality that finds particular expression in San Francisco and the broader Bay Area. The region is now home to 82

billionaires—more than anywhere else in the world—and an estimated 342,400 millionaires, with the number of millionaires having surged nearly 100 percent over the last decade. Tech oligarchs such as Mark Zuckerberg, Larry Page and Sergey Brin amass personal fortunes measured in the tens and hundreds of billions, while the district claims that basic wage increases and fully funded health care for educators are “unaffordable.”

This grotesque contrast is the conscious outcome of policy. For years, the Democratic Party at the city, state and federal levels has funneled tax breaks and incentives to the tech and finance elite while starving public education. The San Francisco school board and successive superintendents have responded to state under funding with one “fiscal stabilization plan” after another, each centered on cuts, school closures and layoffs.

In 2021, SFUSD announced a \$125 million deficit and threatened more than 400 positions, with the board ultimately approving sweeping cuts demanded by the state. That crisis never truly ended; it merely set a new, lower baseline from which further cuts are now being prepared.

A veteran teacher with more than two decades in the district put it this way: “We’ve lived through wave after wave of ‘deficit’ crises, furlough days, program cuts, layoffs. Every time they say, ‘there’s no money.’ But you walk outside and see luxury condos, corporate shuttles, billionaire estates. There is money. It’s just not for us or our students.”

### CTA’s “We Can’t Wait” trap

The district and the political establishment have made clear that they intend to use the legal framework and budget constraints to discipline educators. A state-appointed fact-finding report has already echoed claims that SFUSD cannot sustain the union’s demands under current funding levels and warning of further deficits if raises go beyond the district’s offer. Democratic Mayor Daniel Lurie issued a statement Wednesday stating that “schools must remain open,” and insisting that any settlement must fit within the straitjacket of existing revenue, which is itself the product of tax concessions to the wealthy and chronic under funding from Sacramento and Washington.

In this context, the union’s strategy of appealing to the Democratic Party and relying on closed-door negotiations is a dead end for educators.

An elementary teacher described the mood among colleagues: “We’re done with symbolic actions and photo ops with politicians who say they ‘support public education’ and then vote for budgets that cut us to the bone. We need our own organizations, run by teachers and staff, to decide what we’re

fighting for and how.”

The conditions exist for a powerful, united movement of educators across California, as shown by the 94 percent strike authorization vote by 35,000-member United Teachers Los Angeles that took place at the end of January.

But the central obstacle is the union bureaucracy, which is terrified of a movement that would challenge the political establishment. The real purpose of the California Teachers Association’s cynically-named “We Can’t Wait” campaign has been to delay and block genuine joint struggle by educators working without a contract throughout the state while preserving the unions’ alliances with the Democratic Party.

Under this banner, the CTA and local affiliates like UTLA and UESF have rolled out choreographed “strike ready” stunts—T-shirt days, after-school pickets and parent leafleting—aimed at dissipating anger and channeling it into appeals to Governor Newsom and other Democrats, rather than mobilizing the hundreds of thousands of educators statewide who face the same cuts and conditions.

To win this struggle, San Francisco educators cannot limit themselves to pressuring the existing parties or making appeals to the same Democratic politicians who have overseen the destruction of public education. To maximize their initiative and independence, they must organize independent rank-and-file committees at every school and worksite. Such committees should:

- Demand full, inflation-beating wage increases that allow all educators and staff to live in the city where they work, without being driven into multiple jobs or out of the region.

- Insist on fully funded, no-premium family health care as a non-negotiable social right, not a temporary “perk” tied to short-term funding schemes.

- Fight for sharp reductions in class sizes, major increases in special education supports, counselors and nurses, and an end to all layoffs and school closures.

- Reject the district’s “structural deficit” framework, demand a full opening of the books and oppose all attempts to pit teachers against other workers or students through cuts.

- Link up with educators across California—where unions in numerous districts are preparing their own actions—and nationally, to wage a common fight for massive expansion, not contraction, of public education funding.



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