

1,100 California State University skilled trades workers launch 4-day strike across 22 campuses

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19 February 2026

On February 17, roughly 1,100 skilled trades workers across the California State University system launched a four-day strike after voting to support a walkout by an overwhelming 94 percent last December. The dispute with campus administrators is a direct confrontation with the austerity measures being implemented by Governor Gavin Newsom and other state Democrats.

The workers, members of Teamsters Local 2010, include plumbers, electricians, HVAC technicians, locksmiths and building maintenance staff at all 23 campuses of the California State University system. They are demanding wage increases and step raises that were promised under their agreement but are now being withheld.

These workers make the campuses function. They maintain electrical systems, repair plumbing, ensure fire safety compliance, service heating and cooling during extreme weather and keep student housing operational. Without their labor, classrooms cannot open safely, laboratories cannot function and dormitories cannot remain habitable. Yet despite the centrality of their work, they are being told that the state cannot afford to honor a 5 percent general salary increase and scheduled step raises that were to take effect in July 2025.

At the center of the dispute is the administration's refusal to implement those increases. Workers fought to restore a step system recognizing years of service and skill, reversing earlier concessions. Now CSU management claims it lacks the funds, citing a 3 percent reduction in base state funding and reliance on a one-year zero-interest loan from Sacramento to close the gap. The university argues that certain raises were tied to "new, unallocated, ongoing state budget funding" and that such funding did not materialize under the current budget framework.

Instead of permanent wage gains, the administration has proposed a one-time 3 percent bonus. For workers confronting soaring rents, rising healthcare costs and persistent inflation in California, a non-recurring payment

does nothing to reverse long-term wage erosion. It does not increase base pay, does not compound over time and does not improve retirement calculations. It is, in effect, an attempt to cut compensation.

A building service engineer with 38 years at the university said, "We shouldn't be paid less than the cost of living. The inflation rate right now is about 2.5-2.7 percent. We're trying to get 2 percent, and they say no."

"It's just outrageous to see how workers are fighting for just 2 percent. You see the ultra-rich people getting their money. They take advantage of the workers. Lots of people are working two jobs. Some have the kids and the uncles and everybody pitching in just to buy a house for a big family. Otherwise, you cannot buy a house anymore. That's very sad. This is the wealthiest country in the world, and the workers are not being rewarded. So the best thing to do is walk off the job."

Describing the conditions on the job, he added, "We don't have enough engineers. In 2003, we had nine engineers and now we have only five, and we have more buildings to maintain. I've been working every Saturday for the last 12-14 years and sometimes at night and even Sundays. So, a lot our lives have been dedicated to this place."

CSU pay significantly trails comparable positions in other public agencies and in the private sector. This disparity contributes to chronic understaffing and growing maintenance backlogs. When vacancies remain unfilled because wages are uncompetitive, remaining staff are stretched thin. Delayed repairs become routine. Equipment replacement is postponed. As a consequence, malfunctioning HVAC systems during heat waves, plumbing failures in residence halls and deferred fire safety upgrades directly affect students and faculty.

While denying step increases to trades workers, the CSU system has approved substantial raises for campus presidents and senior executives, in some cases up to 20 percent. Many of these increases are retroactive to the very month workers

were denied their contractual raises. The contrast is stark: Austerity for those who maintain the campuses, and upward redistribution for those who manage them.

More broadly, the contradiction reflects the political character of the conflict. The CSU system operates under a state government dominated by the Democratic Party, which presents itself as a defender of labor and public education. Yet the budget framework signed by Governor Newsom for 2025-26 reduced ongoing base funding, a move now invoked to freeze wages.

In this context, the leadership of Teamsters Local 2010 functions as the state Democrats' most reliable accomplice, limiting the struggle to a narrowly defined bargaining dispute rather than exposing its political dimensions.

Based on statewide averages and campus demographics, it is estimated that between 30 and 40 percent of CSU skilled trades workers are immigrants. Many have built long careers maintaining public institutions while confronting rising living costs and economic insecurity. The refusal to implement agreed-upon raises disproportionately impacts these communities.

The administration has paired its fiscal arguments with open efforts to weaken the strike. System-wide emails to students and faculty state that individuals are “permitted to cross a picket line” and are not required to provide personal information to anyone on strike. By framing strikebreaking as a neutral “choice,” management seeks to isolate workers and minimize disruption. The message implies that the dispute is peripheral to the university’s mission.

In reality, the conditions confronting trades workers are inseparable from conditions on the campus. Understaffed maintenance departments mean deferred repairs, unsafe facilities and deteriorating infrastructure. Students facing tuition hikes and overcrowded classrooms are subject to the same austerity logic used to justify wage suppression.

The CSU walkout is unfolding amid a broader wave of labor unrest in education and healthcare. At the University of California, 48,000 graduate student workers affiliated with the United Auto Workers have voted overwhelmingly to authorize strike action. In K-12 education, 35,000 members of United Teachers Los Angeles within the Los Angeles Unified School District have approved strike action over pay, staffing and class size, even as LAUSD announced 657 layoffs. In Northern California, educators represented by United Educators of San Francisco conducted a four-day strike before union officials announced a tentative agreement that remains unratified.

Combined, these education workers number close to 100,000 in California alone. When healthcare workers are included, such as the 31,000 on strike at Kaiser Permanente facilities and others across hospitals and clinics, the

collective social power is immense. A unified movement of university staff, graduate workers, K-12 educators and healthcare workers would constitute a direct political challenge to the state government responsible for funding priorities.

Yet such coordination has been prevented by the union apparatus. Teamsters Local 2010 has confined the CSU strike to its own bargaining unit. There has been no organized effort to link the struggle with UC graduate workers, LAUSD teachers, San Francisco educators or striking nurses, despite shared grievances and overlapping timelines. Contracts are compartmentalized. Bargaining is isolated. The fragmentation of what is objectively a common fight is not accidental.

At the national level, Sean O’Brien, general president of the Teamsters, has aligned the union apparatus with President Donald Trump and his reactionary “America-First” chauvinism. At the same time, the Teamsters bureaucracy has sold out major struggles, including of UPS workers in 2023, paving the way for mass layoffs.

For CSU workers, the immediate question is how to overcome isolation. The broadening of the struggle and winning this fight will not be achieved through closed-door negotiations by Teamsters bureaucrats, campus administrators and Democratic politicians.

It requires initiative from below through the building of rank-and-file committees to transfer power and decision-making from the union apparatus to workers themselves. Workers must oppose all backroom talks and formulate their own demands—including inflation-busting raises, full benefits and the end to forced overtime—and a strategy to fight for them.

The strike by 1,100 skilled trades workers has brought to the surface a fundamental conflict over priorities within publicly funded institutions. Its significance extends beyond the immediate contract dispute. It raises the question of whether workers’ struggles will remain confined within institutional boundaries or develop into a broader challenge to the austerity framework imposed by the profit system.



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