

# San Diego school layoffs expose union betrayal and the deepening assault on public education

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San Diego, California is yet another flashpoint in the escalating crisis of public education in the United States. The San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) announced a \$47 million budget deficit for the upcoming school year, triggering threats of sweeping layoffs and program cuts. Last week, despite widespread public outcry, the district voted to move forward with the elimination of 221 classified positions, including bus drivers, custodians, cafeteria workers and special education aides—workers essential to the daily functioning of schools.

The elimination of 221 classified positions will have immediate classroom consequences. Special education aides will be stretched thinner. Custodial services will be reduced. Transportation routes may be consolidated. Remaining staff will absorb heavier workloads.

Students with disabilities, English learners and working class families will bear the brunt of these cuts. Larger class sizes and fewer supports mean diminished educational outcomes and heightened stress across the system.

The anger and backlash against the cuts were on full display at a recent San Diego Unified school board meeting, attended by educators and community members, many workers spoke out against the harm the cuts and layoffs will have. One school worker said, “I read braille at my school, who’s going to cover my job when it gets cut?” Another pleaded, “You are creating an unsafe environment with these cuts,” while one worker told the board, “If anything, you should be hiring more classified staff.”

One speaker pointed out how the cuts were not announced until the previous Friday with panic setting in as workers did not have a full list of names until the following week. Another worker told the board, “We are not items on a spreadsheet, but faces at your school. These 221 positions are being eliminated but the work is still there.”

Another educator pointed out how the cuts “were not shared equally, but focused only on classified employees, the lowest-paid employees of the district.” A bus driver spoke for many when they said, “We will not stand idle while public education is dismantled.”

District officials have sought to frame the deficit as an unfortunate but unavoidable financial problem. Superintendent Fabi Bagula cited the underfunding of special education, stating that the district spends more than \$400 million annually on services while receiving only \$125 million in state, federal and local funding, leaving the remainder to be drawn from general funds.

But the timing of these layoffs is highly suspect, as just last month educators in San Diego were preparing for what would have been the district’s first strike in nearly 30 years. The planned action centered

on chronic understaffing in special education and deteriorating working conditions.

Teachers were prepared to walk out, but then, at the eleventh hour, the strike was called off by the San Diego Education Association (SDEA). The cancellation was announced by SDEA without a finalized, ratified contract and without resolving the structural funding crisis. Union officials declared that they had secured commitments to “address” special education staffing and educators were told to stand down.

A little over two weeks later, the district announced layoffs of more than 200 classified staff—cuts projected to save roughly \$19 million toward the \$47 million shortfall. Preliminary layoff notices are being sent to roughly 200 workers, with dozens expected to lose their jobs outright.

While educators were mobilizing for a strike that could have created real leverage against the cuts, the union bureaucracy intervened to defuse that momentum—only for the district to proceed immediately with layoffs that will devastate classrooms and overburden remaining staff. The question must be asked if SDEA was aware of the looming layoffs?

Educators with SD unified cannot allow their fellow coworkers and staff to be eliminated. This points to what must be done: educators must organize independently to reject the tentative agreement, which was drawn up behind closed doors, they must carry out their planned strike and unite with their paraeducator and staff colleagues to ensure there are no layoffs.

This struggle is not only a fight for the jobs of the staff, which alone would be justified, but to prevent what will inevitably occur with the layoffs—that educators themselves will have to assume all the responsibilities of the laid off support staff. The overburdening of fewer educators with increased workload and class sizes is part of the decades-long attacks on public education. Educators must only approve a contract that prevents increased workloads and guarantees their colleagues’ jobs will be protected.

Lessons as to the real political loyalty of the union bureaucracies must be learned, particularly on the heels of the teacher’s strike in San Francisco, which was sold out by the Democratic Party, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the California Federation of Teachers (CFT) and the United Educators of San Francisco (UESF).

A concessions agreement was announced to contain the first strike by teachers in almost 50 years before it could join educators in San Diego and Los Angeles who also authorized strike action. Educators received paltry raises of about 4 percent over two years plus extra paid

working days, which given ongoing inflation and the city's high cost of living effectively meant a real-wage decline. The union also negotiated a "no-strike" clause for future actions and to add insult to injury, San Francisco teachers were forced to cut 30 classified staff and 10 teachers.

