

Layoffs, immigration raids deepen crisis in California public education

Kimie Saito, Marc Wells
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A wave of layoffs is sweeping California's public education system through the "March 15 Notice" process, the legal mechanism school districts use to notify employees their services may not be required for the following school year.

Under Assembly Bill 438, signed in 2021 by Governor Gavin Newsom, the process now applies to both certificated employees (teachers and administrators) and permanent classified workers. Because the state budget is finalized only in June, districts routinely issue these preliminary notices based on conservative financial projections.

This year the notices signal a new and dangerous stage in the crisis of public education in California, the largest school system in the United States. Districts across the state are preparing layoffs of thousands of classified employees, including special education aides, bus drivers, health technicians, custodians and other support staff who form the backbone of school operations.

At the same time, opposition is rapidly developing among educators, school workers and students. Tens of thousands of education workers across California have voted to authorize strike action or are preparing contract battles as living costs soar and working conditions deteriorate.

The crisis is unfolding amid broader social unrest. Mass protests against immigration raids have swept Los Angeles and other cities, while high school students have organized walkouts linking the defense of immigrant communities with the fight to defend public education. These developments underscore that the assault on schools is part of a wider attack on the working class.

School administrators and politicians present the layoffs as necessary "budget adjustments" supposedly aimed at protecting classroom instruction. In reality, they represent a far-reaching assault that threatens the stability of schools, intensifies the exploitation of teachers and undermines the educational environment for millions of students.

Responsibility for the crisis in California education rests squarely with the political establishment.

While the Trump administration has intensified attacks on immigrants and public institutions at the federal level, the Democrats who dominate California politics have pursued austerity policies for decades.

Governor Gavin Newsom and the Democratic-controlled legislature routinely present California as a progressive model. In reality, they have overseen the steady erosion of public education and social programs.

Year after year, schools are told there is "no money," even as billions are directed toward corporate subsidies, policing and military spending.

In Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), the second-largest school district in the country, the Board of Education has already announced 3,200 layoff notices and at least 657 job eliminations.

The claim that classroom instruction can be protected while eliminating support staff exposes the fraudulent character of the policy. Special education aides, bus drivers, health technicians and custodians make it possible for schools to function. Their removal will inevitably destabilize instruction. As these workers disappear, their responsibilities will fall directly on teachers, accelerating the burnout already driving educators out of the profession.

District officials attribute the cuts to expiring pandemic relief funds, declining enrollment tied to Average Daily Attendance and rising pension costs. Such explanations conceal the real issue: public education is systematically underfunded while trillions are directed toward war, policing and immigration enforcement. The result is layoffs targeting some of the lowest-paid school workers while officials claim there is "no money."

Teachers themselves face enormous uncertainty as districts prepare layoffs.

Derek, a special education teacher with 30 years of experience in LAUSD, said the atmosphere in schools is one of growing anxiety.

"The big issue is the layoffs," he said. "That's what we've been hearing at district meetings."

The situation has become even more unstable following the law-enforcement raid on district offices and the home of former superintendent Alberto Carvalho.

"Now we don't even have a superintendent," Derek said. "Things are up in the air."

Despite the uncertainty, he expects the cuts to proceed.

"These are definite cuts," he said. "They're probably going to implement them. It's going to affect teachers and students—everyone. We're just bracing for it."

The broader political situation also concerns many educators. Speaking about the escalation of US military operations abroad alongside domestic austerity, Derek said simply, "It's terrible what's going on."

Asked about the political establishment, he expressed skepticism toward both parties.

"It looks like we're going in that direction because no one holds

true to what they believe in,” he said. “They’re all big business.”

For many teachers, the cost of living in Los Angeles has become increasingly unmanageable.

Christian, an itinerant music teacher who travels between five schools each week, described the reality.

“My commute is quite long,” he explained. “Sometimes my salary doesn’t even cover the commute.”

Despite these challenges, Christian emphasized that teachers are fighting not only for themselves but for their students.

“My students deserve better learning conditions,” he said. “That means I need better working conditions.”

He also expressed anger at the priorities of the political establishment, which claims there is no money for education while allocating vast sums for military spending.

“That’s the part that ticks me off,” Christian said. “If we invest in people, they create the wealth. If you don’t invest in healthcare or education, it means you don’t care about your people.”

Compounding the crisis is the escalation of immigration raids across Los Angeles which have created an atmosphere of fear in working class communities, particularly among immigrant families.

This repression has immediate consequences for schools. When families fear arrest or deportation, children stay home. Attendance falls and, because California funds schools based on Average Daily Attendance, districts lose revenue. Immigration policy thus functions as an indirect mechanism for defunding public education.

The social consequences have already erupted into student protests throughout Los Angeles. Thousands of high school students have walked out of class to oppose immigration raids and defend their communities.

At a campus shared by Synergy Quantum Academy and Maya Angelou High School in South Los Angeles, these tensions produced a confrontation between students and administrators.

Rosalia, a 10th-grade student at Synergy Quantum Academy, described the events surrounding the dismissal of Ricardo Lopez, a teacher who reportedly opened school gates during the protests.

“The students had been protesting the ICE raids,” she said. “I saw videos of him opening the gates. I thought that was a very heroic thing for him to do.”

Students attempting to leave campus had been climbing fences and injuring themselves.

“A lot of people were getting their hands cut trying to jump the fence,” Rosalia explained. “If an adult was there, it would have provided protection.”

The teacher’s firing has angered students who view the action as retaliation for supporting the protests.

“Now we’re being told not to talk about this,” Rosalia said. “He’s fired and that’s it. The teachers’ union should be defending him. He should have his job.”

Elena, a student at Maya Angelou High School, said, “We walked out with Synergy students to protest ICE.

“There were three walkouts in the same week. ICE has been doing raids near here.”

The bipartisan character of these policies reveals a fundamental

reality: both major parties defend the interests of big business, not working people.

Equally significant is the role played by the major teachers’ and public-sector unions. Assembly Bill 438 was promoted as a “protection” providing “layoff parity” by extending March 15 notices to permanent classified employees—essentially ensuring that layoffs would be applied equally.

The measure was backed by the California Labor Federation, the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the California School Employees Association (CSEA) and the California Teachers Association (CTA).

United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), the SEIU, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the United Auto Workers (UAW) present themselves as defenders of public education. In practice, they function as partners of the political establishment.

More than 100,000 workers, including UC graduate students and LAUSD educators and staff, have voted in favor of strike action. Yet union officials keep these workers on the job without contracts instead of uniting the struggles into a broader movement.

Over decades, the unions have repeatedly isolated strikes, suppressed rank-and-file opposition and negotiated agreements that fail to address the structural crisis confronting schools. Their alliance with the Democratic Party prevents them from waging a genuine fight against austerity.

Even now, as layoffs loom, union leaders limit their response to appeals to the same politicians responsible for the cuts.

Students themselves increasingly recognize the contradiction. Rosalia’s demand that the teachers’ union defend the fired teacher reflects a growing sentiment that educators and students must stand together.

The crisis in California education reflects the broader priorities of American capitalism.

Across the United States, trillions of dollars are directed toward war, weapons and corporate bailouts while public institutions deteriorate. At the same time, immigration raids and authoritarian policing threaten the democratic rights of millions of working class families.

The defense of public education, democratic rights and social equality cannot be achieved within the framework of the existing political system. It requires the independent mobilization of the working class—teachers, school staff, parents and students—against austerity, repression and war.



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