



Education | Healthcare | Public Services

The Road Ahead: Fighting for Progress, Freedom and Democracy

I. The Moment We're In

These are unprecedented times. First and foremost, I want to thank President Biden. He's been a great president, a great public servant and an incredible patriot. We owe him a debt of gratitude.

Of course I'm starting with a primary source. I don't think they've banned Charles Dickens—yet. “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness. ...” Those words were written more than 165 years ago, but today they feel very Dickensian.

Today, our union has never been stronger, and a revival of labor activism is sweeping the nation. Wages are up, inflation has cooled, the Biden-Harris administration has created more jobs than any other in history, and America's economy is the strongest in the world—powered by America's workers.

Yet...

Fear, anxiety and despair have taken hold across our country, driven by disinformation, shifting demographics, loneliness and a pervasive feeling that the American dream is slipping further and further out of reach. Our students and our patients are coming to us with greater and greater needs. Academic freedom and the right to peacefully protest have come under attack. From floods to famines to fires, climate catastrophes are worsening. Hate crimes, particularly anti-Muslim and anti-Jewish hate, are climbing. And gun violence still haunts us.

Let's be clear: Political violence is never justified; not on Jan. 6 and not against political candidates. And while the calls to condemn political violence were encouraging, billionaires and demagogues are still capitalizing on fear to stoke division, defund public education and public services, decimate healthcare and dismantle our democracy—all to cement their power. And the Supreme Court's extremist majority is aiding and abetting them, rewriting the Constitution in terrifying ways.

The AFT 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.

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Operatives like Christopher Rufo, who work on behalf of billionaires like Betsy DeVos, openly admit their scheme—to create distrust in public education and in their political enemies so they can enact their extremist agenda.

These aren't the first unscrupulous operatives we've faced. We've been outspent, been bet against, and had our union's obituary written more times than we can count. Michelle Rhee tried to sweep us away. Scott Walker tried to legislate us out of existence. Billionaires backed the *Janus* case to try to bankrupt us. A red wave was supposed to crest in 2022 and wash us away.

Mike Pompeo tried to vilify us, first claiming that America's school teachers teach "filth," and then calling me the most dangerous person in the world—more dangerous than Vladimir Putin. Why? Because I am your elected leader.

But we're still here. In fact, we're thriving. I guess that old saying IS true—what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. And, in our case, bigger.

The AFT had 1.4 million members when I became president in 2008. Since then, we've been through two recessions, a pandemic and all the crap I just described.

Despite everything that has been thrown at us, since our last convention, the AFT has added 185 new units and more than 80,000 new members.

And today, the AFT is 1.8 million members strong!

Who are the newest members of the AFT? Four airport ground crew workers in Bangor, Maine—and 450 teaching assistants at Brown University. Nine licensed practical nurses at PeaceHealth in Oregon, and 910 diagnostic imaging techs in Michigan. Bus drivers in Farmington, Ill., and faculty and staff at universities in Kansas and Hawaii. Healthcare workers at Planned Parenthood in Wisconsin. Librarians in Ohio, doctors in Maryland, charter school educators in Massachusetts, paraprofessionals in Minnesota. And thousands more who just want a better life, including—after a 50-year fight—the 27,000 educators and school staff in Fairfax County, Va.

Why do they join the AFT? Because the AFT believes in improving people's lives. Because the AFT believes in our communities and our country. And because the AFT believes in you.

This growth is essential. America's middle class has risen and fallen as union membership has risen and fallen. That's why we—indeed, the entire AFL-CIO—are working to grow.

Our unions help us win better wages and benefits. Our unions give us real voice at work. It's how the United Federation of Teachers negotiated groundbreaking paid parental leave and lower class sizes. It's how Cleveland got their new policy prohibiting students from using cell phones during the school day. United Teachers Los Angeles won sustainable community schools. And the Chicago Teachers Union is negotiating for healthy, safe, green schools.

It's about the value of belonging.

You're never on your own in our union, especially during life's hardest moments, like when we lost two members of our union family from Farmingdale, N.Y. Band director Gina Pelletiere and retired teacher Beatrice Ferrari were chaperoning a band trip when their bus crashed, killing them and injuring several students. Chaperoning, coaching, advising clubs—our members perform so many unsung labors of love. Their memories are a blessing. Thank you, Cordelia Anthony, the president of our Farmingdale local.

