



A Union of Professionals

AFT President Randi Weingarten AFT Biennial Convention July 28, 2020 “Confronting America’s Three Crises”

Thank you, Wayne.

I also want to thank Evelyn DeJesus, our executive vice president, who never stops fighting for justice and is a COVID-19 survivor. And I want to thank the iconic Dr. Lorretta Johnson.

Lorretta started her career in 1966 as a teacher’s aide in Baltimore. Today, she is secretary-treasurer of the 1.7 million-member American Federation of Teachers. Through it all, Lorretta has fought for racial equity and a better life for our members, our children and our communities. While we will honor Lorretta on her retirement with the Bayard Rustin Award later today, I couldn’t speak without thanking my beloved friend, mentor and partner Dr. J.

Since the founding of our union, the only time the AFT did not gather in person for a convention was during World War II. Until now. Today, we don’t face a world at war. But we do face an America in crisis—in fact, three crises: a public health crisis, an economic crisis and a long-overdue reckoning with the crisis of racism, all made worse by the current president.

PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS

Let’s start with the public health crisis—the coronavirus pandemic.

The AFT sounded the alarm about this virus back in February. I called on the Trump administration to act with greater urgency while there was still time to prevent the spread. We asked for a proactive response—for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration, the Department of Health and Human Services and the rest of the federal government to coordinate, and to inform and protect the public.

A month later, when the gravity of the situation was clear, President Trump insisted, “Pretty soon [it’s going to be] only five people,” and “One day, it’s like a miracle, it will disappear.”

Trump’s response has been chaotic and catastrophic. Instead of deploying the public health tools at his disposal, he has downplayed the threat, dismissed the advice of our nation’s top scientists and public health experts, and rushed to reopen. Now he wants to stop testing and hide data about how bad the pan-

The **American Federation of Teachers** is a union of professionals that champions fairness; democracy; economic opportunity; and high-quality public education, healthcare and public services for our students, their families and our communities. We are committed to advancing these principles through community engagement, organizing, collective bargaining and political activism, and especially through the work our members do.

Randi Weingarten
PRESIDENT

Lorretta Johnson
SECRETARY-TREASURER

Evelyn DeJesus
EXECUTIVE VICE PRESIDENT

demic is. He's tried to smear Dr. Anthony Fauci.

Mr. President, attack the virus, not the people fighting the virus. By the way, Dr. Fauci will join us in a virtual town hall with our members tonight—6:45 p.m. Eastern time, Facebook Live.

What's the price for Trump's failed response? The number of [virus](#) cases is rising in 40 of the 50 states. We have Depression-level unemployment. Family businesses going under. There's more homelessness and hunger, and millions are losing health insurance.

As if that weren't enough, this president is still trying to overturn the Affordable Care Act and strip health-care protections from millions of Americans with pre-existing conditions.

As for his claim that pretty soon there'd be just five cases of coronavirus? More than 150,000 people have died from COVID-19 in the United States, which now has more coronavirus infections and deaths than any other country. Make no mistake: In the United States, the war against COVID-19 was lost from the top down. And it's still being lost.

This isn't for lack of dedicated health professionals, world-renowned medical institutions or esteemed infectious-disease scientists. The AFT is honored to represent more than 200,000 of these incredible health professionals.

AFT members have been on the frontlines—protecting, educating, feeding and caring for others. Teachers, paraprofessionals and professors shifted to remote instruction in a nanosecond—an incredible display of dedication and flexibility.

Michele Bushey, a high school biology teacher in Saranac, N.Y., found that when her students didn't have internet access, online learning didn't work. So she spent hours each day calling students to provide alternate instruction, all while helping her own second-grade daughter learn remotely.

Bus drivers and food service workers scrambled to ensure families got "grab-and-go" meals. Yolanda Fisher, a school food service manager and member of Alliance/AFT in Dallas, and her colleagues have been preparing and distributing up to 1,000 meals each day, because they know that without those meals, students go hungry.

