



Education
Healthcare
Public Services

AFT IN THE WORLD

DEMOCRACY, EDUCATION, LABOR, SOLIDARITY



GLOBAL SOLIDARITY

UNIONS & TEACHERS
IN CRISIS

EDUCATION FOR
DEMOCRACY

AFT IN THE WORLD:

Democracy, Education, Labor, Solidarity

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Message from AFT President Randi Weingarten

People sometimes ask me why a labor union like the AFT spends its time engaging in world affairs.

My answer is simple: Because the world does not stop at our domestic borders, and what happens across oceans and continents increasingly affects the daily lives of our members here at home.

The conflict in Iran, war in Europe, attacks on democracy, disruptions in global trade, health epidemics, refugee crises—these are not distant abstractions. They affect the price of groceries, gasoline and healthcare, and the economic security of working families in America. They already shape the future our communities will inherit.

AFT members come from diverse backgrounds, faiths, cultures and political perspectives. Within the AFT, there are passionate disagreements about world events and international conflicts. But one of the strengths of our union is that we do not fear diversity—we embrace it. It is proof that people and unions worldwide with different experiences and viewpoints can still come together around our shared values: democracy, dignity, public education, labor rights and human rights.

And we meet at a moment in history when those values are under real attack. As I have laid out in my recent book, *Why Fascists Fear Teachers*, this may be the most ominous period for threats to democracy we have seen in our lifetimes.

Around the world, authoritarian movements have been attacking independent unions, targeting educators, harassing journalists, weakening courts and turning neighbors against one another through fear and division. We understand this danger deeply, because educators are often among the first people authoritarians try to target. As I have said many times in the past, critical thinking is always a threat to tyranny.

But even in these difficult times, there are reasons for hope. We saw that recently in Hungary, where on April 12, after years of fearmongering, propaganda and democracy backsliding, voters demonstrated that democratic participation still matters: Democracy can fight back.

The good-news results from Hungary's peaceful elections reminded the world that people can reject corruption, repression and cynicism and choose a better future when civil society, labor movements, educators and democratic institutions stand up in peaceful resistance.

And we have seen that same spirit in the streets of cities across the world. During the last No Kings Day, millions marched in London, Rome, Seoul and across the United States to defend democratic values.

Those demonstrations were not identical in every city, but together they sent a powerful message that ordinary people still believe democracy belongs to them, not to oligarchs or authoritarians.

That is why international solidarity matters.

I have led leadership delegations standing with teachers in Ukraine, working alongside other international allies to raise the status and salaries of educators who continue working under the trauma of conflict.

We have worked for peace, safety and self-determination for both Israelis and Palestinians, lifting the voices of educators who seek safety, dignity and the right of children to learn in peace.

We have worked with educators from the Republic of Korea to South Africa, from Latin America to Eastern Europe and the Middle East, because teachers everywhere understand something fundamental: Public education is essential to democracy itself.

The AFT under former President Al Shanker was heavily involved internationally in supporting democratic trade unionism. He always reminded us that democracy depends on active citizens, free institutions and strong independent unions willing to resist abuses of power. And in that spirit, the AFT will continue working with partners around the world who seek to build peace, strengthen public education, protect labor rights and uphold the dignity of all.

A better future will not be built by isolation, fear or silence. It will be built by people who stand on the side of humanity, willing to reach across borders and defend democratic values. That is the work of the AFT. And that is the work we will continue together.



Weingarten and Ukraine refugee children in Warsaw

The AFT's Global Footprint



Education International
Internationale de l'Éducation
Internacional de la Educación
Bildungsinternationale



PUBLIC SERVICES
INTERNATIONAL



The labor movement has been an international movement for over 150 years. May Day, also known as International Workers' Day, grew out of the struggle for the eight-hour workday and the Haymarket Affair in Chicago in 1886. Many U.S.-based unions (IBEW, SEIU, UAW, LIUNA) have "International" in their names because they represent workers in Canada as well as the United States. This international character continues to manifest itself today and, it turns out, may be more critical than at any point in our history. As more and more industries and public services engage increasingly with a global economy, the trade unions that represent one of the very few checks on corporate power become even more important. From the streets of Argentina, Hungary, South Korea and Mexico, to those of Hamburg, Tokyo and Minneapolis, workers fight for public services, public education, democratic political systems, dignity and a voice at work, access to affordable healthcare and secure retirements.

The AFT stands up for these goals on the international stage by aligning and affiliating with a number

of global organizations where we are active and where our officers serve in leadership roles. These include, most notably and visibly, **Education International** and **Public Services International**, which we have supported and helped lead for decades. We also serve on the board of the **Solidarity Center**, with programs in dozens of countries around the globe, and the **National Democratic Institute**. AFT President Randi Weingarten chairs the EI advisory committee of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, where she was able to craft the OECD policy on AI in teaching and learning. As a member of the EI executive board, AFT Executive Vice President Evelyn DeJesus has helped build bridges between the AFT and Latin American teachers unions. She has also represented women trade unionists throughout Latin America, Canada, the United States and the Caribbean in the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas. All of this work and these relationships help constitute the AFT's global footprint.