Amid the surging culture wars, the AFT made a promise: To defend any member, like Amy Donofrio, who gets in trouble for teaching honest history or doing what it takes to meet the needs of our students or our patients. So many of our members feel alone and bullied, so many are walking on eggshells every day. In May, we won an important case when a New Hampshire law designed to stoke fear about teaching history and discussing gender, race and identity was ruled unconstitutional. Two of the plaintiffs are with us today—Ryan Richman and John Dube. Thank you.

Then there's Karen Marder, a teacher at Hillcrest High School in Queens, N.Y. Days after the Oct. 7 Hamas massacre, Karen posted a photo of herself on Facebook holding a sign reading, "I stand with Israel." Shortly afterward, there was a riot at Karen's school targeting her and calling for her to be fired.

Karen had a choice to transfer to another school. But she returned to Hillcrest, and with a Palestinian friend and fellow teacher, she met with students. Karen used the experience to model how to counter hate, combat intolerance, debunk misinformation and discuss challenging topics. This is what teachers do. Thank you, Karen, for being here.

We believe a better life for all is possible. And we act on that belief through our Real Solutions campaigns. Fighting for our communities. Fighting for each other. Fighting for our values, for the kind of country and the kind of world we want.

During COVID-19, we celebrated healthcare workers as heroes, yet many healthcare corporations betrayed those workers, failing to protect the safety and health of our nurses, technicians, doctors and other health professionals.

We didn't just get angry; we acted. Through our Code Red campaign, we're fighting to combat burnout of and violence against healthcare workers, and to improve patient care. And we are winning. We got new safe staffing laws in Oregon, Connecticut and Washington and new contracts in New York and New Jersey. We're targeting private equity conglomerates that buy up hospitals and bleed them dry without regard for patients or healthcare providers.

Schools and colleges would not function without paraprofessionals and support staff. They fix it, clean it, drive it, teach it, cook it, type it—but too often they are denied a living wage, affordable healthcare, safe working conditions, paid family leave, or meaningful professional development. While some locals have made progress through bargaining, we

need to nationalize this fight. So we're calling for a Bill of Rights for support staff in schools and colleges, and we're working with members of Congress to pass it.

Speaking of raises, teachers need them too.

And so do public employees. They protect our communities and environment, and they make government services more effective. But an understaffing crisis is stretching public employees to the breaking point and endangering lives. In New York state, dire staff shortages have affected crucial services like the child abuse hotline. Corrections officers in Kansas have had to work mandatory double shifts for months on end. In Colorado, the shortage of nursing staff in state facilities has resulted in patients with mental health conditions being housed in prisons. So, using the new report from AFT Public Employees, we are launching a campaign this week to combat these shortages.

Speaking of colleagues who need our help, let's talk higher education. We're fighting for investment and for the freedom to teach, and we're fighting against precarity and endless attacks. Our new higher ed campaign is about access, academic freedom and affordability for all students and ending the adjunctification that higher ed faculty face. Expression—including expression one disagrees with—must be protected for a democracy to thrive. The Hamas-Israel conflict has tested this. But we can and must fight hate, ensure people on campus are safe and protect nonviolent speech.

That's what our members from Rutgers University, Northwestern University and the University of California did. When their college presidents testified before Congress, they were there to make sure the presidents acknowledged their responsibility to protect the right to peacefully protest and the rights of students and faculty to be safe.

We're fighting back against the addictive and predatory practices of social media companies, demanding that they protect children, not prey on them.

And we are focusing on artificial intelligence. AI can be a powerful tool, but there must be strong guardrails like those the AFT recently laid out. We are also imagining how to harness AI's potential, with both Share My Lesson's AI Educator Brain and AFT Innovation Fund grants.

The fights for real solutions don't end there. For over a decade, as you heard from Dr. Saint-Paul, we have fought for the federal government to keep its promise to teachers, nurses and other public service workers for student debt relief.

Donald Trump and Betsy DeVos refused. Ninety-nine percent of public service workers who tried to get debt relief were rejected. That is why the AFT sued DeVos and the student loan giant Navient for conspiring against borrowers.

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris have kept that promise. In three years, 946,000 public service workers have had \$69 billion in loans forgiven. Our members have saved an average of \$60,000.

I hear from AFT members all the time, many of whom have participated in AFT student debt clinics, that they can now buy a home, start a family, send their own kids to college and retire with dignity.

But the student loan system remains dangerously vulnerable to the whims of predatory student loan companies—first Navient, now MOHELA, the latest to line its pockets while refusing borrowers the relief they're owed. So this morning, the AFT went to court, filing a consumer protection lawsuit against MOHELA. We won't stop until every borrower gets the forgiveness they deserve.

