

California state workers strike against Newsom: “We will strike for as long as it takes”

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Thousands of California state workers walked off the job Wednesday, October 21, demanding higher wages, affordable healthcare and protection against Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom’s attacks on remote work. The one-day strike by Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 1000 expressed deep anger among workers who keep essential public services operating but cannot afford to live in the state they serve.

In a strike authorization vote held from September 9 through October 7, 96.2 percent of participating members voted in favor, according to the union. The results were announced October 8, and the union set a one-day walkout for October 21.

Local 1000 purports to represent approximately 100,000 state employees, including nurses, counselors, information technology specialists and office workers. Picket lines were held in Los Angeles, San Francisco, San Diego, Sacramento and other cities. Workers have been without a new contract since the previous agreement expired June 30.

World Socialist Web Site reporters spoke with workers about the conditions driving them into struggle. Their accounts revealed the gulf between the determination of the rank and file to fight and a union leadership that limited the walkout in advance to a single day.

“We’ve been without a contract since July,” Aaron, an information technology worker in Los Angeles, told the WSW. He described the demands as “a basic cost-of-living adjustment, a basic increase in just the amount of workers so we’re not so overworked.”

Workers also wanted a telework policy that was not “so blanket and just so draconian,” he explained. Speaking about the possibility of a sustained walkout, he said, “If it comes down to it, we will strike. And we will strike for as long as it takes until we get a contract.”

Asked by the WSW whether he supported linking up with workers across the country in a general strike against the Trump administration, he replied, “Honestly, it’s going to be the thing we are going to have to do.”

Trump had demonstrated on January 6, 2021, “who he is, what he wants,” the worker added. “He is not interested in helping out the working people.”

The California strike is part of a developing international movement of workers and youth against declining living standards, fascism and war.

In France, mass protests and student mobilizations confront the Macron government’s repression, while the union confederations seek to contain the movement within a delayed, one-day action on November 5. In Greece on Wednesday, teachers, hospital doctors and

other public sector workers joined students in demonstrations across more than 50 towns and cities.

In Mexico, healthcare workers have rejected a union-backed wage agreement and organized assemblies and protests against both the union leadership and the government. Volkswagen workers in Puebla have rejected a second contract pushed by their union. In Canada, more than 9,000 Stellantis workers voted by 97.3 percent for strike action against layoffs and the threatened selloff of the Brampton assembly plant.

Across national borders, workers confront the same class enemy. Capitalist governments are slashing wages, jobs and public services to protect corporate wealth and finance war. The question posed in each struggle is political leadership. Workers need organizations through which they can unite their struggles and exercise control over them.

Ashley, a worker with California’s Employment Development Department, which administers unemployment benefits, observed that workers around the world “are protesting for the exact same thing. This is not a coincidence. And until we stand up and until we do this together, nothing is going to change.”

She said she was protesting “for a better wage” and to “be able to stay working from home.” Filling her truck cost “\$125 for a full tank.” The “cost of living is ridiculous,” she explained. She had recently moved back in with her mother “because I can’t afford rent.”

“I don’t think it’s a coincidence that everybody’s protesting, everybody’s striking,” the worker and mother concluded.

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One of the main demands from workers is an option to continue telework. Newsom’s four-day office requirement imposes additional commuting costs and threatens workers’ health, as COVID-19 and influenza continue to circulate. Last month, he vetoed Assembly Bill 1729, which would have required written justification for ordering employees to work in person. The bill had Local 1000’s support.

Michael, a pseudonym for a worker who spoke to WSW reporters in San Diego, criticized the union for diverting opposition to Newsom’s return-to-office order into an appeal for legislation that Newsom himself could veto.

“The union has never had any intention of fighting this,” he said. He explained that workers had been told the issue would be kept out of the contract and that the union would instead focus its efforts on

Assembly Bill 1729.

“All in all it’s out of the contract struggle, and a big bait and switch was played on the workers,” Michael said. He added that the union “puts their effort into elections more than worker actions.”

The union’s appeals to Newsom cannot conceal its own responsibility for helping to bring him to power and imposing his concessions.

As CalMatters reported, Local 1000 contributed \$500,000 to Newsom’s 2018 gubernatorial campaign and another \$1 million to defend him in the 2021 recall election. During his tenure, state employees have faced wage reductions over three years. Union officials agreed to pandemic-era pay cuts and accepted another round of wage reductions in 2025, along with deferred raises.

