

CALIFORNIA

News Analysis: Labor unions win big in California Legislature as hot labor summer drags into fall



Writers Guild of America members on strike rally in front of Disney in Burbank. (Irfan Khan/Los Angeles Times)

BY LAUREL ROSENHALL | SACRAMENTO BUREAU CHIEF

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SACRAMENTO — By the time California state senators took up a bill Thursday night to grant [unemployment benefits to striking workers](#), labor unions had already scored several monumental wins in the state Legislature.

They landed a major deal to [raise fast food wages to \\$20 an hour](#). They convinced lawmakers to pass a bill requiring [driverless trucks to have a human safety driver](#). They persuaded the Democratic-led Legislature to send Gov. Gavin Newsom a bill giving all workers in California [a minimum of five paid sick days](#) — up from the current requirement of three.

So when the time came to vote on allowing striking workers to receive unemployment benefits, an exasperated Republican state senator rose to make the case that businesses wouldn't be able to stay afloat if their employees could get paid while on the picket line.

“Frankly, colleagues, I’m gonna say it. I think many people are thinking about it,” said Sen. Shannon Grove (R-Bakersfield).

“The fourth branch of government in this Capitol building,” she said, referring to labor unions, “has a little bit too much power this year.”

Moments later, the bill sailed through.

The union energy that has fueled strikes by actors, writers and hotel workers this summer clearly hit Sacramento's corridors of power this year. Even in a Capitol where unions have long held clout, the run of wins for organized labor was remarkable. Whether Newsom will sign labor's legislative wins into law remains to be seen — he has until Oct. 14 to sign or veto bills passed this year.



POLITICS

Newsom in the hot seat after California passes bill to give striking workers unemployment benefits

Sept. 14, 2023

But by the time lawmakers gavelled down for the year late Thursday night, unions also had persuaded the Legislature to pass one bill gradually raising the minimum wage to

[\\$25 an hour for people who work in healthcare](#) settings — including janitors, security guards, launderers and hospital gift shop workers — and another to make California the first in the nation to include housekeepers, nannies and other [household staff in laws requiring health and safety protections](#).

They also won passage of a bill allowing staffers who work for the Legislature to organize unions — a proposal that had failed several times in the past.

And even though it won't get any votes in the Legislature until next year, a [new bill introduced in the final days of the session](#) shows lawmakers' willingness to go to bat for striking workers in the entertainment industry. The legislation would give actors and artists a way to nullify provisions in vague contracts that allow studios and other companies to [use artificial intelligence to digitally clone their voices, faces and bodies](#).

The tug of war between labor and business is a constant in the California Capitol. But this year brought a few new elements that added up in labor's favor: Several new lawmakers with a progressive streak, a [new Assembly speaker, Robert Rivas \(D-Hollister\)](#), who put his muscle behind some of labor's priorities, and ongoing strikes in Southern California that have prompted many politicians to publicly side with workers.

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The strikes “helped people see the humanity involved,” said Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher, who leads the California Labor Federation, the state's arm of the AFL-CIO.



Lorena Gonzalez Fletcher, an assemblymember at the time, rallied for her labor-backed legislation in 2019. (Associated Press)

A state lawmaker herself until two years ago, Gonzalez Fletcher carried legislation in 2019 to give unemployment benefits to striking workers, but it didn't advance very far.

“When I brought up striking workers last time... most of my fellow legislators probably hadn't seen a picket line, hadn't talked to somebody on strike. It had been years since we'd had a major strike,” she said.

Now, many lawmakers from Los Angeles have constituents who are on strike. They're hearing from them. They're showing up on the picket lines. They're getting “more firsthand accounts and it becomes much more real,” Gonzalez Fletcher said.

“Legislators are representatives of their community. And what we know is in every community in California... more and more people are looking toward unions and to

organized labor as a way to right-size this economy, as a way to provide balance against billionaires and against corporations.”



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Will California health workers get a \$25 minimum wage? Legislature sends bill to Newsom after long fight

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Across the nation, [a recent Gallup poll found](#), labor unions are enjoying robust public support, with two-thirds of Americans saying they approve of unions. The survey also polled people about which side they favor — unions or businesses — in three major labor disputes involving actors, writers and auto workers. Overwhelming majorities sided with the unions in all three instances.

The California Chamber of Commerce, labor’s chief adversary at the state Capitol, pushed back on the notion that unions were big winners in the Legislature.

“The reality is that no one has won. Workers, taxpayers and California’s competitiveness are the losers if some of the onerous policies passed by the Legislature are ultimately signed into law,” Jennifer Barrera, president and CEO of the California Chamber of Commerce said in a statement.

“If California employers have to deal with higher costs, more litigation exposure, and additional bureaucracy... it leaves less resources to invest in things such as clean energy, workers’ wages, benefits, and innovation. These policies will depress job growth and ultimately lead to less tax revenue to support education, health care, housing, and infrastructure.”

Rivas, the new Assembly speaker, committed to supporting the \$25 minimum wage for healthcare workers days after he took the powerful leadership post earlier this summer. He then quickly went to work negotiating with unions, hospitals and health clinics to

reach an agreement to change the bill to slow the pace of wage increases and stagger raises depending on where employees work.

He also put his name on two [labor-backed measures](#) that emerged late in the session that will ask voters to [change the threshold](#) for approving taxes and bonds on the ballot. One of them is a [direct attack on a business-backed ballot measure](#) that seeks to make it harder for voters to approve taxes.

After the session ended late Thursday night, reporters asked Rivas about labor's force in the Capitol this year.

"I think it's the times we're living in," Rivas said. "We have an affordability crisis. Middle [and] low-income residents of our state are struggling."



California Assembly Speaker Robert Rivas, a Democrat from Hollister (Max Whittaker/For The Times)

The ball now moves to Newsom's court. He has until Oct. 14 to decide which of the hundreds of bills the Legislature sent him in the final weeks of the session will become law. Barrera, Gonzalez Fletcher and the interests they represent will spend much of the next month lobbying him for a signature or a veto.

The Teamsters will get going Tuesday, Gonzalez Fletcher said, when they plan to drive their big rigs up to the Capitol to pressure Newsom to sign the bill requiring human drivers in autonomous trucks. It's an example of how labor unions are pushing to protect workers as technology evolves, whether on the highways or in Hollywood studios.

"We're going to continue to look at different places in which advanced technology is creeping into the workplace," Gonzalez Fletcher said.

So far Newsom's administration has argued that requiring human drivers in robotic trucks would hamper innovation and competitiveness. And he's been cautious in [taking sides in the Hollywood strikes](#). Newsom has warned repeatedly that he won't sign bills that impose costs for the state that are not accounted for in the budget, and he said this week that he's [concerned about the unemployment insurance fund's debt](#).

Ultimately, the governor has the last word — unless Democrats take the extremely rare, practically nuclear option and override his veto, something that [has not happened in Sacramento since 1980](#).



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