Public schools are essential to our children's future and to our democracy. Every public school should be a place where families want to send their children, educators want to work, and all our students thrive. That North Star guides our K-12 campaign, Real Solutions for Kids and Communities.

We have a vision of what schools can be. It starts with helping our kids love reading. That is why we invest in tools to help teachers be fluent in all aspects of the teaching of reading, and it's why we invest in books.

More than a decade ago, the AFT and First Book joined forces to give books to children who might otherwise not have their own. As others have banned books, more than 700 AFT locals have organized hundreds of community book giveaways across the country. And this May we hit an amazing milestone—donating our 10-millionth book.

Experiential learning should be standard in our schools—hands-on learning, debates, robotics, science fairs, service learning, student-led projects, and career and technical education. As the Biden-Harris administration has remade the economy, the AFT and our affiliates have created transformative pathways to secure those new good jobs, right out of high school, including in healthcare and advanced manufacturing.

Experiential learning is a sea change in public education—and the federal accountability system needs to change with it. No single test can measure what kids need to learn and be able to do to succeed in life. Projects, portfolios and presentations tell us so much more. And they resonate with students. So it is well past time to end high-stakes testing as the basis of federal education law.

In a world in which teachers are expected to do it all and many families feel they are on their own, we need to expand community schools to meet these needs, to make school the oasis in a very broken world—with wraparound services, health services and after-school enrichment. It's time to make these schools the norm, not the exception.

None of this happens without adequate funding, and without the amazing educators we have the honor of representing. But now school privatization is putting that funding, and even the survival of public education in America, at risk.

The school voucher idea first took root in the 1950s, after the *Brown v. Board* decision, when politicians in many Southern states introduced voucher proposals so white families could evade school integration.

By 1990, vouchers became a fixation of the religious right. Since 2010, the American Federation for Children, Betsy DeVos' group, has spent \$250 million to push "school choice" and now boasts that that her spending has led to "\$25+ billion in government funding" being diverted from public schools to private alternatives.

Proponents of vouchers used to argue that they were a way for low-income and minority families to transfer out of low-performing schools. But research shows that vouchers, on average, negatively affect achievement. And today, vouchers subsidize wealthy families who already send their kids to private and religious schools. Privatizers fund those giveaways by defunding and destabilizing public schools.

Look at the fight here in Texas.

Under Zeph Capo's leadership, Texas AFT fueled a coalition of parents, pastors, and rural Republican and urban Democratic legislators. They've defeated vouchers not once, not twice, but five times.

But did Texas Gov. Greg Abbott accept the will of the people? No, he declared war not just on public education, but on anyone who supported public education, including spending millions in primaries to defeat the Republicans who stood up for kids in public schools.

And for all of you who live in states like California, Illinois and New York who think "it can't happen here," these billionaires and extremists have their sights set on you too. That's why I'm so glad for the pro-public education campaigns our state federations in Montana and New York are leading.

Why do these extremists want to destroy public education?

They fear what we do—the teaching of reason, of critical thinking, of honest history, of pluralism—because their brand of greed, of power, of privilege, cannot survive in a democracy of diverse, educated citizens.

They oppose democracy itself. The extremists want to cement their power and prevent others from having it. So they're going after educational opportunity. They're going after economic opportunity. They're going after equal opportunity. They're going after the legitimacy of elections.

In case you think I'm exaggerating, the enemies of democracy have helpfully written down exactly what they intend to do. It's called Project 2025. It's a 900-page extremist wish list, coordinated by the Heritage Foundation, that they intend to implement in the first 180 days if Donald Trump wins.

Here's a taste of what they'd do: Cut Social Security and Medicare. Let employers stop paying overtime. Strip healthcare protections for people with pre-existing conditions.

Allow the government to monitor pregnancies and prosecute people if they miscarry. Replace thousands of federal workers with ideologues, dismantle civil rights protections, end efforts to combat climate change, cut taxes for the wealthy, and weaponize the National Labor Relations Board against workers.

Their plans for public education are equally draconian. Title I would go—swelling class sizes and eliminating paraprofessionals. Educators and public librarians could have to register as sex offenders if they disseminate anything the Heritage Foundation considers pornographic. And their holy grail—limitless funding for private and religious schools, leading to the end of the separation of church and state and of public education as we know it.

It's a path to autocracy.

These extremists see it as a zero-sum game. To seize power, they must subvert ours. So they remake the judiciary, roll back freedoms, reduce taxes on the wealthy, rig democracy, wreck public education and restrict unions—because we the people stand in their way.