Social workers, juvenile justice workers, and workers in prisons braved the risks to keep doing their jobs, because they knew that was what was called for.

And then there are the nurses, EMTs, doctors, orderlies and respiratory techs, putting their health and lives at risk, often without adequate personal protective equipment. As Jose DeJesus, a registered nurse and member of Health Professionals and Allied Employees in New Jersey, said: Caring for patients with COVID-19 is "exhausting, frustrating and scary," but it is "our oath and our calling."

I'm sure you've seen the photos of nurses resorting to "protecting" themselves by wearing trash bags. The calls I've had with our healthcare members have been agonizing and heartbreak. So, as Wayne said in his introduction, the AFT stepped in and—I became a supply clerk. With a handful of AFT staff, we scoured the globe for protective masks, face shields and other PPE. Ultimately, we secured more than 50,000 face shields, 500,000 N95 respirators and more than 1 million surgical masks to protect our front-line members. We sent them to our affiliates as quickly as possible: to our nurses in Washington state, who were at the epicenter early in the COVID-19 crisis; to our Ohio Nurses Association; to AFT Connecticut; to the New York State Public Employees Federation; and across the country. And now that PPE shortages are flaring up again, we'll source more if we have to.

I welcome the newfound respect America has for the extraordinary work our members do, the billboards honoring healthcare workers, and the memes of parents realizing teaching is so hard.

But I mourn those we have lost. More than 200 AFT members have lost their lives to COVID-19.

Jonathan Coelho was a probation officer in Danbury, Conn. The day he was intubated, he wrote his wife and their young children about how lucky he was to be in their lives. He died the next day, 32 years old.

Gabrielle Gayle was a fourth-grade special education teacher and union delegate in Queens, N.Y. Gabby and her husband were expecting their second child when she died.

Elva Graveline was a certified nursing assistant in Connecticut. She worked in the respiratory unit, literally on the frontlines when COVID-19 hit her community. In working to save the lives of others, she lost her own. I was blessed to cry with her family in June.

We mourn them. And we remember them.

RECKONING WITH AMERICA'S RACISM

At this time of so much loss, there are others we must remember, whose names we must say: Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Philando Castile, Eric Garner, George Floyd. Murdered while sleeping, while jogging, while driving—because they were Black. We must confront the racism that cost them their lives and that is one of our nation's original sins.

Racial bias is not only evident in one man's knee on another man's neck. It is built into virtually every system in the United States. It's evident in underfunded schools, voter suppression, substandard housing, healthcare and transportation, low wages and high unemployment, discriminatory policing and mass incarceration, and in racial health disparities that existed long before COVID-19 started taking Black and brown lives at much higher rates than for white people: Higher infant mortality. More premature deaths. More exposure to unsafe water, unhealthy air and the environmental conditions that cause asthma.

Let's face the truth: Many Black Americans have been struggling to breathe long before the murders of Eric Garner and George Floyd.

Trump did not invent racial injustice, but he has fanned the flames of prejudice and made the divisions in our country much worse: the Muslim ban, the border wall, calling white supremacists "very fine people," and blaming Chinese people for COVID-19.

This is a moment of reckoning that requires all of us to act. And act so many of us have. The diversity of those who have protested and taken action gives me hope that America can shed the shameful indifference to the value of Black lives. And they give us proof that progress is possible.

From the cities that have banned the use of chokeholds by police, to changes in use-of-force guidelines, to the adoption of "duty to intervene" rules—we're seeing some long-overdue progress in policing.

That is necessary, but it's not nearly sufficient. We must protect the right that underpins every other: the right to vote. We must secure justice for the most vulnerable, whether it's a transgender teenager, or the countless Native American families for whom extreme inequality is part of their everyday existence. Children should never be caged, families belong together and Dreamers' home is here.

