



A Union of Professionals

Randi Weingarten AFT Convention Speech 7-14-08

Thank you all. I can't begin to express the emotions that I'm feeling right now. I am honored, humbled and hopeful.

Honored that you have elected me to lead this great union.

Humbled to be following people whom I have revered for so long.

Al Shanker led the fight for collective bargaining. He was smart enough to understand that, if we didn't lead the movement for school improvement, it would roll right over us. And he was so forward-thinking that, when confronted with a policy dilemma, we still ask ourselves, "What would Al do?"

Sandy Feldman grew up in a housing project. She never forgot what the public schools, the public libraries and the public universities mean for families striving to get ahead. Sandy was my friend and my mentor, and not a day goes by that I don't think of her and her passion, particularly for kids.

And, Ed McElroy, who has done so much to build our membership strength, our political clout and our leading role in the labor movement. When I think about how to organize the unorganized and mobilize the organized, I am grateful that I can call on him for his wise counsel.

And I am hopeful. Hopeful because I've seen how the AFT has overcome every obstacle in our past, and I know that, together, we can meet every challenge in our future.

The civil rights leader Fannie Lou Hamer once said we can accomplish the extraordinary tasks we set out for ourselves because we stand on the shoulders of those who precede us. Today we stand on the shoulders of Al, Sandy, Ed and all the pioneers of teacher unionism, right here where it started in Chicago. Because of their broad shoulders, this union is capable of great things.

As our allies appreciate and our adversaries admit, the AFT has always been not only the best, but the first:

- The first to fight for collective bargaining.
- The first to embrace education reform.
- The first to unite teachers with all the employees in our schools.
- The first to build "a union of professionals"—from our public schools to our colleges and universities, our hospitals and healthcare facilities, and our state and local government agencies.
- And perhaps most proudly, one of the first to oppose racial segregation in American schools and in the trade union movement—even going as far as expelling our segregated locals.

The naysayers told us that we couldn't, wouldn't or shouldn't do these things that no one had ever even attempted before. But we showed them that a union of professionals can accomplish anything to which we apply our minds and our muscles, our hearts and our souls.

But make no mistake: The society that we serve, the institutions where we work, and the workforce that we represent are all changing at speeds we never envisioned. Yet, the AFT has always been about making change work—for us and not against us. Leadership for—and in—a changing environment has always been our heritage, and we will make it our future.

Together with Toni Cortese and Lorretta Johnson—our newly elected officers—I promise you this: The AFT will always be the union that confronts injustice, embraces the excluded, questions conventional wisdom, challenges the status quo—and works 24/7 to improve the institutions where our members work. No matter what, we will fight for what is right for the kids and the communities we serve, in a manner that respects the dignity of the hard-working people we are honored to represent.

Long before I ever thought about this moment, I learned about teaching and trade unionism from my first mentors—my mother and father. As a young man, my father worked in New York City's jewelry district, and became a shop steward, just in time for a strike. He then went to college on the GI Bill, and became an electrical engineer, a job he thought would equip him to raise his family. But one day, without warning, my dad was laid off. I never forgot how he came home, hurt and humiliated, tears in his eyes. And what it meant for him to have to face his employer alone, without a union standing with him.

Not long afterward, my mother—who was a school teacher in Nyack, N.Y., and an AFT member—went on strike. Not simply for economic issues—important as they were—but for concerns of quality and professionalism.

Before the strike, my sister and I had resolved never to become teachers because the job seemed to demand so much work for so little reward. My mother always seemed to be working. In fact, except when company came, our dining room table was always cluttered with papers waiting to be read and graded. It seemed she spent every weekday evening preparing for the next morning—and all day Sunday preparing for Monday.

It was only after I started teaching myself, and also working every Sunday until the wee hours preparing for the week ahead, that I realized it was not a workaholic tendency, but the desire for our students to succeed, that drives teachers to be the best they can be. When those Nyack teachers went on strike for seven weeks, I saw my mother—and the entire teaching profession—very differently. Suddenly, I saw a woman who was so dedicated to her profession that she was willing to back her words with action—even if it meant, as it did, material sacrifice for our family. I'll never forget how her colleagues—most of whom were women—stood by each other for seven weeks until they won a fair agreement.

