

How to make America work for the American working class

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We all want a better future for ourselves and our families, regardless of how we voted in the recent presidential election. That's why I believe there is a unifying path forward for all Americans—a path of hope, not fear, recognizing full well that fear, anger and a sense of powerlessness in many ways fueled people's votes.

It's clear to me that incumbency, inflation, immigration and identity were at play in this election. When people feel their lives are going in the wrong direction, they often vote to punish the incumbent. In our fractured society, Americans agree that the cost of housing, gas and eggs is too damn high, and many candidates wrongly scapegoated immigrants as the source of our woes. Finally, identity: Of course, race and gender played a role, but so did class, as evidenced by Donald Trump's gains among non-college-educated voters of all races.

Here's a simple truth: We all do better when we all do better.

Four decades of downward mobility for men with only a high school diploma (who make 22 percent less than they did 45 years ago) has had grave economic consequences, and it inflicts psychic wounds on a country that has long believed each generation would do better than the last.

People who feel powerless to improve their economic straits expressed their dissatisfaction through their vote. But Americans don't need a strongman promising to "fix" their lives. Education, good jobs and the labor movement are ways people are able to empower themselves. My union works to strengthen these engines of agency and opportunity. And in this election, voters overwhelmingly supported both public schools and workers' rights when they were on the ballot, including in places where Trump won.

The AFT is working to transform the high school experience, including through career and technical education, which equips students with

knowledge, skills, apprenticeships and stackable credentials for good jobs in in-demand fields. High school must be more than college prep. Every student deserves opportunity, whether they are immediately college-bound, eventually college-bound, or among the 60 percent of Americans who will not attend or graduate from college.

Any student, parent or teacher will tell you: School should be engaging and relevant, so kids want to be there. Young people need to be adept in four skill sets: critical thinking, problem-solving, resilience and relationships. These are the new basics necessary to thrive.

Public schools ignite opportunity for students; a union card sustains that opportunity throughout their careers and into their retirement. If Trump wants to make good on his populist promises to working-class voters, he will support workers' right to join unions.

The economic advantages of union membership are clear. Union members enjoy higher wages and better benefits. Union households have nearly four times the wealth of nonunion households, and union members are more likely to own a home and have a retirement plan.

Support for unions is at the highest level since 1965, yet only 1 in 10 workers in America is in a union. De-unionization is a significant factor in the surge in inequality and the decline of the middle class.

The trickle-down economy of the last 40 years has accelerated this downward mobility. Neoliberal economic rules have prioritized wealth over work, corporate profits over worker pay, shareholder returns over societal value, and

the bogus claim that, in a plutocracy, economic benefits will somehow trickle down. This neoliberal philosophy has never worked for anyone but the rich.

As I reflect on the highs and lows of the past year, I return to a simple truth: We all do better when we all do better.

We must match times of great anxiety with great ambition and reignite an economic movement for all families to be better off. That starts with ensuring all students have access to relevant, engaging education in well-supported public schools. And Congress must act for the common good: Fend off threats to cut vital funds for poor- and working-class kids and students with disabilities. Pass the Protecting the Right to Organize Act. Rewrite economic rules to stop big corporations and billionaires from rigging capitalism further in their favor. Build on the Affordable Care Act and address the problems of private health insurance. Guarantee Social Security for generations to come, including those who have contributed but are denied access to this fundamental promise to our seniors. These paths create agency and opportunity so all Americans can secure a better life.

Millions of Americans placed their trust in President-elect Trump. If he does the bidding of Big Tech, Big Oil and the billionaires who bankrolled his campaign, as early signs suggest, this will be a betrayal of the working people who voted for him seeking lower costs and a better standard of living. Both Republicans and Democrats must advance policies that help working- and middle-class Americans not only survive but thrive, because that is the promise of America.



Weingarten speaking with students attending Columbia University's School of International and Public Policy on Dec. 4.

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