



A Union of Professionals

## A conversation with new AFT president Randi Weingarten



ON JULY 13, DELEGATES TO THE AFT CONVENTION IN CHICAGO ELECTED RANDI WEINGARTEN PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS. WEINGARTEN, WHO IS PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED FEDERATION OF TEACHERS IN NEW YORK CITY, HAS AMASSED AN IMPRESSIVE ARRAY OF ACCOMPLISHMENTS SINCE BECOMING UFT PRESIDENT 10 YEARS AGO. THESE INCLUDE RAISING SALARIES OF THE CITY'S TEACHERS BY 43 PERCENT IN THE LAST SIX YEARS, NEGOTIATING DIFFERENTIATED PAY PLANS THAT HAVE ENHANCED TEACHER QUALITY, AND TAKING THE LEAD IN PUSHING FOR A VOLUNTARY SCHOOLWIDE BONUS PACKAGE THAT HAS HELPED PROMOTE COLLABORATION AS A WAY TO IMPROVE HIGH-NEEDS SCHOOLS.

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Weingarten also has expanded the UFT's commitment to professional development and has opened two union-operated charter schools, which are proving that union contracts are no obstacle to reform.

Late last year, the UFT won bargaining rights for 28,000 home day care providers in New York City.

In addition, the new AFT president has spearheaded the creation of several alliances, among them the "Keep the Promises" coalition, which includes 40 civic, community and advocacy groups as well

as prominent individuals who have mobilized against education budget cuts and other threats to the community and the schools.

Roger Glass, director of the AFT editorial department, interviewed Weingarten a few days after she was elected AFT president.

### ***How will the AFT look different to the average member under your leadership? How will you put your stamp on the union?***

I see myself as building on the legacies of our past three presidents. Al Shanker was a risk taker who really believed in the power of ideas. Sandy Feldman was about passion—passion for kids in particular. This was connected to her roots growing up in Brooklyn, and it came out in everything she did. And Ed McElroy was about building muscle—whether in politics or organizing.

I see myself building on those three legacies—Al's brains, Sandy's heart and Ed's muscle. I believe the reason some people call me a reformer is because I'm open and willing to look at doing things differently—provided it's good for kids and fair to educators. We know we can

always improve upon what we're doing, but at the same time we have to fight against being scapegoated and demonized.

We must take risks to do what works and to change what doesn't to ensure that at the end of the day we are creating a path of continuous, sustainable academic growth and social development for all kids.

***Critics of teachers unions have charged that we put members ahead of children. What's your response to that charge?***

Much of the criticism is predictable because we fight hard to secure a voice for educators so they can improve their schools and have a better life for themselves. What's terrible is that it shows some people's misperception of the labor movement today. Forty years ago, when more people belonged to unions, people understood that unions helped build the middle class, and no one would begrudge a worker making that fight for economic dignity and respect.

What we as the teachers union do is draw attention both to the working conditions that teachers need to be successful and to the economic aspirations they have for themselves and their families. So we're a thorn in the side of those who want to pay teachers as little as possible and who demand that they do as much work as possible in as unfair a setting as possible. The conditions that are good for teaching are the same conditions that are good for learning—small classes, adequate books and supplies, decent facilities, and support for good teaching.

Of all the resources that we give to children, the most important one is a qualified teacher. That's why I always say that a school teacher is a combination of Albert Einstein, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and Tony Soprano. You don't attract and retain large numbers of highly qualified people with low pay, poor working conditions and low status.

What's really special about the AFT is that we are as much about helping our members be the best they can be, and improving the institutions in which they work, as we are about helping them achieve economic security.

So when people say unions are the problem, I say: "Let actions speak louder than words." I'll put my record and those of my predecessors at the AFT up against anyone who says that. We can show that we've always been about what's good for kids and what's fair for teachers.

***The AFT has endorsed Barack Obama for president. Why is this election so important?***

Our first priority must be electing a new president who will be a strong leader—a leader who will re-establish our country's reputation in the world and turn around our economy. I believe the next president must focus on healthcare and education, and what Americans need if they are to see a brighter day for themselves and their families.

To accomplish this agenda, we must elect Barack Obama president and a Congress we can

work with. Obama and John McCain offer two very different records and two very different visions for America's future.

Without national leaders who understand what America needs to do both economically and socially, we're not going to get very far—either at home or abroad.

An urgent priority is for us to weigh in on what a revamped federal education law should look like, specifically how to really eliminate the achievement gap and ensure that all kids get the education that will allow them not simply to dream their dreams but to achieve them.

In my speech to the AFT convention, I proposed expanding the community school model to help our neediest children. Community schools bring together under one roof all the services and activities that our children and their families need. These schools would be open all day, and offer after-school and evening recreational activities and homework assistance, as well as child care and dental, medical and other services.

***Charter schools are growing rapidly, particularly in the urban centers where the AFT represents many teachers and educators. What is your position on charter schools?***

There's a right way and a wrong way to do charter schools. We are concerned about the profiteers and privateers coming in and supplanting a viable public school system. We are concerned about the loss of funding to public schools, which we're seeing in some cities, and charter schools being used to de-unionize schools.