NO KINGS



H. SPENCER

Reporting to the May 2026 executive board and Education International, AFT Executive Vice President Evelyn DeJesus was delighted to thank EI for its support for the No Kings rallies in North America and gave a shoutout to our Public Services International allies who demonstrated in Canada, Mexico, Italy, the United Kingdom, France and Germany. This solidarity matters, DeJesus emphasized, and reminds those of us in the United States that we are not alone in this struggle.



On June 14, in small towns, suburbs and cities across America, more than five million people turned out for No Kings Day against growing authoritarianism to show what democracy looks like: peaceful, passionate and people-powered. **We were joined in solidarity by thousands around the globe.**



FLC-GIL

U.N. Commission *on the Status of Women*



BRYAN WHITNEY

Executive Vice President Evelyn DeJesus and UFT leaders at UNCSW

The message is simple: solidarity across borders matters.

During the 70th annual United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, the principal global intergovernmental body focused on gender equality and women's empowerment, the AFT welcomed 25 leaders of unions affiliated with Education International and Public Services International as they began their deliberations on public finance, the care economy and protecting girls' education.

The gathering brought together union leaders representing educators, state and local government employees, and nurses and healthcare workers from many countries, including Ghana, the United Kingdom, Scotland, India, Norway, Brazil, Ecuador and Chile. Local AFT women leaders from the New York City region—about a third of the group—got to connect with women doing parallel work across national borders and facing many of the same pressures: strained public services, rising healthcare costs and the constant battle for respect in professions like education and healthcare.

These included New York State United Teachers, the United

Federation of Teachers, the Professional Staff Congress/CUNY, the New York State Public Employees Federation, AFT New Jersey and the Health Professionals and Allied Employees, also from New Jersey.

AFT President Randi Weingarten and AFT Executive Vice President Evelyn DeJesus addressed the group, with Weingarten framing the conversation around a point she has been making with growing urgency: The affordability crisis is not an abstract international policy debate. It is the grueling reality shaping working people's lives globally.

According to UFT Vice President for Education Mary Vaccaro, "What was most amazing about the conversations we were able to have with our counterparts from all over Latin America was that despite our different national circumstances, we had so much in common. Whether it was Chile, Argentina, Brazil or the United States, organizing women has the same basic challenge: how to balance our home responsibilities with our working lives."

More concretely, she added, "no matter where we live and work, we are battling employers over identi-

cal issues: safe staffing in healthcare and manageable class sizes in education. And all of us love the way our unions provide professional learning and workshops to help us grow as professionals."

In a room full of women leaders, the message was simple and powerful: Solidarity across borders matters, whether the issue is democracy, peace, public education, healthcare or affordability.



AFT President Randi Weingarten and Union of Education Norway Vice President Ann Mari Milo Lorentzen



CFT-NEU AI Collaboration

London and California, 2026

Many AFT members are aware that the union launched the National Academy for AI Instruction last July, with partners the United Federation of Teachers, Microsoft, OpenAI and Anthropic. You may have followed some of the many public debates over AI use by the government, by businesses, by your healthcare providers, and, of course, by your phones and computers.

You may not know that the AFT has been preparing for the coming of AI to the classroom for more than three years, beginning with AFT President Randi Weingarten at Sen. Chuck Schumer's AI Insight Forum in September 2023, where she represented educators, other workers and families "to discuss the artificial intelligence technology that holds so much promise for America but also presents serious concerns for democracy and humankind. If we want to harness that promise, we need both innovation and commonsense safeguards."

Promise alone isn't enough, she argued: "It presents serious concerns for democracy and humankind." Put differently, it is already everywhere, and we need to be grappling with it. That's why the AFT has been pushing serious consideration of AI by our international partners, including the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and Education International.

When Weingarten and National Education Union General Secretary Daniel Kebede met at the 2025 International Summit on the Teaching Profession in Reykjavik, Iceland, they couldn't help but notice a striking absence in the agenda—there was virtually no discussion of AI technology and how it was impacting teaching and learning in schools.

Kebede knew about the AFT's role in setting an AI agenda at the EI World Congress and wanted to know more about the AFT's relationships with its tech partners. In their conversation, both leaders saw that by collaborating, they could benefit each other's unions and members as everyone navigates the complex new world of AI in the classroom. They already had a model for collaboration—a decade ago, the AFT and NEU (the largest education union in Europe), built a global initiative against privatization of education, which grew into EI's Go Public! Campaign and continues to shape international education labor strategy to this day.

