

San Francisco teachers strike ends under looming budget cuts, layoffs

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Teachers in the San Francisco Unified School District (SFUSD) returned to class Wednesday after the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF) ended the city's first teachers strike in nearly 50 years.

Although the union predictably declared it a historic victory for teachers, school staff will see a decline in real wages from inflation over the two-year contract. What is more, the district and state are threatening layoffs, budget cuts and school closures.

The active role of prominent Democrats Nancy Pelosi (former Speaker of the House), Daniel Lurie (mayor of San Francisco) and American Federation of Teachers national president and Democratic National Committee member Randi Weingarten, highlights the concerted effort by the Democratic Party and its allies in the trade union bureaucracy to contain and halt this powerful strike before it could join with educators in Los Angeles and San Diego, who have also authorized mass strike action.

Little attempt was made to conceal the concessionary nature of the agreement at the February 13 press conference. "We stretched our resources to the limit to get this agreement done," superintendent Maria Su said, "We still have a long way ahead of us where difficult choices remain." When asked by a reporter specifically about layoffs and school closures, Su replied, "That has always been on the table." Since May of 2024, the district's finances have been overseen by the California Department of Education, after a projected \$120 million deficit for the current 2025-26 school year.

The claim that there is "no money" for schools is absurd. San Francisco and the wider Bay Area are home to as many as 131 billionaires and over 340,000 millionaires, making it the second biggest city globally of high-net-worth individuals. "The Bay Area has more billionaires than New York City and everywhere else," the *San Francisco Chronicle* declared in a headline last year.

Teachers, like the rest of the region's working class, struggle to make ends meet. But the deal includes a provocative 4 percent raise over two years, with additional

working days adding another 1 percent to staff pay. With yearly inflation rates over 2.5 percent over the past five years, this means that teachers will almost certainly be working longer for less money at the end of the contract. Moreover, without an expanded budget, even these insulting raises will simply be offset by cuts elsewhere.

The district estimates the cost of the tentative agreement at \$183 million over the next two years, and had already been planning \$102 million in cuts for the next school year to avoid being placed under state receivership. In other words, without additional sources of revenue, this deal becomes the official justification for redoubled budget cuts and layoffs.

Significantly, the "no strike clause" the UESF has agreed to will be used as a legal straitjacket to try to hold workers back when these massive cuts are made in the immediate future.

Mass action by the working class is essential to fight the attack by the ruling class on democratic rights, and many nationwide have discussed the need for a general strike following the ICE murder of Alex Pretti in Minneapolis.

But while doing their part to hold workers back, UESF is touting language in the tentative agreement around the district's "sanctuary employer" status. This is a purely symbolic measure. The expanding onslaught of increasingly lawless ICE raids in Minneapolis, Detroit and beyond, coupled with the complicity of the Democrats, make clear that sanctuary status does nothing to protect the largely immigrant population served by San Francisco public schools.

From the beginning, the strike was carefully choreographed by the UESF bureaucracy, the district and Democrats at multiple levels. Although UESF educators have consistently protested over layoffs, school closures and the growing gap between educator pay and cost of living, the union refused to include economic demands in the strike, limiting it to a claim that the district was not "bargaining in good faith."

Even though most major California school districts have been on expired contracts since last June, the California

Teachers Association has deliberately kept teachers on the job, and isolating as much as possible those strikes that they are compelled to call.

Despite two overwhelming votes in favor of strike action in the past two months, the bureaucracy did not call a strike until after the release of a fact-finding report in late January, led by an arbitration firm and coauthored by California Teachers Association (CTA) representative Angela Su. The report analyzed the finances of the district, attempting to assess the level of raises, benefits and staffing that the district could “afford.”

In other words, the UESF accepts the framework that no additional funds can be used to secure educators’ right to a livable income and students’ right to a quality education. Meanwhile, Democratic governor Gavin Newsom has explicitly stated that he will veto any effort to tax billionaires in California.

In fact, the Democratic Party has helped engineer a nationwide school funding crisis, when the Biden administration allowed supplemental COVID funding to expire in 2024. In California, they are even deliberately withholding \$5.6 billion allocated to schools under Proposition 98. To the Democrats as well as Trump, the wealth of the billionaires is a right, and quality education for children is expendable.

After four days of powerful pickets and mass demonstrations, winning widespread support from students, families and workers across the city and beyond, the strike was unilaterally called off at 5:30 a.m. Friday morning, without any input from the membership, after the union bargaining and district agreed to the TA. This left educators blindsided, dissipating momentum with the hope of fostering an atmosphere that a yes vote was an inevitability.

A teacher from the eastern San Francisco Bay Area spoke with the WSWs: “It’s a giant web of betrayal, collusion, corruption. It’s really kind of hard to sort it all out. Especially for our colleagues who see this as basically just a contract issue.

“The teachers were allowed to get these small wins at the cost of a whole bunch of layoffs. Whether that was foreseen and planned upon by the district, it seems fairly likely that they kind of thought they would just give in on the contract and lay off a few more people. The unions will feel like they won something and keep quiet for a while.”

He sharply criticized the CTA’s “We Can’t Wait” campaign, which he said “was sold to us as ‘we will finally talk with the state.’ Newsom never had to pay any attention to us. The whole We Can’t Wait thing is a failure. The districts still aren’t doing rallies together.

“It sent me back to May of 2025, when there was a rally that CTA organized in San Francisco. There was a video of

various people making speeches, including the UESF president. Her whole speech is a pretty good speech. They’re all talking about Trump and they’re all talking about the state of California funding schools. Nobody is talking about the problem as just our district.

“My union president was interviewed and he was talking about military spending. Now it’s eight months later and all of that’s gone and it’s us against the districts.”

He highlighted the union bureaucracies’ subservience to the Democrats as the main reason for this. “Apparently what happened is that a CFT [California Federation of Teachers] rep came to the union and told them that there’s no appetite for new taxes among the voters. They said we just need to support Prop 55 [which extends existing income tax increases]. They didn’t want the billionaires tax because voters won’t support both taxes. CFT is going around to the locals telling them not to expect more money from the state. Why are they saying that? Because the Democrats told them to.”

The defense of public education cannot be achieved within the confines of the Democrat-imposed austerity budgets. In order for teachers and staff in San Francisco to win living wages and protect their students from the ICE gestapo, they must break out of the union-imposed straitjacket. The first step is to vote no on a tentative agreement that leaves workers worse off at the end of it.

But a no vote on this TA is fundamentally a vote of no confidence in the union leadership presenting it as a historic victory. To take the initiative out of the hands of the conservative union bureaucrats, teachers and staff need to form rank-and-file committees to coordinate with educators in Los Angeles, San Diego and other districts, for an actual strike for the full funding of public education.



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