I believe that charter schools should be open to all children and held to the same standards as other public schools. Charter schools should be open to being organized so that their teachers and other school staff can have a voice.

We know that teachers and kids do better when teachers have a voice at work, and we've shown this to be true at the two charter schools the United Federation of Teachers runs in New York City. We believe a union contract is not an obstacle to success. In fact, I would argue that a contract helps create success.

***What role do you see community and business organizations, parent groups and others playing in AFT efforts to improve schools and help children?***

It takes a village to raise a child. It was true when Hillary Clinton said it several years ago and it's even truer today. I believe education should be a community value. Whether it's parents, churches, businesses or other groups, a community and its schools must see themselves as partners.

We, as the teachers union, need to reach out to others who are active in the community and walk in their shoes to see what they are up against. And they need to walk in ours. When people do that, there is a lot more tolerance, there's a lot more engagement and there's a lot more involvement. And that's only good for kids.

***Workers' benefits, particularly pensions and healthcare, are increasingly under attack. What can the labor movement do to secure these and other benefits for members?***

The labor movement is the conscience of this country, and if we don't educate our elected leaders and our communities about the ramifications of losing the social safety net, then who will?

Right now, we have a market-driven healthcare system that has been unsuccessful in ensuring that all Americans get high-quality affordable healthcare. We have more and more Americans who are uninsured or underinsured. The same is starting to happen in terms of our retirement system. How are people going to have retirement security when they are losing their pensions?

Ultimately, unions have a big job to do in educating, in energizing, in mobilizing and in lobbying.

***Organizing was a priority of the AFT under President McElroy. What are your thoughts on this aspect of the union's work?***

Organizing the unorganized always will be an AFT priority. We need to be on the lookout for every opportunity to both organize and mobilize members. It's our lifeblood.

We're going to keep growing the AFT in every one of our constituencies, and we're going to build and deepen the culture of organizing. By doing that, we'll be giving others an opportunity to have a voice at work and a better life. If we really want to make a difference for the people we serve, then we have to strengthen the strongest force there is for improving their lives, and that is our union.

***Private contractors are taking more and more tax dollars to provide services traditionally provided by public employees. What can we do to protect high-quality public services?***

We have to educate people about core services that are central to our democracy. For example, that is why proposals to privatize policing are normally dead on arrival. When you privatize services you end up losing accountability and transparency, and voice. And, more often than not, when we go head-to-head with the private sector, these services can be delivered much more effectively and efficiently by public employees.

***Chronic short-staffing in hospitals is a problem for many nurses and health professionals. How will you work with healthcare members to address short-staffing?***

Healthcare employers often blame short-staffing on the shortage of workers. We know, however, that there are plenty of qualified workers but that horrible working conditions have made them leave their professions. So, we need to look at bringing these people back, as well as training enough new people to meet future demands. The best way to do that is to ensure that they have a work environment that allows them to provide the highest quality patient

care possible. We will bargain contract language and pass legislation that bans mandatory overtime, provides for minimum nurse-to-patient ratios and prohibits excessive workloads. We also will advocate for loan forgiveness plans—not only for caregivers but for faculty—so that we can educate qualified candidates to enter the healthcare workforce.

***Why is it important for the union to fight for pay equity for part-time and contingent faculty while at the same time working to increase the number of full-time, tenure-track faculty?***

A two-pronged crisis has developed in academic staffing. A tenured faculty, with full academic freedom, is the foundation of the research-teaching enterprise. But that foundation has disintegrated to such an extent that the percentage of tenured instructors in our colleges and universities has slipped to under 30 percent—well below anybody's definition of what's acceptable. Cutbacks in government funding for public services have been the main culprit.

At the same time, institutions have moved to employ hundreds of thousands of part- and full-time faculty in insecure positions where they are not eligible for tenure, where most do not receive remotely proportional pay for their services, and where most are shut out of the curriculum development and governance process.

Obviously, these problems are intertwined, and fixing them will require an approach that addresses both issues. That's why the AFT is vigorously promoting our Faculty and College Excellence campaign (FACE), on campus and in state legislatures across the country, with specific proposals to restore a healthy staffing structure by paying all higher ed professionals what they deserve and by refortifying the tenured faculty corps.

***Is there a final message or thought you'd like to send to AFT members and leaders?***

Ultimately, we're one big union brought together by the common goals of improving the services in the institutions where our members work, giving members a voice at work, and fighting for members and working people's economic security. I started at a local union 22 years ago. Locals, and to some extent state federations, are really where the rubber meets the road. Local leaders face the same kind of obstacles and challenges whether they're in New York City or in New Mexico, Ohio, California or Missouri; whether it's a big city, a small town, the suburbs or a reservation.

As unionists, we can play a leading role in improving the institutions in which our members work, while at the same time affirming the labor movement's traditional goals and values.

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