

Building our power to create a better future

Randi Weingarten
President, AFT

I am writing this as the AFT's convention gets underway in our nation's capital. Years ago, when we decided to gather in Washington, D.C., to coincide with the celebration of America's founding 250 years ago, we could not fathom that the grievances that led to the American Revolution would be so relevant and relatable today. Or that America would have a new kind of aristocracy based on mind-blowing wealth.

In the United States, there are now 1,000 billionaires—and the world's first trillionaire—at a time when nearly half of American households—46 percent—don't earn enough to make ends meet.

This *wealth* imbalance—the top 1 percent having as much wealth as the entire bottom 90 percent of Americans combined—has led to a *power* imbalance that affects the lives of everyone in this country. These oligarchs dictate policy. They have the power to undo social progress, to sway financial markets, monopolize the media, buy elections and undermine democracy.

Millions of Americans believed Donald Trump's promises to end inflation and make America affordable again on “day one,” but the affordability crisis has only deepened since he returned to office.

Trump's tariffs sent the strong economy he inherited into a slump, even with an AI bubble. His trade wars are costing American families \$1,000 more every year. The costs of his war against Iran are mounting. Trump said taxpayers wouldn't pay “one dime” for his ballroom, but it turns out we're on the hook for \$300 million. Meanwhile, he has already raked in more than \$2.2 billion during his second term, through what government watchdogs call unprecedented corruption and self-dealing.

The president and his cronies have enormous power. But this is what they don't have: the power of the people. My union stands at the intersection of the ways that regular people gain and exercise power in our democracy—through public education, unions and voting.

Our convention is focused on the ways that working people can use that power to secure a better future for all.

Through the AFT's student debt clinics and our other advocacy, we have helped more than 1 million borrowers, many of them our members, get \$78 billion in student debt forgiven. That is life-changing—people can start a family, buy a home, save for retirement. The AFT has filed more than 25 lawsuits against the illegal actions of the Trump administration. And then there's the union difference: Union workers' wages are 11 percent higher than nonunion workers, and unionized teachers earn 24 percent more in states with collective bargaining.

The AFT is the fastest-growing union in the AFL-CIO, and we just hit a historic milestone—our highest membership ever. Today the AFT is 1.88 million members strong.

And we are not letting up, because too few people have the benefit of a union. Half of all nonunion workers want to join a union, but only 1 in 10 workers in the U.S. belong to a union. Americans are 14 times more likely to have an Amazon Prime membership than to be a member of a labor union.

In the mid-20th century, when 1 in 3 American workers were in a union, we had the largest middle class and the lowest income inequality. That's why, in the long term, growing the union movement is key to helping all working families have a good life that they can afford.

In the short term, we've got to win elections.

We are working with allies in Congress on bold solutions, like increasing the minimum wage to \$25 and passing the Working Families Tax Cuts, which would exempt 104 million lower-income adults from federal taxes—paid for by million-

aires paying a fairer share. We're pushing for increased funding for public schools and colleges. We're fighting back against the draconian cuts to Medicaid and to rural hospitals. And we're fighting for the millions of children who risk going hungry because of the Big Ugly Bill's heartless changes to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program.

But we need majorities in statehouses and Congress this year, and ultimately the White House, to secure the foundational changes we seek. We can build a better future and a stronger democracy. But that requires winning in November.

The AFT is bigger, badder, big-hearted—and America's fastest-growing union.

This election will decide whether we are a country governed by the people or ruled by the powerful. A country of opportunity or oligarchy. A country whose people live in freedom or in fear.

The AFT is embarking on an ambitious political program to elect leaders who will help achieve the America we dream of: An America where everyone has opportunity and economic security. An America where everyone's dignity and freedoms are respected. An America whose democracy not only endures but finally lives up to its noble ideals.

That's the America that this bigger, badder, big-hearted union and our 1.88 million members are fighting for.



Weingarten speaking at the AFT convention on July 16 in Washington, D.C.

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