Designed to provide the NEU with a broad view of how educators and unions in California are responding to the rapid expansion of AI in schools and workplaces, the CFT took the delegates to legislative briefings, labor federation meetings, a school visit and intensive CFT-led AI trainings. Conversations emphasized educator voice and how to ensure that members get the support they need as AI reshapes the future of work.

Teachers raised concerns about student overreliance on AI, declining foundational skills, academic integrity and the lack of clear guidance from school administration. The delegation left the schools with a mutual agreement that unions are always directly involved in shaping AI implementation. Every meeting included an acknowledgement that the political influence of the technology sector is the central constraint to stronger AI regulation.

In May, a CFT delegation went to London. During the weeklong visit, sessions covered such concerns as staff avatars being used to teach absent students, AI-powered broadcast robots in classrooms and the absence of any government data protection guidance for schools. CFT members shared that University of California-AFT contract language now defines an educator as a human being. The CFT's framing



CFT delegates outside UK Department of Education

of AI as a worker rights issue rather than a technology debate resonated strongly with the NEU.

Meetings with the United Kingdom's Department of Education allowed NEU members to make the case that teachers cannot model responsible AI use if tools are being forced upon them without consultation. Fortunately, officials indicated that updated AI guidance, developed in partnership with the NEU, is forthcoming.

The union-to-union collaboration has three concrete outcomes:

- Both unions deepened their understanding of AI as a worker rights issue rather than a technology debate, advancing a shared position that educator authority, data protection and union-led implementation must be the foundation of any AI policy in schools.
- AI technology companies on both sides of the Atlantic are hard at work trying to limit strong AI guardrails and regulations.
- Finally, the visits produced concrete commitments to ongoing collaboration, including sharing AI training materials, coordinating advocacy strategies and continuing engagement ahead of key political moments in both countries.

What began in January as an exchange on AI in education grew by May into a full-scale partnership spanning education policy, labor strategy and the defense of democratic institutions. Both unions are living in similar environments, facing identical pressures from underfunding, the power of corporate technology, anti-labor science fiction fantasies and far-right electoral politics. Seeing those parallels up close, across two visits and two continents, has sharpened both unions' thinking and deepened a partnership that will only become more important in the years ahead.



Freitas on the line with British Colleagues



Unions & Teachers in Crisis

The AFT has a substantial global imprint because for generations, our union leadership has forged strong relationships with trade unions representing educators and public employees in dozens of countries on five continents in this large, beautiful and—unfortunately—often dangerous world.

Danger comes in many forms: war, famine, epidemics, earthquakes, authoritarian crackdowns and, increasingly, extreme weather events. And because large-scale crises always affect children and the more vulnerable above all—the very people we serve—our members frequently feel called upon to offer material and emotional support to their international siblings and their communities.

In Israel, Palestine, Ukraine and Jamaica, the AFT has worked hard to help our fellow trade unionists address the trauma faced by educators and youth in these very different crisis environments. None of these efforts would have been possible without the extraordinary generosity of our members and working families in other unions—most of whom never see the impact of their contributions firsthand.

In a late-breaking development, we are thrilled to report that two of our partners in this work, Save Ukraine and Parents Circle–Families Forum, have been nominated for the 2026 Nobel Peace Prize!

Israel and Palestine

The AFT has a long history of supporting a secure and democratic Israel and engagement with Palestinians in the West Bank.

We have advocated consistently for self-determination for Israelis and Palestinians, so that both peoples can live in peace, equality and freedom. We know that there is no military solution to conflict in the Middle East, no force of arms that can bring lasting peace and security. In that spirit, on May 28, the AFT executive council called for an immediate end to the war with Iran, calling “upon the United States and Israel to end the use of military force against Iran and the blockade of Iranian ports, and for Iran to end its blockade of the Strait of Hormuz.”

Over the course of many years, the AFT has met with Israeli and Palestinian teachers and union activists, representatives of the Israel Defense Forces and the Palestine Liberation Organization, the mayor of a Jewish settlement in the West Bank and former Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin’s daughter Dalia, women who live on the Israel-Gaza border and former Israeli soldiers turned activists for Palestinian

civil rights. These conversations have reinforced our conviction that dialogue across differences is essential to any lasting peace.

We have partners in Israeli civil society who are dedicated actors, engaged every day to advance the AFT’s interest in recognizing the rights, dignity and cultural expression of Jewish, Muslim and Christian Palestinians and Israelis. Our partners campaign every day on behalf of peace and mutual recognition—and against military action of all kinds.

In AFT President Randi Weingarten’s words, “I am incredibly proud of our ongoing partnerships in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in the West Bank and Gaza with education unions and civil society organizations as well as with the Israeli trade union movement (the Histadrut) and the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions.”

In Israel, we have worked closely with Parents Circle–Families Forum, an organization of more than 800 bereaved families who have lost loved ones to the conflict but have chosen reconciliation, peace and equality over retaliation.