The president of the Heritage Foundation publicly warned that “we are in the process of the second American revolution, which will remain bloodless if the left allows it to be.” An explicit threat of violence.

This is the stuff of demagogues and dictators, not democracies.

Tragically, our nation's highest court has become a dangerous tool in this regard.

The last two years, the extremist, activist majority on the Supreme Court has rewritten the Constitution, thrown out long-settled precedents, scrapped environmental protections, eliminated the deference given to science and expertise, granted corporations new powers over us, and stripped individual rights, including women's freedom to make one of life's most personal and significant decisions.

And now, the extremist majority on the court has granted presidents near-total immunity and almost limitless powers, creating a rule of one, not a rule of law.

They have laid the legal foundation for American autocracy.

Allow me to dwell on this for a moment. There is no presidential immunity clause in the Constitution. It's pretty much the point of the founding of our country—the rejection of imperial rule. Yet the extremist majority on the court fabricated out of whole cloth a power of kings expressly not granted by the founders. .

This is the moment we are in. And the moment when our nation must make a decision of enormous, lasting consequence.

Who will hold the office of president, the office that the Supreme Court now says is above the law?

II. Contrast between the administrations

To state the obvious, these are unprecedented times. Joe Biden has been incredibly effective at moving the country forward. He is a great president. But he is passing the baton, and we respect his decision. Because of the changed circumstances, the AFT executive council met last night. We will be asking you to consider an endorsement of Kamala Harris for president of the United States.

Vice President Harris has fought alongside Joe Biden to deliver historic accomplishments and create a better life for all Americans. She has a record of fighting for us—fighting to lower the costs we pay, for reproductive rights, for worker empowerment and to keep communities safe from gun violence. As President Biden said in his endorsement of Kamala Harris, she has his full support to be the Democratic nominee for president.

Much is changing, but we know one thing already: Donald Trump is still Donald Trump. This will be a choice between two values systems—and only one lifts up freedom, democracy, pluralism and shared prosperity. And it's a choice between two records.

Let's compare those records. Take the economy: Trump passed trillions in tax breaks for corporations and the richest Americans, driving up the national debt by \$7 trillion during his administration. Three million Americans lost their jobs over the course of his presidency. Herbert Hoover had the worst record of job loss in modern history—until Donald Trump.

Trump left his successor a country in crisis and chaos, with soaring inflation and an economy in freefall. Joe Biden and Kamala Harris turned it around. They stabilized schools, saved pensions for hundreds of thousands of retired union workers and remade the economy. They invested in our country's future—in our roads, our bridges, our ports, our electrical grid, our manufacturing sector and, yes, our schools—more than any administration in my lifetime. They passed the child tax credit, which cut child poverty in half. They got the Inflation Reduction Act, the Bipartisan Infrastructure Deal, and the CHIPS and Science Act, and they helped veterans sickened by burn pits.

From insulin prices to junk fees to student debt relief, this administration is combating corporate greed. Medicare can now negotiate lower prescription drug prices for seniors, and the cost of insulin is capped at \$35 per month.

Instead of slipping into recession—which was widely predicted—Joe Biden and Kamala Harris led our country through the COVID-19 crisis to the strongest economic recovery in our lifetimes: 15 million new jobs. Inflation down from 9 percent to 3 percent.

Donald Trump promised to revitalize America's "left-behind counties" almost as often as he promised Infrastructure Week. It took the Biden-Harris administration to catalyze their

comeback. In the last three years, these distressed areas have added jobs and new businesses at the fastest pace in decades.

Yes, Americans are still struggling with higher prices and more must be done—on child care, housing, gas and groceries—but who do we really believe will take on the corporations that are gouging consumers on just about everything while raking in record profits on the backs of American families?

Our planet is boiling. But Donald Trump offered oil company executives a deal—he'd scrap climate laws if they donated \$1 billion to his campaign. The Biden-Harris administration has taken more action to combat climate change than any in history.

Trump takes credit for the overturning the constitutional right to make reproductive decisions. Kamala Harris led the fight to reinstate *Roe v. Wade*.

Trump bragged to members of the National Rifle Association that he “did nothing” to curb guns during his presidency. Biden and Harris advanced the most significant gun safety legislation in decades.

Trump's education agenda is “Betsy DeVos 2.0,” stripping civil rights and diverting funding from public schools to vouchers. The Biden-Harris administration has made record investments in public education, including investing in teachers and school staff, community schools, college, and career and technical education.