Moreover, the CTA's so-called "We Can't Wait" campaign has proved to be totally bankrupt in defending public education. The union has postured a leader of state educators but in reality have worked to isolate teachers to their respective districts and contract negotiations.

Rather than mobilizing workers to coordinate strike and mass action through the rank-and-file, the "We Can't Wait" campaign subordinated workers pressuring to the Democratic party politicians that were enforcing austerity. Officials like Governor Gavin Newsom explicitly refused to tax billionaires and even withheld funds allocated under Prop 98. Workers were kept on the job site under expired contracts and told to accept the framework that "there is no money" to prevent layoffs, program cuts and school closures.

San Diego's education crisis reflects a nationwide pattern. Across the country, school districts are invoking expired federal relief funds, declining enrollment and "structural deficits" to justify cuts. Yet at the same time, trillions continue to flow toward military expansion, corporate subsidies and tax breaks for the wealthy.

The attack on public education has intensified under the second administration of Donald Trump. Federal education funding has been frozen or slashed, grants eliminated and teacher preparation programs undermined. Policies favoring charter expansion and privatization continue to funnel public funds into private hands.

The political establishment insists there is "no money" for bus drivers, aides, counselors and teachers. Yet there is unlimited money to start a war with Iran and massacre school children there, while funding for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to kill Americans and deport immigrant families continues to flow uninterrupted here at home.

In fact, the cost of a single F-35 fighter jet at \$80 million could cover SDUSD's \$47 million deficit and still have over \$30 million left over. According to the Center for American Progress the opening days of the recent US war on Iran has cost at least \$5 billion, and if it lasts for several more months as President Trump has publicly predicted, the economic costs will escalate into the hundreds of billions and trillions. As for DHS and ICE, the deportation machine has received about \$75 billion since 2025 to build concentration camps, up from roughly \$10 billion every year.

California itself is home to immense wealth, with more billionaires and multimillionaires residing in the state than anywhere else in the US. Yet districts are told to tighten their belts while housing costs soar and working class families are pushed out of cities like San Diego. Budget shortfalls are politically produced. Decades of tax cuts for the wealthy, charter profiteering and military expansion have hollowed out public coffers.

The decisive issue, however, is not merely the district's fiscal maneuvering. It is the role played by the trade union apparatus in disarming educators.

Rather than broadening the struggle—linking teachers, classified workers, parents and other districts facing similar cuts—the union leadership narrowed the fight to limited demands and then shut it down. Now, classified workers—many of whom earn far less than credentialed teachers—face job loss, increased workloads and

destabilization. The union leadership has confined opposition to board meetings, appeals and lobbying efforts.

This pattern is not unique to San Diego. In district after district, the union bureaucracies—tied to the Democratic Party—isolate struggles, prevent coordinated statewide action and negotiate concessions under the banner of "fiscal responsibility," and fundamentally accepting austerity.

The lesson of the past weeks is clear: the defense of public education cannot be entrusted to the trade union bureaucracy or to appeals to Democratic politicians. Educators and classified workers must take matters into their own hands and form independent rank-and-file committees in every school and district.

Such committees—democratically controlled by educators and support staff themselves—can:

- Ensure democratic and fully transparent negotiations, nothing behind closed doors!
- Coordinate action across job classifications, an injury to one is an injury to all!
- Prepare collective strike action based on the will of workers, not union officials. No agreement can shut down the strike without a democratic vote!
- Link local struggles with educators, health workers, transit workers and others facing austerity nationwide.
- Reject the austerity and claim that "there is no money" with \$75 billion given to DHS/ICE and the billions spent on the illegal war against Iran.

These committees must operate independently of the existing union apparatus.

The layoffs in San Diego are not the end of a conflict but the beginning of a deeper confrontation. Public education is being systematically dismantled to serve corporate and military interests. The wealth exists to fully fund schools, reduce class sizes and guarantee stable employment. What stands in the way is not economic scarcity but the political power of the ruling class—and the institutions that defend it.

Educators have shown their readiness to fight. That fight must now proceed on a new foundation: independent, democratic organization from below, breaking with the trade unions and mobilizing the full power of the working class in defense of public education.



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