To honor these lives, Parents Circle created a trauma-informed



**AMERICAN FRIENDS
of the PARENTS CIRCLE
— FAMILIES FORUM —**
Palestinian and Israeli Bereaved Families for Peace

curriculum, Listening from the Heart, an innovative dialogue and education program designed for schools, universities and community groups. It combines powerful video testimonies from bereaved Jewish and Palestinian families with structured activities and reflection tools, helping participants engage with difficult conversations in a way that fosters empathy, critical thinking and constructive dialogue. It's available on Share My Lesson.

The AFT also partners with Hand in Hand, a network of six bilingual and bicultural schools teaching 2,000 Jewish and Arab children who learn and grow up together. Children study in Hebrew and Arabic; they learn each other's history, share each other's experience and celebrate each other's holidays, showing that coexistence is not an abstract aspiration but a practical reality that can be taught, nurtured and sustained.

Amid the pain and turmoil in the Middle East, the AFT joined voices with those working to end conflict between Jews and Palestinians by partnering with the civil society organization Standing Together, a grassroots movement based in Israel to mobilize Jews and Palestinians in pursuit of peace, equality, and social and climate justice.

At the same time, we have partnered with Israeli civil society and educational organizations, and we have worked for decades with Palestinian education unions, the General Union of Palestinian Teachers and the Palestinian General Union of Workers in Kindergarten and Private Schools.

In our work with GUWKPS kindergarten teachers, AFT leaders and staff have provided on-site training programs in social and emotional learning for teachers dealing with trauma in their own lives as well as the trauma of their students. Teachers are themselves faced every day with the barriers of living in a repressive environment that includes constant checkpoints, intrusive surveillance, occasional violence and the ever-present danger of being arrested—as kindergarten teacher Fatima Rimawi was for a year, apparently due to social media posts. As the AFT has discovered in Ukraine and Jamaica, unless there is a way to deal with the social and emotional trauma and fears of teachers, they cannot be expected to address the social and emotional lives of their students.

The union has successfully delivered webinar trainings on the topic and is now reaching out to all of its affiliates throughout the West Bank to host live forums where teachers can share their stories of creating a safe and psychologically healthy environment for children, and building teachers' and children's skills in social-emotional learning.

Today, we continue to grow through planned collaboration with Palestinian higher education unions on the defense of academic freedom, and through the AFT's growing effort to mobilize education unions worldwide in support of better pay and working conditions for Palestinian educators, who continue to teach and serve in times of crisis.

GUWKPS



Ukraine Trauma Education

TUESWU



In the four years since Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the country's education system remains devastated. Nearly 4,000 educational institutions have been bombed and over 300 have been totally destroyed. Millions of children have been displaced internally or as refugees abroad. Educators have been asked not only to teach but to serve as frontline supporters for children experiencing acute and chronic trauma: the loss of family members, homes, classmates and the normalcy of daily life.

Ukrainian teachers' burdens include their own grief and stress from losing colleagues and students, having air raid alerts interrupting lessons daily, and teaching in bomb shelters. Without targeted support and training, teachers risk secondary trauma, burnout and an inability to recognize or respond to the trauma signals their students display. What looks like defiance, apathy or aggression is often simply a nervous system doing the best it can under horrifying conditions.

Since the beginning of the war, the AFT has made common cause with Ukrainian educators, visiting and working with the Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine. And in February 2023, in partnership with the Ukraine Children's Action Project and the Polish Teachers Union (ZNP), we procured and delivered nearly 50

generators to every preschool and kindergarten in Lviv, funded by AFT members through the union's Disaster Relief Fund.

At the AFT's 2024 convention, delegates passed a resolution formally committing the union to work with TUESWU on the development of trauma-informed professional development for Ukrainian educators, in collaboration with UCAP and the Solidarity Center. From July through December 2025, the AFT partnered with TUESWU to deliver an intensive training series titled "The Impact of Trauma and How It Affects Behavior and Learning: What Teachers Should Know." Conducted across 10 training cohorts, the project reached 220 educators representing 24 regions of Ukraine, a geographic scope reflecting the scale of the need and the AFT's and TUESWU's commitment to reach as many educators as possible, including those working closest to active combat.

Participants included diverse cohorts of classroom teachers, school psychologists, principals, administrators, and preschool and early childhood educators in and out of schools. Trauma-informed practice is most effective when an entire school community shares a common framework for understanding and responding to children's needs.

The training drew on curriculum developed by UCAP with the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University, an evidence-based framework designed specifically for educators working with children traumatized by war and displacement. Afterward, the 220 participants submitted reports documenting practical application in their schools. Evaluations showed near-universal satisfaction, along with significant gains in trauma awareness, classroom practice and professional confidence.