Trump stacked the National Labor Relations Board with anti-worker, anti-union members. Biden is the first president to walk a picket line, and the Biden-Harris administration vigorously defends workers' right to organize and bargain collectively.

Trump sides with dictators and strongmen. He has callously called for Israel to “finish what they started” in Gaza. Biden has rebuilt our international coalitions and has worked tirelessly for peace and for a ceasefire to stop this war.

What are Donald Trump's and Kamala Harris' visions for the country? Donald Trump wants to help himself and his friends—expand his tax cuts for the wealthy, deport millions of immigrants, and roll back Biden-Harris initiatives starting with clean energy. Kamala Harris wants to improve people's lives. Expand the Affordable Care Act and lower drug prices, make childcare and housing more affordable, raise wages and the corporate tax rate and make our country better for everyone.

Indeed, Mark Zandi, the chief economist of Moody's, says, “Biden's policies are better for the economy. They lead to more growth and less inflation.” Moody's projects that Trump's plan would trigger a recession by mid-2025.

Donald Trump stokes conflict. I pray this near-death experience changed him, but the Republican National Convention demonstrated the opposite. As president, he wanted to use his official powers to have Black Lives Matter protesters shot. He said the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff should be executed. He sought to overturn the results of the election he lost. He promises “retribution” if he is returned to the White House and a

“bloodbath” if he is not. And the Supreme Court has given him a blank check to do all of this.

And then there’s Trump’s lying: Dozens of lies in the debate. More than 30,000 lies during his presidency. From calling unflattering reports about him “fake news” to the “big lie” that the 2020 presidential election was stolen from him. Trump is not a blowhard mouthing off. He is a cunning master manipulator.

Does anyone in this room doubt, given a choice between what’s good for him or what’s good for working families, which Donald Trump would choose? Or whether he would use the nearly unlimited power the Supreme Court has granted him in dangerous ways?

If your answer is the same as mine, this election is the most important not only in our lifetimes but in our children’s and grandchildren’s lifetimes.

It’s going to be tough. The presidential election, the Senate elections, the House elections. Every day matters.

Yes, we must vote, but we must do more. In this world of “alternative facts” and disinformation, your voice and your activism are essential.

You are trusted, you are beloved—because you make a difference in the lives of others. Talk to your co-workers. Talk to your neighbors. Knock on doors. Write postcards. Put out the lawn sign and slap on the bumper sticker.

No one can do everything, but we can all do something. We can’t risk regretting that we didn’t do more.

III. A Better Future

There’s a new musical on Broadway called *Suffs*. It’s about the movement to win women’s right to vote. The lyrics from one of the songs called “Keep Marching” have been stuck in my head:

*Progress is possible, not guaranteed
It will only be made if we keep marching. ...
The future demands that we fight for it now
It will only be ours if we keep marching.*

What will that future be? The best of times? The worst of times? It is still in our power to shape it. *Progress is possible.*

Cast fear and despair aside for a moment and imagine what progress looks like. Imagine a country where a living wage is the norm, where families can afford decent housing, child care, a vacation every once in a while, and people can retire with dignity.

Imagine a country where all kids can be kids and have childhoods full of joy, learning and adventure. Where their bellies are full of nutritious food, they feel safe, and we prioritize their well-being. Imagine a country where every school is a school where educators want to teach, parents want to send their kids, and kids are excited to learn.

Imagine a country where healthcare is a right, hospitals focus on patients over profits, and nurses, doctors and technicians are treated like the heroes they are. And so are bus drivers, teachers and public employees.

Imagine a country where technology and AI are used for progress, not for disinformation or to replace good jobs.

Imagine a country where hate has no harbor and freedom rings—the freedom to vote, to live, to breathe; the freedom for families to make reproductive choices; the freedom to read; the freedom to teach; and the freedom to join a union.

We are at a historic juncture. Our nation has made great progress because we organized and fought and marched and voted. The November elections will determine which path we take as a nation. Progress is indeed possible, but so is the eradication of the rights and freedoms we hold dear.

Historians like Timothy Snyder and Heather Cox Richardson, who study threats to democracy and how fascists come to power, conclude that it is seldom a dramatic event or attack that lets fascism in the door. The violence comes later, after they are voted in.

Voting is still our best defense against tyranny and fascism. And it's our best offense to create that better future we dream of and march for.

Progress is possible, not guaranteed.

When the history books are written about this moment, let them record that we the people, united, mobilized and voted down this existential threat to democracy and freedom. That we continued the march for progress. That we laid the foundation for a better future. And that we sought to create a more perfect union.

Progress is possible, ... keep marching.