

A moment of moral clarity

Randi Weingarten, President
American Federation of Teachers

Have you heard the joke about Labor Day? It's when Americans celebrate the contributions of working people with mattress sales and cookouts so they don't have to think about how their wages and bargaining power have plummeted.

It's not funny, and neither is the reality it taps into—that, as Wall Street has soared, nearly 8 out of 10 American workers live paycheck to paycheck to make ends meet. Our economy and politics are rigged in favor of the wealthy and corporations. Individually, workers are virtually powerless to change this. Forming strong unions is the most effective way workers can level the playing field. As we approach Labor Day, it's time to demand that politicians stand with working people and support our freedom to join together in unions.

Belonging to a union helps working people gain the freedom to prosper. This freedom comes not only from making a good living, but also from work-life balance, the ability to take a loved one to the doctor or attend a parent-teacher conference without fear of losing your job, and the ability—after a lifetime of work—to retire with dignity.

Many corporations, wealthy interests and the politicians in their corner want those freedoms for themselves but not for their employees or people in public service like teachers. They have rewritten the economic and political rules to amass more wealth for themselves and secure as much influence as money can buy. They know that there is power in numbers, so they have plotted ways to gut union membership.

Dishonestly named “right-to-work” laws are in place in 24 states, tilting the power balance toward employers and weakening workers' freedom to join together to secure better wages, working conditions and benefits.

For years, wealthy interests have sought to make such legislation the law of the land. And this fall, the U.S. Supreme Court is expected to agree to hear the case of *Janus v. AFSCME*, which seeks to overrule decades of precedent enabling public sector unions to charge a fair-share fee to nonmembers for the representation they provide. The goal is to cripple labor unions, weaken workers' rights, and further exacerbate the imbalance of power in our economic, political and social

systems. That is why those behind *Janus* requested the Supreme Court review the case right after the confirmation of Justice Neil Gorsuch, who has a record of siding with corporate interests against working people.

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Amid these challenges, the AFT has grown steadily, adding more than a quarter-million members over the past decade (during which 364,000 school employees were laid off as a result of the Great Recession). Nurses and healthcare professionals, adjunct faculty, charter school teachers, thousands of teachers in Puerto Rico and many others have responded to the AFT's guiding values: to give working people voice, create economic fairness, resist hate, and reclaim the promise of public education and of democracy.

The AFT's growth is a testament to the fact that working people yearn to achieve better lives for ourselves, our families and our country, and we view unions as the vehicles to do so. The AFT and our local unions fight for adequate funding for public schools, for smaller class size and for ways to make all public schools safe and welcoming. We support fair pay and raising wages to both

lift workers out of poverty and create a stable middle class. We have helped pass laws that protect patient safety. We press to make higher education accessible and affordable. And the AFT, like other unions, has always lent our strength to the struggle for civil rights and a just society that honors everyone's freedoms, opportunities and safety.

This struggle has reached a disturbing turning point in the aftermath of the violence in Charlottesville, Va., and President Donald Trump's refusal to unequivocally condemn white supremacists and neo-Nazi groups. This is a moment of moral clarity: You either stand against racism, anti-Semitism and other hateful bigotry, or you don't. The president's failure to denounce hate in a clear and convincing way emboldens the forces of hate. Thankfully, the vast majority of Americans get this instinctively, and many are standing up against hate and violence, including many AFT members, 50,000 of whom joined a call last week to discuss our next steps as a union. As children are returning to school, educators will once again play a key role in this continuing struggle.

The late German theologian and anti-Nazi dissident Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: “Not to speak is to speak. Not to act is to act.” Who will speak against attacks on civil rights and human decency? Who will act to strengthen pillars of civil society, such as labor unions and public schools? Who will demand opportunity for all, over privilege for the few? Speak and act we must.



Weingarten (holding poster) with students, staff and Education Austin leaders at International High School in Austin, Texas, Aug. 24.

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