"[The training's] greatest strength lies in providing concrete, practical tools rather than merely identifying the problem."

—Fedir S., Zakarpattia Region

"The practical tools, real-life cases and focus on a resource-based approach reinforced the idea that a teacher can be a significant adult who helps restore a child's sense of safety and trust."

—Larysa M., Dnipropetrovsk Region



My Visit to Ukraine

By Dan Montgomery

As an AFT vice president and a member of the Democracy Committee, I joined President Randi Weingarten and an Education International delegation to Ukraine in May 2023.

The AFT has a long history of engagement with the Ukrainian education union TUESWU, dating back to 2014, and this was our fourth mission to Ukraine since the Russian invasion began. The union was the host for our mission.

We spent time in Kyiv meeting with union leaders, government officials, refugees and civil society organizations to discuss the challenges in managing the education system and supporting teachers throughout the country during the war.

The war was never far away during our visit. As we arrived in Kyiv in the middle of the night, we were hurriedly ushered into a bomb shelter as Ukrainian air defenses intercepted drones only blocks away.

In the early months of the invasion, the Russians had reached the outside of Kyiv, and we visited the destruction left behind following their evacuation and spoke with teachers and school administrators committed to clearing the rubble and rebuilding their schools. What struck me was the resilience, hope and certainty that everyone had that they were fully capable of restoring their communities. Many people had left when the Russians arrived and rolled through their villages and towns, but they were back now and deep into the reconstruction.

We also met with civil society organizations doing extraordinary work on behalf of displaced Ukrainian children and families. Among the most inspiring to me was Save Ukraine, led by Mykola Kuleba.

Mykola has been nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize for his work with Save Ukraine to rescue children who have been abducted by the Russian military to be reprogrammed and enlisted into the Russian army.

During our visit, we toured several Save Ukraine facilities. The organization takes existing buildings and transforms them into centers that combine housing, schools, childcare facilities and community services.

Mykola explained that it costs approximately \$100,000 to renovate and equip each center so that it is safe and suitable for children. As I listened, I began thinking about how we could help.

When I returned home, I spoke with friends in Chicago who happen to own an Italian restaurant. I told them about Save Ukraine's work and said I wanted to find a way to raise money for the organization.

Their response was immediate: "Tell you what—we'll donate the food and wine for a fundraiser, and we'll hold it here at the restaurant."

Word spread. I invited Mykola and members of the Save Ukraine team and reached out to the Ukrainian Congress Committee of America,

labor-friendly law firms, the AFL-CIO and numerous unions, including the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the Chicago Teachers Union.

The response was overwhelming. By the end of the evening, we had raised more than \$80,000 to support Save Ukraine's work.

Afterward, the AFT helped sponsor an event at Ukraine House in Washington, D.C. AFT President Randi Weingarten spoke alongside Mykola and several teenagers who Save Ukraine had successfully repatriated.

Formerly occupied school on the way to Borodianka



These were ordinary high school students, much like the students I taught throughout my career. They wanted the same things that teenagers everywhere want—to spend time with friends, attend school events and live normal lives.

Yet they had demonstrated extraordinary courage. Russian authorities pressured them to surrender their Ukrainian passports and become Russian citizens. Some simply refused. Basically, they told their captors, "Never, we're Ukrainian."

My visit to Ukraine left me with two lasting impressions. First, if Americans could see what is happening to families and children there, they would be outraged by the suffering this war has caused and by any effort to normalize or excuse Putin's actions.

Second, everywhere I went, I saw an unshakable commitment among Ukrainians not to give up. You see it in the people rebuilding schools. You see it in teachers, union leaders, parents and ordinary citizens. The message is the same wherever you go: "We are never going to give in to the Russians."



Free Fatima Campaign



Through its International Affairs Department, the AFT works to defend labor rights around the world—to put muscle on the principle of global labor solidarity. As we show throughout this report, defending labor rights can range from state-level advocacy and sharing union-to-union best practices to building and managing an international campaign on behalf of one illegally imprisoned educator.

When Fatima Nimer Al-Rimawi, a 54-year-old Palestinian labor leader and early childhood educator, was arrested by the Israel Defense Forces in January 2024, her union colleagues brought her case to Education International (her union is a member) and to the AFT convention in July 2024.

Arrested at her home and charged with “inciting terrorism” because of Facebook posts critical of Israel’s invasion of Gaza, Fatima was soon transferred to the notorious Damon women’s prison in Israel, where she was denied access to medical care, family visits and a visit from her lawyer. Human rights groups have long criticized the prison for its overcrowded conditions, poor ventilation, physical abuse and inadequate food and water. Survivors report the prison’s unrelenting isolation, humiliation and insults—constituting psychological and emotional torture.