The union is now seeking a 20 percent wage increase spread over three years. This meager demand does not even begin to recover past losses and secure decent living standards in one of the country’s most expensive states.

Daniel, a Los Angeles County finance worker, told the WWS, “Currently I work two jobs because I cannot afford the cost of living in California. Everything’s so expensive. I can’t afford a home. So I’m trying to save money for a down payment and working two jobs.”

His second job is as a part-time longshoreman at the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach. “Whatever jobs come down to the union hall, we get the leftover jobs as part-timers. The pay is good, but you don’t get no benefits.”

He retained his public sector position in large part for its medical coverage. “The cost of medical care in America is ridiculous right now. So that could bankrupt me.”

Daniel had also been following developments in Europe. “I think a lot of people kind of focus on the two-party system here in the US, but to me it’s more about the economic system that we have and how the oligarchs are trying to control everybody. They’re using the divide-and-conquer tactic where all the working people are divided and fighting among each other for crumbs while they profit.”

His experiences had led him to leave the Democratic Party. “I used to consider myself a Democrat, but I re-registered as an independent because I think the leaders in the Democratic Party aren’t doing enough for us.

“I mean, this is a time in America where you have fascism at our doorway, and the leaders of our party are not standing up.”

The SEIU bureaucracy works to preserve precisely this political subordination. Workers are fighting a Democratic administration that has imposed concessions and rejected their demands. Yet the union leadership’s strategy is based on appealing to that very same administration to bargain fairly.

Wednesday’s walkout was an unfair practice strike over alleged bad faith bargaining. Local 1000 officials used this framework to direct workers’ anger toward securing a return to negotiations, while ordering them back to work without a contract.

The walkout was the first actual strike in the 44 years since Local 1000’s first collective bargaining agreement in 1982. In 2016, the union bureaucracy called off a planned one-day walkout despite a 92 percent vote in favor. Then-President Yvonne Walker declared, “Our goal has never been to strike.”

Over those decades, immense fortunes accumulated at the top while workers’ living standards stagnated. A study by economists Jasper Boll, Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman estimates that average wealth per family among California’s richest 0.001 percent grew 25-fold between 1982 and 2026, after inflation. Separately, the Public

Policy Institute of California found that real earnings for a median-paid, full-time, year-round worker rose just 7 percent between 1980 and 2023. By March 2026, Oxfam counted 246 California billionaires holding a combined \$2.061 trillion. Their wealth had grown by \$487.2 billion in just one year.

The one-day limit was a decision of the union leadership aimed at having workers “blow off steam” while they continue to work without a contract, even though mediation talks between the union and the state are not scheduled to resume until October 30, nine days after the walkout. Workers’ needs remain unmet, while the administration has been assured that state operations will resume.

The union bureaucracy is trying to undercut the strike by threatening poverty against workers. Its own strike guidance acknowledges that Local 1000 has a strike fund but states that it is “not intended to replace workers’ wages during a strike.” Workers already struggling to pay rent are expected to bear the loss of income, while the organization that collected their dues and sent them to Newsom refuses to use this fund to replace their pay.

State workers occupy a powerful position. Administrative services, unemployment benefits, healthcare and education depend on their labor. But that strength must be organized independently of an apparatus that limits their struggle and ties them to the Democratic Party.

Workers must form independent rank-and-file committees in every department and workplace, democratically controlled by workers themselves. These committees should take charge of demands, strike preparations and connections with other sections of the working class.

Among their first tasks should be to restore the principle “No contract, no work” and prepare the organization and financial support necessary to sustain it. Workers must demand control over strike resources, livestreamed negotiations and full access to every proposal. No agreement should be accepted without publication of its complete text, adequate time for discussion and a democratic vote of the membership.

The IT worker’s call for a general strike against Trump points toward the political struggle that must be developed. Opposition to dictatorship cannot be entrusted to Newsom or the Democratic Party. It requires the independent mobilization of the working class against both capitalist parties and the social system they defend.

Workers who agree with the need to break the control of the SEIU bureaucracy and the Democratic Party and organize an independent struggle should contact the WWS today.



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