California State University education workers vote to authorize strike

Marc Wells, Kimie Saito
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Approximately 29,000 California State University tenure-track and lecturer professors, librarians, counselors and athletic coaches from the California Faculty Association (CFA) voted by 97 percent to authorize a strike across the system's 22 campuses, according to totals released Friday.

The vote takes place in the context of a global upsurge of workers. In recent weeks, millions of workers and youth have joined massive strikes and protests in France, Italy, Greece and Spain against war, authoritarianism and attacks on social programs. In the US, the midterm election results point to a decisive turn to the left by workers and youth, with the Democrats being the initial undeserving beneficiaries.

In the US, public education is under increasing attack. This year alone, educators in San Francisco, Los Angeles and Chicago have authorized strikes. Harvard University graduate students are still on strike while the UAW ended a non-tenure track faculty and researchers' strike. On November 16, more than 7,000 Los Angeles Unified School District students walked out against ICE raids and deportations.

The CFA has kept its rank and file on the job without a new contract since June 30, 2025, when the previous contract expired. The bureaucracy signed six contract extensions over 16 months. It declared a formal impasse last July, sending the parties through mandatory state mediation. The final fact-finding hearing is now scheduled for December 10, after which a report and a mandatory 10-day period must follow before CFA members can strike.

CSU management's position is a declaration of war on public higher education. Management has offered a non-pensionable 3 percent one-time bonus alongside a delayed, non-retroactive 3 percent general salary increase while flatly rejecting annual cost-of-living adjustments (COLA), salary step increases (SSIs) and equity pools. Faculty also oppose management's attempts to alter healthcare cost-sharing and existing plans. Any marginal, short-term pay bump would be swallowed up by higher monthly premium contributions, steeper copays and out-of-pocket medical debt.

Moreover, management refuses to guarantee job security for contingent lecturers and signs multi-million-dollar corporate AI contracts behind the backs of the faculty, raising the prospect of automation replacing academic labor and surveilling classrooms. Chancellor Mildred Garcia receives more than $1.1 million in total annual compensation, while lecturers can work 60 to 80 hours a week while being unable to afford rent near the campuses where they teach.

The union is calling for a wage increases pegged to 2 percent above inflation, a $79,500 minimum floor and assurances against AI replacement. Faculty are also demanding protections for academic freedom amid attacks on political speech and research.

Seven CSU universities—Channel Islands, Chico, Dominguez Hills, East Bay, Humboldt, San Francisco State and Sonoma State—are currently subject to turnaround plans. A system-wide March 2026 plan calls for lecturer non-renewals, hiring freezes, larger classes and the consolidation or elimination of degree programs.

At Sonoma State, the administration announced plans in January 2025 to eliminate more than 20 degree programs, including physics, philosophy and economics, and issued non-renewal notices to roughly 46 faculty. Opposition has forced the partial restoration of programs. At San Francisco State, more than 1,000 course sections and 155 lecturer positions disappeared between 2019 and 2024.

The cuts are taking place even as CSU's ongoing core funding increased by $815 million, or 8.8 percent, in the 2026–27 budget. That includes $601 million in state funding and $203 million from tuition and fees. Much of the increase covers compensation, previous commitments, student aid, debt and central initiatives. At the same time, CSU is shifting approximately $89 million in recurring annual funding from campuses losing enrollment to growing campuses, such as Fullerton and San Diego State.

The Democrats, who control the state and CSU, have presided over decades of underfunding, tuition hikes, the casualization of academic labor and the transformation of public universities into corporate profit centers. The Democratic-controlled legislature and Governor Gavin Newsom required campuses with sustained enrollment declines to submit the turnaround plans under the 2025 budget. Their 2026–27 budget reinforced enrollment-based funding, even as systemwide funding increased.

The midterm elections vote was a massive repudiation of Trump and the Republicans. It expressed a genuine shift to the left among working people: opposition to the war on Iran, inflation, deportations, grotesque inequality and assaults on democratic rights. Millions voted against war, social misery and dictatorship. The Democrats were the immediate, undeserving beneficiaries of this movement, which is now rapidly coming into conflict with the party's policies.

But within hours of the polls closing, the Democrats were

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pledging “bipartisan common ground” with the very party they had just defeated. Hakeem Jeffries promised to continue seeking common ground with Trump. Meanwhile, New York City Mayor Zohran Mamdani, a member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), called for “a place of shared purpose” with Trump. At CSU, a strike is being prepared against a restructuring program that the Democrats themselves have mandated.