The AFT is trying to do our part. Our executive council passed a resolution in June laying out 19 commitments to combat systemic racism and violence against Black people. Among other things, it calls for the separation of school safety from police departments and help for school staff to address the needs of children who suffer racial trauma. We will convene a nationwide conversation on how to transform school security, led by a longtime leader from the United Federation of Teachers, LeRoy Barr.

We are continuing the work of the AFT Latino Task Force, we are creating the AFT Asian and Pacific Is-

lander Task Force. And anti-racism training will be part of all AFT leadership training.

In the labor movement, we often talk about turning moments into transformative movements. We must transform America, as Langston Hughes wrote, into “The land that never has been yet— / And yet must be—the land where *every* man is free.” Free to walk the streets, free to jog, to drive, to learn—without fear, and with true equality.

ECONOMIC CRISIS

The pandemic has exacerbated another pre-existing condition in America—extreme income inequality. Even before the pandemic hit, 78 percent of Americans were living [paycheck](#) to paycheck. Forty percent of Americans couldn’t cover a \$400 emergency. Thirty million children relied on school meals. Twenty percent of the country’s 43 million federal student loan borrowers were in default.

And then COVID-19 hit. As this pandemic batters the United States, we are all in the same storm, but we are far from being in the same boat. Since COVID-19 erupted, 45 million Americans lost their [jobs](#), 1.5 million more children are going hungry—and U.S. billionaires added \$584 billion to their own wealth. One in 5 workers is [either on unemployment or waiting for their claim](#) to be approved, yet Trump and his Republican allies are allowing those benefits to run out in two days. State and local budgets are cratering. Nearly 1 million people who work in schools and colleges have already lost their jobs in this recession. And 1.4 million more educators will lose their jobs if the Senate denies states and schools the funds they need for essential services.

Trump desperately wanted to stake his presidency on a strong economy, but history will show that this downturn was so much worse than it needed to be and that so many more people lost their jobs—because Trump is so bad at his.

Americans get this. The majority believe the country is on the [wrong track](#), and that we must do better. Just like the New Deal and the Great Society, we know that bold action is needed to achieve the economy and society that we have long championed: a society in which people have the opportunity to attain a better life—good jobs with a living wage and a union, adequate healthcare and housing, child care and retirement, a healthy and sustainable environment, and justice for all.

That starts with education—pre-K through postsecondary. And our public schools, which are a foundation of our democracy, must be excellent for all, equitable for all and empowering for all.

But first they must reopen safely. We know that kids need in-person learning and that remote instruction is no substitute for it, but it has to be safe. That is why the AFT has been planning for school buildings to reopen since they closed. Back in April, we issued our “Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities.” It’s based on science and public health protocols as well as educator, school staff and healthcare expertise.

Our plan details three conditions essential for school buildings to reopen: First, low infection rates and adequate testing in any region where in-school learning is being considered; to state the obvious, we cannot rebuild the economy, including reopening schools, until we get the virus under control. Second, public health safeguards, starting with masks and social distancing, cleaning and ventilation, handwashing, and reasonable accommodations for those at risk. And third, the necessary resources to enact each and every one of these safeguards, as well as the supports for meeting kids’ academic, social and emotional needs. Because states have been so badly hit, federal resources are absolutely essential. And parents, students, school staff and their unions have to be involved, not sidelined.

While safety must be the main consideration, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to school reopening. Public schools in Montana have reopened with the necessary spacing and other safeguards. But that’s not

possible in places where COVID-19 is surging. That's why school districts like those in Atlanta, Houston and Los Angeles have been forced to make the difficult decision to start the school year remotely.

But, in Florida, despite the state's still surging COVID-19 infection rates, the governor is ordering all public schools to fully reopen in August. So last week, with our help, the Florida Education Association filed a lawsuit against Gov. DeSantis. The right-wing predictably lashed out at teachers and their unions, claiming we don't want to be back in school; not a word about the resources or conditions we need, or Trump's mishandling of the crisis, or all the work we're doing across the country to plan for a safe return.