With advice from teachers unions in the Arab region and from Israeli human rights lawyers, and in consultation with her husband, Ghassan Rimawi, the AFT created the campaign #FreeFatima, which had thousands of individuals and a network of 12 international unions, including EI and Public Services International, contacting their governments and the Israeli authorities.

Ghassan’s letter asking for international solidarity and assistance read in part:

“I am calling you from the oldest city in the world, Jericho, with 10,000 years of civilization, to stand with her and with the other women there, as there are mothers, teachers and housewives inside the Damon prison who are suffering like her.”

An immensely popular teacher at her school, Fatima serves as president of the Jericho branch of the Palestine General Union of Workers in Kindergarten and Private Schools. Her absence was deeply felt by both students and parents alike. Her colleagues fondly recall her care and presence, saying things like, “Fatima is the most loved teacher in our school. She’s always been so close to the kids, and they miss her so much.” Our campaign, almost entirely built by the AFT International Affairs Department, included:



Palestinian women serving prison sentences at Damon prison

THE PALESTINIAN INFORMATION CENTER

- Creating a #FreeFatima website, which was regularly updated and hosted information about Fatima, her incarceration and a social media toolkit, including Facebook, X, Instagram and TikTok resources. The campaign was reaching out all the time to supporters and allies, building a network and making sure everyone knew the kind of person she is.
- Convening and leading a group of worldwide education unions—including AFT affiliates as well as unions from South Africa, Germany, Italy, Australia, Japan, Portugal, the United Kingdom, Canada, Palestine and other parts of the Middle East—to communicate with their governments to advocate for her release.
- Keeping communication lines open among Fatima’s family and colleagues, as well as human rights officials in the Department of State in Washington and Jerusalem.
- Working in collaboration with an Israeli legal rights group to keep a spotlight on Fatima’s case.

You may be wondering why this story is set in the past tense. It’s because we are happy to report that after a year in detention, on Jan. 20, 2025, Fatima was released as part of the first prisoner exchange between Hamas and Israel, on the first day of the long-awaited ceasefire agreement that went into effect more than 15 months into the war. Better still, we can report that she is back in the classroom, doing what she loves most, teaching children.

And you may very well be wondering something else. Does international pressure on behalf of illegally detained individuals actually work? The answer is, not always, but sometimes it does. The reverse, however, is just about always true: If there is no international pressure, those illegally detained are only released when the government in question chooses to do so, on its own timetable. Without our campaign, our sister Fatima could very well still be languishing in a prison where guards welcome new detainees with the words, “Welcome to hell!”

Her case is a textbook example of the concrete impact of a theme running throughout this report—the real-world power of global labor solidarity.

Jamaica Hurricane Melissa



FOTOMER / ISTOCK /
GETTY IMAGES PLUS

When Hurricane Melissa hit Jamaica in October 2025, as the strongest storm to ever directly impact the island, dozens of people were killed, tens of thousands of families were displaced, hundreds of school and health facilities were damaged or destroyed, and many communities lost power, communications and infrastructure.

The AFT has a long-standing relationship with the 60-year-old Jamaica Teachers' Association, one of the most effective teacher organizations in the Caribbean.

Our first step after the hurricane was to listen—to hear how the disaster had affected our colleagues—and to ask them the best way the AFT could assist as a union. The first answer was to help meet the immediate humanitarian food and shelter needs of Jamaicans—and to this end, we contributed an immediate \$20,000 in relief funding. Individual AFT members collected humanitarian aid through their local churches and charities, particularly in cities like New York that have large Jamaican populations.

But as this report indicates, we know that teachers' needs do not end with the simple rebuilding of a classroom. Every member of the JTA has been affected differently by this disaster, and for many, recovery is more than just physical—it is also emotional and psychological. So, at the request of JTA leaders and the JTA's professional development team, the AFT has held two web-based seminars focusing on trauma-informed, post-disaster teacher recovery.

Chuck Wilson, an associate director in the AFT's Health Issues Department, presented the clear mes-

sage: Teachers cannot care for the well-being of students and their communities unless teachers themselves address their own well-being. According to Wilson, "the trainings were custom-made to address their well-being—to encourage and uplift them, not only in clinical terms but in matters of their heart and spirit." His trainings begin with "acknowledging each other, practicing how to listen to each other without judgment." They proceed to create a cohesive, supportive environment that encourages participants to love themselves and each other.

THE PROFESSIONAL
ADVANCEMENT AND TEACHER
WELFARE AND INTERNATIONAL
RELATIONS COMMITTEES

WEBINAR

"YOU CAN'T POUR FROM AN EMPTY CUP: SELF-CARE FOR EDUCATORS"

DATE WED. FEB. 4, 2026

TIME 06:00 P.M.

