

Faculty and staff at City Colleges of Chicago vote 96 percent to strike; walkout set for October 19

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Faculty and professional staff at the City Colleges of Chicago (CCC) are set to walk off the job Monday, October 19, after having voted by an overwhelming 96 percent margin to authorize a strike. Turnout for the vote was 1,324 out of 1,446 eligible members (91.6 percent), which speaks to deep anger in the ranks over low wages, increasingly unmanageable healthcare costs and concerns over artificial intelligence.

The vote covers faculty and professional staff across the seven-college CCC system, which serves tens of thousands of students, many of them working class. The threatened walkout follows strike authorization votes in 2018 and 2022, when the Cook County College Teachers Union (CCCTU) officials reached last-minute agreements and called off planned strikes.

The strike deadline comes amid a wider series of struggles in Chicago. Hundreds of hotel workers have been on strike since October 9, although UNITE HERE Local 1 has called out only six of the 46 hotels involved in their contract dispute, leaving most of the roughly 7,000 workers on the job. More than 500 workers at six Chicago-area nursing homes were preparing to strike October 16 before the Service Employees International Union announced a tentative agreement and canceled the walkout. Faculty at Prairie State College in Chicago's south suburbs have also been working without a contract since August, following layoffs of staff.

By Monday, workers in two major industries could be on strike simultaneously in the third-largest US city, only weeks before the November elections. These struggles are taking place under Democratic Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) organizer elected with the union's backing, and raise the question of how workers can unite their struggles that the union apparatuses are keeping separated.

Wages, healthcare, AI and working conditions

The contracts covering CCC faculty and professional staff expired on July 15. In September, union president Tony Johnston reported that the administration had met with CCCTU bargaining teams 32 times—17 sessions for faculty, 15 for professionals—and that 50 proposals remained open, with the parties “far apart on the issues that matter most.” Negotiations are continuing with a federal mediator ahead of the October 19 deadline.

The central issue is wages. The CCC administration's offer reported by the union in September was 1 percent, 1 percent, 1.25 percent and 1.5 percent over four years, increases well below recent inflation. In the Chicago area, rents increased 4.9 percent over the previous year, according to Zillow, a substantial burden for CCC workers, who are required to live within city limits.

Minimum faculty pay is about \$58,000, or \$65,000 for those with a terminal degree, in a city where a one-bedroom apartment rents for roughly \$22,500 a year.

There is more than enough money to ensure good wages for faculty. City Colleges' adopted FY2027 budget totals \$684.2 million, an increase of \$36.1 million, while its unrestricted and enterprise operating budget rises 5.4 percent. Chancellor Juan Salgado describes the institution as enjoying “continued solid financial health,” although the district also projects declines in restricted grant revenues and is increasing tuition.

The administration has also moved to eliminate the master's degree salary incentive for professional staff; rejected union proposals on AI protections; proposed increases in workers' health insurance contributions; and resisted clear contractual rules for remote work, which remains at management's discretion.

Chicago's Democratic administration and public education

The City Colleges administration is directly connected to City Hall: Its seven voting trustees are appointed by the mayor, subject to City Council approval. Johnson's election in 2023 was promoted by the Chicago Teachers Union officials (Johnson himself is a former CTU official) as an advance for teachers and public education. The same administration now demanding concessions from City Colleges employees has been carrying out huge cuts to Chicago Public Schools (CPS).

The CTU reached a four-year agreement with CPS in April 2025, which it hailed as a major gain and which avoided a strike. Cuts followed rapidly. This summer, CPS adopted a budget that reduced staffing allocations and other spending in response to a \$732 million gap; some initially proposed cuts were reversed, but school positions and services still face reductions. The experience raises the question of what has come of the unions' promises that their political alliance with a Democratic mayor would protect public education and its workforce.

City Colleges is a principal route to higher education and vocational training for working-class Chicagoans, including adult learners and immigrants. Cuts to staff conditions, the growth of class sizes and the unregulated use of new technologies have direct consequences for the students they teach and assist. The conflict over a contract is bound up with the future of public education in the city.

The union's strike preparations and their limits

"We don't want a strike," Johnston told the Board of Trustees in September. "Our members want to be in their classrooms and helping students, not on picket lines."

This statement reveals that the bureaucracy's concern is to block a struggle, or limit it if they are forced to let the strike go ahead. The union leadership announced last-minute tentative agreements in 2019 and 2022 after workers had authorized strikes. In 2019 a strike was averted within days of setting a strike deadline. In 2022, the CCCTU set a November 2 strike deadline after a 92 percent authorization vote, then called off the action as bargaining moved toward a settlement.

The union's strike manual explicitly instructs employees in other bargaining units—including adjunct faculty, building service workers and food service workers—to cross the picket

lines under no-strike clauses in their contracts. "No one should say anything negative about this crossing," it states. Under a separate heading, the manual instructs professional employees who also teach as adjuncts to continue their adjunct classes or face possible discipline.

Thus the CCCTU is preparing pickets while accepting that significant parts of the college workforce will continue working. Adjuncts make up a majority of teaching staff, so the division of workers into separate contracts has direct consequences for the ability to stop normal operations. The manual invokes the Illinois Educational Labor Relations Act (IELRA) as a rationale for allowing management to divide and conquer the staff.

The union is also inadequately provisioning workers for the struggle. The manual describes interest-free loans through the union credit union and possible retroactive continuation of medical coverage under COBRA, without identifying union-funded strike benefits.

The CCCTU has close organizational ties to the CTU, including offices in the latter's headquarters. The union officials' approach to the City Colleges dispute has to be considered alongside the restriction of the hotel strike to six properties and the last-minute cancellation of the nursing home walkout. Workers across Chicago are showing a readiness to fight, while their struggles remain confined within separate bargaining units, unions and industries.

The 96 percent strike vote at City Colleges expresses a determination among faculty and professional staff to resist further attacks on their livelihoods and working conditions. Whether a strike begins Monday or negotiations produce another last-minute agreement, workers face the same political questions: the responsibility of the Democratic city administration, the limits imposed by the union bureaucracies and the need for rank-and-file committees at all seven campuses, elected and controlled by workers independently of the CCCTU apparatus, to scrutinize bargaining proposals and establish direct links with striking hotel workers, CPS teachers and other Chicago workers.



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