In New York City, for example, the United Federation of Teachers has negotiated an agreement on a package of protocols—including PPE, medical accommodations for staff, social distancing, cleaning and disinfecting, and scheduling for blended instruction. And there is a new push for community schools and wraparound services in New York state.

Unions in Massachusetts are advocating for a phased reopening that starts with school staff having time together to prepare for the resumption of school; then, educators and school staff will check in with students and families to assess their basic needs, including their emotional health; and then, instruction and learning will resume, whether it's in-person, remote or a hybrid.

But school districts are immobilized by lack of funding and lack of space, by windows that don't open and bathrooms without soap. The average school will need at least \$1.2 million, or \$2,300 per student, to open its doors safely. Assuming no other budget cuts, that's at least \$116 billion—to have the resources to protect the health of students, staff and families, and to have the supports to meet every child where they are and to advance every child's learning and development.

But of course, in this recession, there have been budget cuts. Draconian cuts. So, in this recession, the only source for that funding is the federal government.

The House of Representatives did its job. It passed the HEROES Act in May—a COVID-19-relief and recovery package that includes \$1 trillion for states and cities and towns, including \$100 billion for K-12 public schools, higher education and historically Black colleges and universities, and \$50 billion for child care. It shores up healthcare—from Medicaid to preventing the closure of more rural hospitals, and requires OSHA to do its job. The HEROES Act also defends the right to vote, extends unemployment insurance, and protects renters and homeowners from eviction.

What did Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell do? He scoffed at the aid states need, saying they should go [bankrupt](#). Then, as parents and teachers around the country were grappling with how to start school in the fall, McConnell and his colleagues went on vacation.

These funds should have been distributed to communities months ago. How dare McConnell stonewall and stall this aid? And how dare Trump tweet, in all caps, "SCHOOLS MUST OPEN IN THE FALL!!!" With no plan. No funding. And no idea what he is talking about.

What hypocrisy, to cancel the GOP convention in Jacksonville, Fla., because of the risks to GOP delegates gathering in that coronavirus hot spot, yet in the same breath demand that children and teachers gather in schools in that same hot spot.

Why would anyone trust Trump with reopening schools, when he has mishandled everything else about the coronavirus? Why would anyone trust Betsy DeVos, who has zero credibility about how public schools actually work? Why would anyone try to reopen schools through force and threats, without a plan and without resources? Unless all they wanted was to create chaos so it would fail.

Before the virus' resurgence, and before Trump and DeVos' reckless "open or else" threats, 76 percent of AFT members polled in June said they were comfortable returning to school buildings if the proper

safeguards were in place. Now they're afraid and angry. Many are quitting, retiring or writing their wills. Parents are afraid and angry, too. A recent AP poll shows that the majority of Americans think that school buildings should only reopen with major adjustments or revert to remote instruction.

Let's be clear: Just as we have done with our healthcare workers, we will fight on all fronts for the safety of our students and their educators. But if authorities don't protect the safety and health of those we represent and those we serve, as our executive council voted last week, nothing is off the table—not advocacy or protests, negotiations, grievances or lawsuits, or, if necessary and authorized by a local union, as a last resort, safety strikes.

It is the 11th hour. We need the resources now. Our message has gotten through, but we haven't gotten what we need. Members like you have made calls and sent letters to your senators—tens of thousands of them. We can't let up now. Keep calling. Keep writing.

If the federal government—the one to which we pay taxes—can send a life raft to the cruise industry, give hedge funds a free lunch, and offer a tidy handout to Kanye and the Kushner family—they sure as hell can help working families, and can help educators ensure our kids get the education they need.

As the country confronts these three generation-defining crises—a public health crisis, an economic crisis and a crisis of racial justice—one factor, one person, is making them all worse: Donald J. Trump.