JOIN US

Meeting ID: 832 3831 2535
Passcode: 826614

Mark Malahver
President

Presenter
Dr. Leven "Chuck" Wilson
Associate Director of Health and Safety
American Federation of Teachers (AFT)

AFT-ASI Defending Democracy Series



South Korea



Argentina



Hungary



South Africa

For the past year, the AFT International Affairs Department and the Albert Shanker Institute, which former AFT Executive Vice President Mary Cathryn Ricker currently serves as its executive director, have been hosting a series of webinars devoted to Defending Democracy. The series features union and civic activists who have helped fight back to defend or expand democracy in their countries—Chile, Argentina, Colombia, Hungary, South Korea and South Africa. The following is an interview with Ricker about the webinars.

Q: Let's start with a blunt question. Why is the Shanker Institute focusing on democracy in these countries when we have our hands full at home?

MCR: The idea behind the Defending Democracy series with an international education union focus has roots in the work former AFT President Al Shanker did to build up the democracy work of the AFT. Al saw the opportunity for a teachers union to spread democracy by educating about democracy, worker to worker. After all, workers bring democracy into the workplace by voting to form a union and voting in elections for officers and representatives—workers created places to practice what they expected of their governments.

We knew we had access to a network of union and community leaders in real time—unlike most intellectuals. Our AFT activists like being connected to unionists around the world. They notice when there's a setback in Chile or a big win in Hungary. They know that our own democracy is stronger

when other democracies are as well. So we decided to call on the AFT's global network of education union leaders to tell us what was actually happening in their countries.

How did you decide on the countries you wanted to focus on—like South Korea?

MCR: I have a personal interest in South Korea—as a young woman I lived there and taught English in a teacher exchange program—but that wasn't the reason. In December 2025, South Korea made international news when democracy activists stormed the parliament and forced the legislature to revoke the martial law order imposed by the president. In less than six months, the president was forced to step down, a snap election was called, a new president—a human rights lawyer who was a leader in the protests—was elected and the parliament enacted a new labor law.

We knew from some of our labor movement family that the story of democracy in South Korea was about more than the declaration of martial law—even though the media only cared about that and made the movement seem completely spontaneous. We knew there was something deeper, more motivating and inspiring. And we took the time to find the South Korean leaders who could tell us that story.

Another through line in these stories is trust—trust in each other. You have to be more trusting than suspicious if you want to participate. And you have to trust the intentions of



the folks saying, we've heard your hopes and dreams. South Koreans trusted the leaders who said, if we get out in the streets, we can turn this decision around.

Hyewon Chong, international director of the Korean Metal Workers' Union, stressed that unions in South Korea have long operated under intense political pressure and government attacks: "The identity of our members is intrinsically linked with a long struggle in the history of democratization. For all the institutions of democracy that took years to build up, we were there at every step. We refused to see it being taken away at the blink of an eye, so we asked our members to step up, and they did!"

Union members trusted that their participation was really going to matter.

Q: And then you focused on Hungary.

MCR: We timed the Hungary webinar for shortly after the April 12 election, figuring that no matter what happened, we could learn something. We wanted to know, what does long-term electoral organizing look like? We knew that there was a lot of organizing after Viktor Orbán's first election. We wanted to help our people understand that it could take many attempts, many different approaches, to connect with the electorate.

Q: Why go back in time—50 years ago—to South Africa?

MCR: Part of it is eagerness to learn how events that can set democracy in motion still reverberate across decades and generations—in this case, the 50th anniversary of the Soweto uprising, led by young people. It turns out that a constant in all these stories is that great democracy movements have a serious youth component. What is that ambition, that marker that youth make and lay down that expectation, that we then continue to strive for? After all, who dreams big better than young people?

Q: Where do unions fit into what you've learned?

MCR: The success rate of fights for democracy is so much greater when labor unions are a part of the fight, which is why we included union leaders in all these webinars.

Q: Why is that? It feels right, but there must be a better explanation.

MCR: There is. While the research shows that you only need 3.5 percent of the population in the streets—the infrastructure to support that 3.5 percent has to be vast. And unions have infrastructure! Which includes every little thing, as we heard from the teachers union in South Korea—they knew that protesters were going to need transportation, childcare and care for the elderly,

water and food, warm clothing or sunscreen, toilets. They arranged for local diners to provide takeout noodle pots. We need to respect every piece of it—no commitment is too small. Everyone needs to take some responsibility.

Also, unity matters—the pro-democracy movement needs to be a big tent. Here's Argentine Sonia Alesso, president of Education International's Latin America Region: "It is our duty to strengthen unity in our struggle—to organize everyone: teachers, doctors, healthcare workers, public sector workers—from every perspective, whether feminists, environmentalists, youth or retirees, so that we can resist and confront authoritarian and reactionary governments."

Q: Say more about Hungary and electoral work—what stands out to you?

MCR: First, don't overlook anybody. That's one of the big lessons from the Hungary webinar. Every corner of the country was visited, community by community.

