

Fighting for the right to rise

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Mother Jones' plea to "pray for the dead and fight like hell for the living" feels especially apt today. The horror of yet another gun massacre in an American school elicits "thoughts and prayers" from politicians who then "fight like hell"—not for the living, but against any restrictions on even the deadliest firearms. It's clear who is fighting for the living: the young people who survived the rampage at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and are insisting that there can be no return to business as usual for anyone doing the gun lobby's bidding.

Americans must share these kids' determination to do everything possible to prevent further carnage. My union—from our colleagues at Sandy Hook Elementary to those at Stoneman Douglas, including responsible gun owners—is renewing our commitment to end the scourge of gun violence and ensure schools and colleges are safe havens. That includes opposing President Trump's reckless, National Rifle Association-inspired call to arm teachers. Teachers' first instinct is to protect kids, not engage in a shootout that would put children in danger.

Why hasn't more been done to prevent mass shootings? The appalling answer is that, like so much in America, there is a huge power imbalance. The nonpartisan Center for Responsive Politics estimates that during the 2016 election, NRA-related groups spent \$54 million to secure Republican control of the White House and Congress. The gun lobby's power is magnified by its ties to right-wing groups. For example, the *Los Angeles Times* reports that, in 2014, the Koch-backed Freedom Partners gave the NRA Institute for Legislative Action \$4.9 million. The president of Freedom Partners at the time now serves as President Trump's director of legislative affairs.

Like the NRA, the Kochs, DeVoses and spinoffs like the right-wing State Policy Network want to eliminate any challenge to their political and economic power. What's their No. 1 target? Unions. SPN has pledged \$80 million to "defund and defang" unions. The Kochs, after receiving the Trump tax cut, upped the ante with \$400 million to undermine public education and "break" the teachers unions. Why? Because we oppose efforts to defund and privatize public education.

Their plan to bankrupt unions will take center stage at the U.S. Supreme Court tomorrow, where *Janus v. AFSCME Council 31* will be argued. Once Trump's nominee to the court, Neil Gorsuch, was confirmed, anti-union activists swiftly moved the *Janus* case onto the docket, knowing Gorsuch's long history of siding with corporations over workers.

The Supreme Court has long upheld that states can decide how they handle their labor relations, including explicitly allowing unions to represent employees, and that public employees who do not

want to join the union that represents them may instead pay a "fair share" fee. This fee is meant to compensate the union for bargaining contracts and other services; nonmembers are not required to pay anything toward any political activity by the union. Twenty-three states have opted to do this, because collective bargaining has proven to lead to more efficient state services and a better quality of life.

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Janus' backers argue, with no evidence, that this 40-year precedent violates nonmembers' right to free speech. The current ideological composition of the Supreme Court suggests that this one complaint could undercut the interests of millions of workers by depriving their unions of funds they need to function. That's not an unintended consequence—it's the entire point of these assaults on unions. Unions fight for a better life for working people, and the right-wing sees that as a threat.

Unions help make possible what would be impossible for individuals acting alone. It's how we were able to lift teachers' salaries in New York City by double digits before the 2008 recession, so they were in line with surrounding suburbs, and how teachers in West

Virginia are fighting right now through their unions for a living wage. Unions advocate for good public schools for all our kids, affordable higher education and health-care, and a voice at our jobs and in our democracy. Right now we are fighting for the school safety and mental health funds Trump's new budget eliminates.

When Mother Jones began organizing workers, during

the so-called Gilded Age, employers' power was virtually unchecked, the economic supremacy of the elite was entrenched, and the aspiration that Abraham Lincoln had advanced—"the right to rise"—was routinely denied to working people. The labor movement helped tilt the scales of oppression, and, by midcentury, American workers enjoyed safer workplaces and far better standards of living. That's the movement the right-wing wants to "defund and defang."

"Never again" has been the *cri de coeur* for many—those opposing genocide, of course, and more recently, those decrying mass gun violence. It is also fitting for those who insist that our country must not revert to a time when workers were systematically denied even the most fundamental rights—a voice and a better life.



Weingarten at a rally with students and educators from Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Fla., on Feb. 17.

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