

Stopping ‘Make America Hate Again’

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You’ve undoubtedly heard a lot about the recent Republican National Convention in Cleveland. But there was another convention last week, and it couldn’t have been more different. Thousands of delegates convened in Minneapolis for the American Federation of Teachers’ biennial convention, where we commemorated the AFT’s 100th anniversary and the union’s history of fighting for our aspirations for our families and our communities—for economic and educational opportunity, democracy and fairness, and civil and human rights.

Political conventions provide an opportunity to draw distinctions, typically balancing passion with some decorum. But I doubt many people would use that word to describe the proceedings in Cleveland. It was a festival of hate, and it was chilling to hear speaker after speaker deliver angry rhetoric and venomous, threatening remarks intended to whip up a frenzy against Hillary Clinton.

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The AFT convention, which proudly hosted Clinton as a speaker, highlighted our union’s enduring values and our role in accomplishing them. At a time when the wealth gap is growing, union membership is declining and the middle class is shrinking, when elected officials are destabilizing public schools and public services in order to promote flawed privatization schemes, and when a presidential nominee says that wages are “too high,” this union and America’s labor movement are more necessary than ever.

People are angry. It’s the fear of being left behind. It’s the anxiety of wages that don’t rise with expenses. It’s the lingering unease, left over from the Great Recession, that in the blink of an eye you could lose your job, your home and your life savings. It’s the feeling many millennials know—that they’ve done everything right but are stuck with lots of debt and few job prospects. It’s the feeling that the economy is rigged and our politics are broken.

Some politicians stoke this anger. But aspirations for a better life are underlying the anger many feel. And those aspirations compel us to act.

One way the AFT acts is by fighting for excellent public schools in every neighborhood in America. At our convention, the AFT adopted a policy to ensure that the new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act, is the reset intended, and that, rather than fixating on tests, it makes public schools places where parents want to send their kids, students are engaged and educators want to teach. We also passed policies that confront discrimination of all kinds—to support the safety and educational opportunity of LGBTQ students, confront Islamophobia, address problems in our criminal justice system and promote racial equity.

Many vestiges of racial discrimination remain in the United States and, in fact, it has gotten worse—from the under-resourced and increasingly segregated schools attended by many children of color, to the 17 states that have restricted voting rights since President Obama’s election.

The United States has not come to grips with pervasive racism—not even close. And that shows in the disproportionate use of deadly force against black people. Our justice system needs to be more just. But it takes more than a legal change or a change in policing—our economy and our culture must change too.

Working to make the criminal justice system more just and supporting police are not mutually exclusive. Everyone deserves to feel safe—those who swear an oath to protect us, and those they are sworn to protect. Montrell Jack-

son, a black man who was one of the Baton Rouge police officers murdered last week, posted these words on Facebook shortly before his death: “In uniform I get nasty hateful looks, and out of uniform some consider me a threat. ... These are trying times. Please don’t let hate infect your heart.”

Tragically, the easy availability of guns in America enables haters to become murderers. The second amendment is the law of the land, but the National Rifle Association’s interpretation of it is not.

AFT delegates voted overwhelmingly to endorse Hillary Clinton. Hillary understands the most urgent issues confronting our country. Her economic plan puts unions front and center, one of the ways she will level the playing field for the middle class. She is committed to creating debt-free college for students, extending access to high-quality healthcare for all, and lifting children out of poverty. She is ready to assume the solemn responsibility of keeping Americans safe from violence and terrorism.

This is a moment of reckoning for our country—a battle for its soul and for our children’s future. These two conventions last week highlighted very different visions for our country. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” That’s true, but it doesn’t bend on its own. We bend it—through our work, our votes—and by building bridges, not walls.



Weingarten with Hillary Clinton at the 2016 AFT convention in Minneapolis.

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