Second, recognize that we live in an immediate gratification world, but electoral politics doesn't work that way. This work takes time. Orbán was elected in 2014—it took 12 years to get him unelected. The Voting Rights Act wasn't passed a day after Bloody Sunday. It's going to take more than one bite of the apple.

Q: What keeps people together for the long haul?

MCR: Trust is one thing—but there's more. When a movement succeeds at stopping democratic backsliding, it often wins a better democracy than the one they had lost. Because for lots of people, the lost status quo didn't really include them in the first place. This reality allows the most vibrant democratic movements to dare to dream big.

Here's what longtime Hungarian regime critic Péter Krekó observed: "After 16 years under Orbán, voters finally got fed up with fearmongering. The opposition won because it was able to present an alternative narrative—one of hope for a new and better Hungary."

Q: Anything you'd like to say by way of a conclusion?

MCR: Democracy is the world's idea. It's helpful for us to be reminded we're not alone: South Korea is not alone, Americans aren't alone, Hungary is not alone, Chile and Argentina and Brazil and South Africa are not alone—we've never been alone in this fight.



SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS IN THE CLASSROOM

In Cocoa Beach, Fla., a small town 200 miles north of Miami, Freedom 7 Elementary School—named for the space capsule that carried the first American into space in 1961—serves about 400 students in grades K-6 in an International Baccalaureate program in Brevard Public Schools.

Just 5 miles from storied Cape Canaveral, students in the sixth-grade classrooms are learning to see the world—and their place in it.

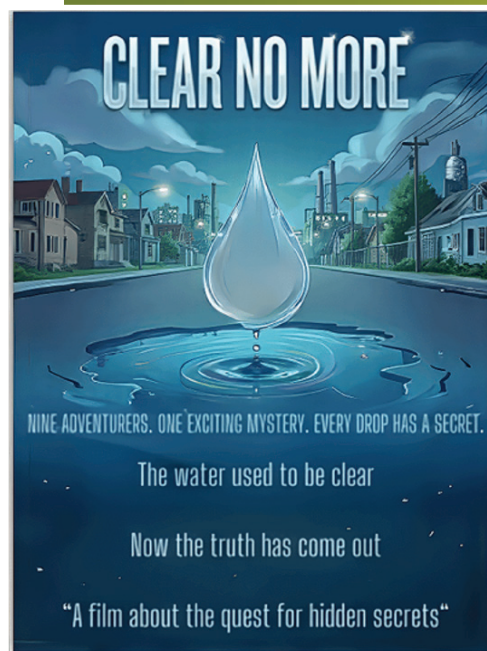
Not only can these students identify and describe the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals—they can also explain how those global goals show up locally and how elementary school students can address them.

The students who focused on SDG 4—ensuring access to quality education—held after-school tutoring sessions, read aloud to children in lower grades, and visited local libraries, handing out bookmarks with QR codes to digital resources. Impressed, one library patron even suggested the students go to the state Legislature in Tallahassee to present their work.

That's the point, says one of the sixth-grade teachers, Brevard Federation of Teachers member Tracy Lally.

“Originally, when we started this, the students would research the goals and come back with examples from places like South Africa,” she says. “But we said—look in your own backyard. Look at how these issues impact your own community and ask, ‘What can I do?’”

That changed everything. Students studying SDG 2—eliminating hunger—volunteer with Meals on Wheels and food pantries. Groups focused on en-



A poster for *Clear No More*, the movie trailer created by sixth-graders at Freedom 7 Elementary School



COURTESY OF FREEDOM 7 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Sixth Graders at Freedom 7 Elementary

Environmental goals organize beach cleanups, learn about wastewater treatment and work at wildlife rescue centers. Global goals came down to local earth.

This is hands-on learning, inquiry-based learning, at its best.

For the SDGs project, students investigate the goals through research and apply what they learn through community action. They increase community awareness by creating infographics, designing slideshows, producing videos, making posters, choreographing dances, giving speeches and presentations, and building websites.

To cap things off, they host an exhibition. For this year's theme, "Movies that Change the World," each student group created movie trailers connected to their SDG research.

Freedom 7 student proficiency levels reach 90-100 percent, befitting one of the county's and state's top-performing schools.

After spending years using a more traditional direct-instruction model, Lally delights in watching the students grow through inquiry-based learning. They learn the standards, not by memorizing, but through active learning that equips them with long-term skills.

"What I now see in these kids—it's life skills," she says. Plus purpose and agency. Sixth-grader Adam Francis, who focused on hunger in his community, wrote that the work "opened my eyes"—as he discovered that people can lose jobs quickly and need resources, like food pantries, unexpectedly. He now believes that "one person can make a difference."

That sense of purpose stays with them. Former students tell her they are still doing beach cleanups, tutoring younger children or volunteering in their communities. Thinking globally, acting locally.



OUR MISSION

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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