At San Francisco State, students have organized assemblies and confronted administrators over academic cuts, tuition, ICE and AI contracts. The Los Angeles schools walkouts also express the growing political opposition among young people.

On October 27 a rally was held at CSU Long Beach under the slogan “Five Unions, One Fight.” Similar mobilizations brought together faculty, staff and students at other campuses. The slogan expressed the determination of workers for a joint struggle against their common employer, across occupational and bargaining-unit lines maintained by the union apparatuses.

But the union apparatus is deliberately sabotaging a joint fight. Even as the CFA strike authorization vote was taking place, five other unions—the Statewide University Police Association, UAW Local 4123, the Academic Professionals of California, the International Union of Operating Engineers Local 39 (IUOE) and the California State University Employees Union (CSUEU)—reached tentative agreements. The deals cover more than 28,000 employees. By November 20, the CSUEU and APC agreements had been ratified; agreements with all five unions had been placed before the trustees on November 18.

Nevertheless, Teamsters Local 2010, which covers 1,100 CSU skilled trades workers, is set to begin a strike authorization vote on December 1.

Rank-and-file committees, elected and controlled by workers, could organize workers to countermand actions which violate the will of the membership and coordinate common demands and strike action across campuses and occupations.

The last contract shows why the struggle has to be controlled by workers, not union officials. In 2024, after faculty delivered a 95 percent strike authorization, CFA officials organized isolated one-day campus strikes rather than a unified systemwide walkout. When a five-day strike finally began in January, the union called it off after a single day and announced a tentative agreement offering an immediate 5 percent increase and a second contingent increase instead of the 12 percent workers had demanded. The ratification ballot was structured so that a “no” vote meant accepting management’s terms.

On Tuesday and Wednesday, WSWS reporters spoke to workers at CSU Long Beach and CSU Northridge. A history professor with 24 years at CSUN (Northridge) said that while she herself is tenured, she estimated about 50 percent of her colleagues in the faculty are adjuncts, “and that insecurity isn’t good for anybody. It’s not good for students, and it’s not good for the processes of the university.

“What we really need is more tenured and tenure-tracked faculty, but that seems unlikely to happen anytime soon. Also, workloads are always an issue. I teach a four-four, which is four classes each semester: four classes in the spring, four classes in the fall. And our adjunct professors teach a 5-5. So they’re teaching a lot of classes, assuming they can get a full load,” and some faculty “teach here and in several other places as well.”

On the possibility of a strike the professor noted the role of the union in sabotaging a real struggle once workers express their support for strike action. “I think every time we’ve come to these negotiations, there’s been a moment where we’ve been asked to vote for strike authorizations. It’s happened several times since I’ve been here. Most of the time we don’t end up going on strike. And the one time we did was two years ago in January. And then it ended up, you know, being not a particularly... useful experience.”

In addition she noted that sabbaticals are an issue. “Sabbaticals should be given every seven years, in my opinion.” she said. But because there are “not enough eligible faculty we have to apply, and it’s a fairly onerous process.” The “12% rule” for CSU faculty sabbaticals was a major concession given up by the CFA bureaucracy in a previous contract. It took effect beginning with sabbatical leaves granted for the 2007–2008 academic year.

Campuses can only grant sabbatical leaves to no fewer than 12 percent of the total number of eligible faculty in a given year. The “12% rule” also states that faculty receive only one-half of their full salary instead of full pay.

Jane is a member of CSUEU, CSU Employees Union, which just voted on its contract. She started working as an administrative assistant in the Philosophy Department in 2022, while her husband, also a CSUEU member, began working in 2014. “I know a co-worker in the same college as us. He quit the union because he was so angry.

“I’m just angry at how come the CSU received all these donations and so much money and the amount of international students, who pay higher tuition. And you cannot pay your employees? It makes no sense.”

Even with both husband and wife working full-time, Jane said they were living “paycheck to paycheck. We have two kids we have to take care of. And it’s really hard to build a stable life.”

At CSU Long Beach, the WSWS reporters spoke with LaTanya, the administrative assistant in the Cinematic Arts Department. She described how her own job is actually two people’s jobs. “Even when I go on vacation, I bring my laptop so I can check emails every day. Otherwise, I’d face a mountain of work after my vacation.”

She also described the lack of basic infrastructure for staff and students. The department women’s restrooms are nonfunctioning, and there is no air conditioning when the heat waves hit.

The strike authorization vote is the beginning, not the end, of a struggle that can and must be won only when the workers take the conduct of that struggle out of the hands of the CFA bureaucracy and expand it to be a fight for political power.

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