Donald Trump told us who he is. In the first moments of his presidency he spoke of “American carnage.” He intended it as an insult to his predecessor, but it turns out to have been a prediction. He caged children and tore families apart. He teargassed peaceful protesters for a photo op and sent federal forces to Portland, Ore., uninvited, to incite violence. He gave Vladimir Putin a pass for putting bounties on American troops.

As the economy slumps and COVID-19 deaths spike, Trump has chosen to be the commander in chief of a culture war, not the consoler in chief to a nation in pain. He labeled peaceful protesters calling for racial justice “terrorists.” He denies the fact that Confederate symbols and statues celebrate slavery and racial terror. He ranted that “Our children are taught in school to hate their own country.”

Do you recognize his dystopian portrayal of America? Of the public schools where you foster the freedom to think, to hope and to learn? Of course not, because this is just another of the 20,000 documented lies that have come out of Trump’s mouth since he became president.

It is no wonder that a majority of Americans say Trump’s handling of his job as president has been irresponsible, self-absorbed, chaotic, unprepared and out of control. It’s no wonder that historians are sounding the alarm about the threat he poses to democracy. How many scholars do we need to tell us that when you lose democracy, it’s gone? How much history do we need to learn to know that it can repeat itself? It’s not enough to just defeat Trump. We must right the course of our country and reimagine a better, more equitable future.

Of course, that’s what we try to do as a union: just this year, helping AFT members reduce their student debt by millions of dollars, providing a new trauma benefit, offering Innovation Fund grants to help members teach in a changed environment. We will do our part. But we need partners—on school boards, in statehouses and in the White House.

And Joe Biden will be a true partner.

Before the pandemic, the 2020 election was about the soul of our country. Now it’s about our soul, our safety, our freedoms, our economic future, justice and a whole lot more.

Our presidential endorsement process this cycle was designed to engage more of our members than ever

before. And it did. And, after all the member town halls and listening sessions with the candidates, when it was time to come together, the AFT executive council gave Joe Biden a rousing endorsement because he is the experienced and caring leader our country needs right now.

We've got a choice between two people—and two visions for America—that couldn't be more different.

Joe Biden is deeply decent. And when he's made mistakes, he has learned and grown from them. He is honest—in every dealing we've had, his word has been his bond. In fact, he was our go-to person in the Obama administration. He gets things done—President Obama looked to Vice President Biden on everything from taking on gun violence to foreign policy. As vice president, he helped fight a national health crisis and climb out of a recession, and as president, he'll do it again.

There is something else that really matters at this moment: Biden's deeply-felt empathy. At this time when we're experiencing tragedy upon tragedy, we need a president who understands and cares about what we're going through. Few public servants have endured so many of life's most heartbreakings losses: the loss of a wife and two children. Even fewer have found purpose in that pain—by easing the pain of others.

Decent, honest, caring, effective. Do any of those words apply to the current occupant of the Oval Office?

Joe shows us how you put one foot in front of the other. Not to run away from the past, but to keep moving toward the future. And what does that future look like?

Imagine a world with: universal pre-K; debt forgiveness for educators; triple Title I funding; expanded community schools; supports for kids with special needs; high-stakes testing thrown out the window; charter school accountability; public colleges and universities tuition-free for families who earn less than \$125,000.

That's not from an AFT resolution. That's straight from the Democratic Party platform, born out of the Biden-Sanders Unity Task Force recommendations we helped draft. That platform—including its embrace of labor unions; its plans to revitalize American manufacturing and rebuild our aging infrastructure; its recognition of healthcare as a right; and its commitment to creating a path to citizenship for 11 million people, eliminating greenhouse gas emissions, reversing the Trump tax cuts and ending mass incarceration—is, as Bernie said, the most progressive Democratic platform in history. It's a plan to "build back better" and reimagine what society should look like.

It's time to give Joe Biden the chance to enact that plan as president—with a teacher, Dr. Jill Biden, at his side.

And we will need a Senate on his side—and ours, as well. Without it, Mitch McConnell will keep throwing sand in the gears of government and packing the courts with judges driven by ideology, not the rule of law.