I always knew that teachers were called to their profession because they cared about kids. But, during my mother's strike, I learned some lessons that would last a lifetime about teaching and trade unionism.

I understood that, while teaching will never get you a penthouse, it shouldn't put you in the poorhouse. I understood that, when teachers can no longer accept low wages and poor conditions, their only choices are to give up and leave, or to stand up and fight. I understood why unionism is so essential to professionalism. Because, for all the righteousness of our cause, our greatest strength is

our relationship with one another. Standing alone, we are vulnerable. Standing together, we have voice, and victory.

That strike planted the seeds of commitment to teaching and trade unionism in my heart and soul, so that years later, after a stint as a Wall Street lawyer, I found my life's work not in the courtroom but in the classroom and the union hall. That is where we can make a difference in the lives of students and teachers. We can't make much of a difference if each of us stands alone. But we can do it when we all work together, as professionals and as a union of professionals. That is the lifelong commitment that brought me to this moment.

No one comes to a moment like this alone. Allow me a few introductions: my mom and dad (and other members of my family—and my UFT family); my friends and advisers, who have helped ensure the union's rightful role in New York: a New York icon and UFT counsel, Basil Paterson; community activist, head of NY ACORN, Bertha Lewis; and my high school humanities teacher from Clarkstown High School North, a public school in suburban New York, Mr. Robert Dillon, who taught me that people of conscience, courage and commitment can change the world.

Back in high school, we always called him "Mr. Dillon." And yes, before you ask, his first name really is Robert—and so yes, that would be Bob Dillon. His presence today reminds us that, as his famous namesake sang, "The times they are a-changing." In its best tradition, the AFT is changing with the times, and Toni, Lorretta and I—and each and every one of you—represent the next generation of leadership.

Like almost all of you, I came of age in an America with more material comfort, but less of a spirit of community, than the generations before us. Many of the ideals and institutions that our parents and predecessors held sacred can no longer be taken for granted: The labor movement—which lifted working people into the middle class—is berated by hostile politicians, battered by unscrupulous employers, and beset by economic, social and technological change. The public schools—which prepare 90 percent of America's children for productive citizenship—are at risk of being demonized, de-unionized and privatized. And public service—the very idea of serving the common good that is central to our democracy—is being challenged by those who contend that the business of America is business, and the best thing government can do is nothing.

As a union of public service employees, we are Public Enemy Number One for those who take pot shots at the public schools, the labor movement, and the very concept of government serving a greater good.

We have often been called a "special interest." And I will never apologize for that because our "special interests" are the students we teach, the patients we care for and all the people we serve. They're worth fighting for, with every weapon in our arsenal as a union of professionals: The power of a growing membership. The power of collective bargaining. The power of the political process. And the power of our ideas for improving the institutions where we work.

We are more than 1.4 million members strong. And I'd emphasize that word "strong" because every member, every local union, every state federation and every occupational sector of the AFT is stronger because we stand alongside our sisters and brothers in other places, other professions, and other public services. That is why we are "greater than one".

For ten years, I've served as president of our largest local union, New York City's United Federation of Teachers. And UFT members know that we are stronger because we can count on the clout that comes from standing together with workers all across our nation.

We all are stronger because the AFT is now the second-largest and fastest-growing union in the entire AFL-CIO.

We are stronger because of the organizing victories that our great secretary-treasurer, Nat LaCour, who we will miss so much, talked about on Saturday: the Colorado state employees, together with AFSCME and SEIU; the nurses at South Jersey Medical Center; the part-time adjunct faculty at Henry Ford Community College; and the 21,000 PSRPs in the Oregon School Employees Association, who got to know Lorretta Johnson real well when she traveled cross-country many times to walk the organizing walk.

