

California scientists seek higher pay in 3-day strike drawing thousands of picketers

November 17 2023, by Sophie Austin



Scientists who work for California picketed outside of the California Environmental Protection Agency building in Sacramento, Calif. on Nov. 16, 2023, on day two of a three-day strike as they seek higher wages. California Association of Professional Scientists, the union representing the workers, argues they are drastically underpaid compared to engineers and other state employees. Credit: AP Photo/Sophie Austin

More than 1,000 [state scientists in California](#) took to the picket line Thursday on day two of a three-day strike, calling for higher wages for work they say often goes unrecognized in a state that sets environmental policy trends on the national and global stage.

The California Association of Professional Scientists, a union representing about 5,200 scientists across more than 50 state departments, decided to strike after three years of stalled [contract negotiations](#), said President Jacqueline Tkac. The push for a better contract began when state scientists were furloughed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

"We're not here to settle for anything less than the fair pay and respect that we deserve," Tkac said. "We hope that the state can recognize the opportunity that we have in front of us."

The strike comes during a big year for labor, one in which [health care professionals](#), Hollywood actors and writers, and auto workers picketed for better pay and working conditions. It also comes amid new California laws granting workers more paid sick leave and increased wages for [health care](#) and fast food workers.

The scientists—whose work includes creating earthquake warning systems, protecting wildlife and reducing air pollution—picketed outside of the California Environmental Protection Agency building in downtown Sacramento. Most wore green shirts representing their union, and many held signs that read, "Scientists Strike Back" and "Defiance for Science." Drivers, including firefighters, honked in support as they drove by.



Striking members of the California Association of Professional Scientists march in Sacramento, Calif., Wednesday, Nov. 15, 2023. Thousands of scientists who work for California have begun a three-day strike over lack of progress on contract talks. Credit: Paul Kitagaki Jr./The Sacramento Bee via AP

Tkac accused Democratic Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration of boasting about the state's leadership on climate policy without recognizing those who do the work.

"Nobody wants to be here, but we have to," Tkac said.

The union says state scientists are paid [40% to 60% less](#) than professionals in comparable positions doing similar work.

The state says it has been working to reach a [fair deal](#) with the scientists. The California Department of Human Resources recently filed a complaint of unfair labor practices against the union in an attempt to prevent the strike.

The department said Wednesday it was disappointed by the walkout and that the state continues to bargain "in good faith." Camille Travis, a department spokesperson, said the union sought mediation then called for the [strike](#) before that process concluded.



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The state will continue working toward a fair agreement with the [union](#), as it has with other bargaining units, Travis wrote in an email. She said the state "has taken steps to ensure that service to the public continues with as little disruption as possible."

Kelsey Navarre, an environmental scientist with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, said it is important for people to recognize the wide-ranging work of state scientists that includes conserving natural resources, monitoring food safety and protecting public health.

"It's really hard to be able to make a living—especially in some of these larger cities like Sacramento and L.A. and in the Bay Area—on the salary that we get working for the state," Navarre said.

Jan Perez, an environmental scientist with the California Natural Resources Agency who has worked for the state for 25 years, said she chose her job in part because she believes "the state has the greatest impact on preserving and protecting our environment."



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Perez said she's lucky to have worked for the state long enough to afford living in Sacramento.

"When I look back at what an entry-level scientist makes and what the rents are and mortgage is in Sacramento, I honestly don't know how they're doing it," Perez said.

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