Right now, the polls look good for Biden. People recognize that Trump has failed our country. And we're competing in Senate races in across the country. But the only poll that counts is the election result. And we can't just win. We need to win decisively.

We know votes will get suppressed, there will be broken machines, closed precincts and voter roll purges. We know more disinformation campaigns will be unleashed. And does anyone doubt that Trump will do everything he can to hold on to power? We need to win and win decisively. Democracy is on the ballot.

In two of the last five presidential elections, the candidate who won the popular vote didn't become America's president. We can't let that happen now.

Just like in 2018, when we made such inroads in states and in the Congress, we need big wins—we need to win the presidency and the Senate, as well as local elections from judges and district attorneys to state legislatures and school boards. This is our shot to make real change, and we are not throwing away our shot. (Spoiler alert: Lin-Manuel Miranda, as well as Joe Biden, will be with us on Thursday.)

AFT members have already made thousands of calls during the primaries to get out the vote. That's great, but more is needed.

This has been an era of disinformation, lies and a dangerous erosion of trust. But guess what? You are trusted. By your family, your friends and your community, and your fellow union members and colleagues. Nothing cuts through that disinformation like the people you can trust. So we need to do what our union has done for a century—person-to-person organizing.

We are aiming for 100,000 actions a month—phone calls, texts and emails. We need every hand on deck and, to help, we have created a new program and the tools to help us get this done in a pandemic.

We lost Michigan by 10,000 votes in the last presidential election. Our members showed up. In 2016, 82 percent of our members were registered to vote, and 73 percent voted. But some of the folks they are closest to did not. Changing outcomes like that is within our grasp, if even half of our members inspire just one of their friends or family members to vote. We need you to come out, we need you need to tap your circle—your book group, your sorority, your Facebook friends, your peeps, anyone you can get to the polls or to vote by mail.

Vote by mail is safe; don't believe what Trump tells you. After all, he voted by mail, and you better believe he wants to have his vote counted.

This Nov. 3, we need to vote like our lives depend on it. Because they do.

In the last two years, we have learned a lesson over and over that the founders of the AFT understood, that John Lewis and other leaders of the civil rights movement understood. Activism and elections build the power necessary to create a better life, a voice at work and in our democracy. Activism changes the narrative, elections change policy, and together, they change lives.

I spoke earlier about finding hope in the protests for Black lives. I find hope in something else, too: you, and our activism.

From the moment Trump was elected, to his choice of Betsy DeVos, to the *Janus* decision, school shootings, austerity and countless other challenges—AFT members have stood up for what is right. We saw it in the teacher strikes, from the hollers of West Virginia to the alleys of Chicago and during the rainstorms of Los Angeles. We saw it in the bus tours in Florida and New York, the demonstrations in Minnesota and Massachusetts, Michigan and New Mexico, calling on officials to Fund Our Future. We engaged the community, and together we changed the narrative about public education, we changed policy and we changed lives.

The other side knows the power of collective action; that's why they go after us. It's no mystery why Betsy DeVos sat in on oral arguments in the *Janus* and *Espinoza* Supreme Court cases. She knows that public education and the right to join a union empower people. And she knows that when people are empowered, even her billions of dollars won't be a match for our millions of voices.

We know it, too—that together we can accomplish things that are impossible on our own. That's why people are joining the AFT. We have organized 59 new units with close to 12,000 workers in 21 states since the last convention. Since the *Janus* decision, the AFT has seen a net growth of more than 44,000 members, including 4,000 new members since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.

I am hopeful, despite everything we are going through. There is a basic goodness in the souls of Americans. We must have leadership that matches that goodness.

Together, we can temper the health, economic and racial justice crises that are tearing our country apart. Together, we can rethink, reimagine and rebuild our country. Together, we have the power to defeat Donald Trump and elect Joe Biden. Together, we will care, fight, show up and vote for a better life for all Americans.

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