We are stronger because of the victories and enthusiasm of state employees in Kansas, administrative professionals at Rutgers University and teachers in charter schools across the nation. And we are stronger because of the spirit and determination of those in states like Texas, Alabama and Louisiana, who continue to build our union despite the toughest odds. We are stronger because of the 8,000 AFT Healthcare members in 11 New Jersey locals who lined up their contract expiration dates to give them the bargaining power they needed.

I could go on, but I must mention the librarians in New City, my home town, who—like too many other employees across the country—had to brave a tough and unfair fight in order to form their union.

And permit me just one more moment of pride. We are stronger because 28,000 home-based child care providers in New York City voted to join the AFT. That was the biggest union organizing campaign the city had seen in nearly half a century.

I'd like to ask everyone who has been involved in successful organizing campaigns since the last national convention to stand. Let's give them all one more well-deserved round of applause.

We're going to keep growing the AFT in every one of our sectors. And we're going to build and deepen the culture of organizing in this union so that every local is on the lookout for new groups of workers who want a stronger voice and a better life.

But let's not kid ourselves. Our work as organizers isn't over once we've signed up new members. In fact, it's only just begun. This union isn't an ATM—where you deposit your dues and get your gains. Nor is it an insurance company that we pay in good times and don't think about until we need it in bad times.

Every day in every way, this union depends on our members to contribute their energy and experience, their intelligence and ideas.

Yes, even as you are teaching kids who are struggling to beat the odds, caring for seriously ill patients while being second-guessed by bean-counters, defending academic freedom against the forces of ignorance and intolerance, and coping with devastating cuts in state budgets—even as you do all that, there is something more to do.

Because if we really want to make a difference for the people we serve, if we really want to lead the change that is needed, then we have to strengthen the strongest force there is for improving their lives, and that is our union.

And to make that change, we need each other. We need organizers to reach out to unrepresented workers. We need political activists who will reach out to their colleagues, their friends and neighbors, and explain why issues matter. We need grass-roots lobbyists who will reach out to their elected representatives at the local, state and national levels. We need activists to organize and lead the kind of professional development that helps our colleagues sharpen their skills and build their knowledge, and shows them that their union cares about their professional growth and the people they serve. And we need to be heard, both at work and in public, which means we need to turn out big-time at rallies, phone banks, picket lines and public hearings.

We need not only to expand our base, but to energize it. Our challenge isn't only organizing the unorganized; our challenge is mobilizing our members—or, as Ed likes to say, "organizing the organized." And by asserting our role as change agents eager to invigorate our institutions, we appeal to our members' professionalism and idealism, and we force the naysayers to treat us as partners.

We must demand dignity in our work lives and security in our financial lives. But we also aspire to quality in the services that we provide. And the AFT will always give voice to our members' aspirations to do their best work—and to overcome every obstacle to doing the best that you can.

This is what binds us together as a union—person by person, profession by profession, sector by sector. If you are a teacher concerned with lowering class sizes; if you are a nurse fighting for adequate staffing levels; if you are a college faculty member trying to save the professoriate; if you are a school aide seeking respect as part of the team in your school; or if you are a state employee struggling against cutbacks and contracting-out; then you share the same values; you are fighting the same battles; and you have a natural home in the same union—the AFT.

That is why, as our first priority, Toni, Lorretta and I will lead the development of an AFT reform agenda that involves all AFT members in improving the lives and prospects of children and their families, especially those in the greatest need. This agenda will embrace everything AFT members do—early childhood education, K-12 education, higher education, healthcare and public services of all kinds. Our most urgent priority is overhauling the federal education law that, for many AFT members, has become a four-letter word. And you know what those letters are: N-C-L-B.

We didn't all feel that way at first, and neither did our allies. No Child Left Behind began as a bipartisan effort to close the gaps in educational achievement and complete the unfinished business of the 20th century. That agenda was defined by two transformative events that embodied the purposes of public education. Purposes we were proud of then and should be proud of now.

The historic decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* declared that the nation would settle for nothing less than universal access. And the groundbreaking 1983 report, “A Nation at Risk,” affirmed that we should accept nothing less than universal attainment.

We believed in high standards—and we still do. We believed in bringing out the best in all children—and we still do. For years, we tried to correct what was wrong with NCLB. But now we know better: NCLB does not work. By misdefining achievement, relying too heavily on paper-and-pencil tests, narrowing and dumbing down the curriculum, and stressing sanctions over supports, NCLB has become a blunt instrument for attacking, not assisting, our public schools.

The sad fact is: NCLB is not about teaching, it is about testing. New York City elementary school teachers tell us they spend more time doing test prep than teaching science and social studies combined. Don't get me wrong. I believe in accountability. And tests, if they are fair and accurate, and aligned with a rich curriculum, can play an important role in holding teachers, administrators and schools accountable for much of student achievement.

But the narrow numerical measures of NCLB benefit no one, least of all the children they were supposed to help. These are the children who have the least opportunity outside the schoolhouse walls to be exposed to all the elements of a well-rounded education: the arts and physical fitness, the ability to think critically and to argue logically, the value of active citizenship, and a knowledge of different people and places. NCLB slams the schoolhouse door on much of what makes up modern civilization and replaces it with multiple choice questions.

We need to prepare our students for 21st century jobs. Employers say that they are looking for workers who can devise new solutions. But how will kids who have spent 12 years learning to keep their pencil marks inside the bubbles ever be able to think outside the box?

And what about our noncollege-bound students? NCLB's test-driven curricula has meant a neglect of the technical and higher order thinking skills that could prepare these students for jobs in the knowledge economy.

NCLB has outlived whatever usefulness it ever had. Conceived by accountants, drafted by lawyers and distorted by ideologues, it is too badly broken to be fixed.

What we need—and what we seek—is a new vision of schools for the 21st century, a vision that truly commits America to closing the achievement gap once and for all—and the accountability to ensure this happens: Accountability that is meant to fix schools, not to fix blame. Accountability that recognizes that student, teacher and school success means much more than producing high scores on two tests a year. Accountability that holds everyone responsible for doing their share, including school districts, states and the federal government, which must provide the necessary resources. And accountability that takes into account the conditions that are beyond the teacher's or the school's control.

If student success and accountability are the challenges, then NCLB is not the answer. The answer is to make our schools work for all our children—to do all we can to ensure that all our children have the opportunity to reach their God-given potential.

Can you imagine if, as part of that vision, the federal education law, instead of being punitive, actually was positive? If it helped to promote both proven and promising models of education reform?

Can you imagine a federal law that promoted community schools—schools that serve the neediest children by bringing together under one roof all the services and activities they and their families need?

Imagine schools that are open all day and offer after-school and evening recreational activities and homework assistance. High schools that allow students to sign up for morning, afternoon or evening classes.

And suppose the schools included child care and dental, medical and counseling clinics, or other services the community needs. For example, they might offer neighborhood residents English language instruction, GED programs or legal assistance.

And can you imagine if cities like Chicago, Philadelphia and Washington, D.C., and others where mayors control the schools, actually used that power to integrate services on behalf of kids?

Imagine a federal education law that doesn't narrow the curriculum, but instead, as Toni Cortese has often said, assures that every child learns to read by being exposed to a rich core curriculum.

Imagine a law that encourages districts to assure teacher quality by paying competitive salaries, and devising career ladders and other professional compensation models that support great teachers and keep them teaching.

Imagine a law that promotes professional development embedded in the job, mentoring for new educators and peer coaching for those who are struggling. Imagine if the staff had common planning time across the disciplines, and a collaborative, respectful relationship between staff and administrators.

Imagine, in other words, a law that supports the great work of some of our own locals, like the teacher recruitment and retention strategies at the ABC Unified School District in California, or the lead teacher program in New York City, or peer review programs in Toledo [Ohio], Rochester [N.Y.] and Cincinnati.

Now imagine if our schools had the educational resources we have long advocated, like quality pre-K, smaller classes, up-to-date materials and technology, and a nurturing atmosphere, so no child feels anonymous.

That kind of commitment is what American schools need to provide equity and excellence for every child—to make education a civil right, as the AFT has long championed. It's a commitment worth fighting for. And we are fighters.

It won't be easy. But we can do it. We can improve our own working lives and we can improve the lives of those we serve. We can do it in education, and we can do it in healthcare and we can do it in all the public services we provide.

But we cannot do it alone, and that is why this year's elections are so essential. We believe in accountability in the schoolhouse—and in the White House.

The Bush administration has transformed prosperity into recession, turned historic surpluses into horrendous deficits, brought us eight years of stagnant incomes for everyone but their rich friends, left our school districts and state governments drowning in red ink, left a great American city underwater, and bungled a war that never should have been fought in the first place. That crowd loves to talk about accountability, so let's hold them accountable for their record and send them back to the private sector that they claim to love so much.

Yesterday, you enthusiastically endorsed Barack Obama for president. I have no doubt that we will work enthusiastically to make him president—and those of us who supported Hillary Clinton will fight just as fiercely for Barack Obama.

The choice is clear: Barack Obama says we need to overhaul NCLB. John McCain has said he wants more of the same. Obama wants to invest in our public schools. McCain supports private school vouchers. Obama wants to invest in health insurance for all Americans, including every child. McCain voted against extending health benefits to children and wants to tax workers who still have employer-paid healthcare benefits from their employers.

Barack Obama and John McCain offer two very different records, two very different philosophies, and two very different visions for America's future. Sen. Obama will make history not only because of who he is but because of where he will lead America.

Can we elect a president who shares our vision and our values? As Barack Obama would say, "Yes, we can."

And now I conclude where I began. For years, we have fought back against those who would weaken or destroy the public schools, public services of all kinds, and the labor movement which, for all its flaws, is the strongest voice for America's working people. Against great odds, we have fought the good fight against bad ideas. But as Al Shanker said, "You can't beat something with nothing."

In this union, we are strongest when we stand together for something. So let's proudly present our vision of an America that offers all our children a fair start, a healthy start and a hopeful start in their journeys in life—the vision that inspires our ideas for community schools, healthcare for every family, college opportunity and career training for every American, and a strong and growing labor movement that empowers every worker and dignifies all work.

Our adversaries have looked at the challenges confronting this country—from struggling schools to stagnant wages—and repeated the big lie that organized educators, healthcare professionals and public service employees are the problem. We need to put forth the simple but powerful truth that, far from being the problem, a progressive and innovative union like the AFT is part of the solution.

We in the AFT believe that professionals who serve the public have a crucial contribution to make—not just in making sure that services are delivered, but in making changes that ensure that services are delivered better than ever. Because the people who do the work care more than anyone else,

know more than anyone else, and can do more than anyone else about improving the public services that Americans count on.

Our members know what works and what doesn't work, what to keep and what to change. And our union gives voice to their heartfelt aspirations—and practical proposals—for doing their best work for the people they serve.

Whether the issue is education reform, healthcare reform or governmental reform, these efforts will be doomed to failure unless they are built on a foundation of respect for the professionals who do the work. But, when you give professionals the respect, the recognition and the rewards that they rightfully deserve, there is no limit to what they can accomplish.

So we say to public officials and administrators: If you're searching for partners to improve public institutions—the union is the solution. We say to parents and taxpayers: If you want better public schools, better colleges, better hospitals and better state governments - the union is the solution. And, most of all, we say to educators, nurses and all those who serve the public: If you want the dignity you deserve, the security you demand and the quality you dream of—the union is the solution.

We are grateful to those who built this union, made it part of the fabric of American life and passed it along to us. But the AFT is not an inheritance. It is an achievement that every generation of activists must renew in response to the challenges of their times.

Sisters and brothers: Our challenges are great. But our cause is just. Our ideals are right. Our numbers are growing. And our moment is now. Let's make the most of it.