

Working people are stronger together

Randi Weingarten, President
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"We can bring to birth a new world from the ashes of the old."

That line, from the century-old labor union anthem "Solidarity Forever," feels especially apt in this moment. Aren't we all yearning to live in a "new world" without the anxiety, disruptions and sorrow caused by the COVID-19 pandemic? Isn't it well past time to sweep discrimination and violence based on race, religion, gender and other factors into the "ashes of the old"? Can't the United States—the richest country in the world, yet home to 37 million people living in poverty—"bring to birth" a world in which every person has a decent standard of living and opportunities to get ahead?

Much has been made of the divisions polarizing our country, but Americans are united by a powerful bond: our desire for a better life for ourselves and our families. People are anxious about rising prices for food, gas and other essentials. They are frustrated that life isn't snapping back from the pandemic as quickly as they'd like. And they want fair wages and benefits, good working conditions and a voice on the job.

New terms have emerged to describe the state of American workers—like the "Great Resignation," the "Great Exhaustion" and the "Great Frustration." I hear this sentiment from my members, most of whom work in education and healthcare, professions under enormous strain during the pandemic. We have a saying in my union: Together we can achieve things that would be impossible on our own. Collective bargaining allows workers not just to ask for things from those in power but to *have* some power of their own.

Today, Americans are twice as likely to have a Costco card as to have a union card. Yet two-thirds of Americans approve of labor unions, the highest level of approval since 1965. And nearly half of nonunion workers polled said they would join a union in their workplace if they got the chance.

The pandemic has shone a new light on the importance of worker voice. Our affiliates across the country negotiated health and safety protocols to reopen schools and keep them open for in-person learning during the pandemic. And some unions, like the Detroit Federation of Teachers, negotiated innovative programs like the DFT's home visit program to combat low student attendance exacerbated by the pandemic.

But there must be good faith on both sides of the bargaining table. Warrior Met Coal is riding high on record coal prices but has kept its employees on strike for nearly eight months—after workers made concessions in pay and benefits to help the company emerge from bankruptcy. Workers at Kellogg, which racked up \$307 million in profits last quarter, are in the sixth week of a strike. The union representing employees at the Wirecutter, the *New York Times'* popular and profitable product review site, plans to strike from Black Friday through Cyber Monday, to protest the *Times'* management's wage proposals that would severely underpay its staff.

Americans are united by our desire for a better life.

Nurses and health professionals at Kaiser Permanente facilities in Oregon and Washington state, 3,400 of whom are members of my union, are exhausted, traumatized and short-staffed after nearly two years on the frontlines of the pandemic. Kaiser had a higher profit rate than Amazon last year, yet it demanded a two-tier wage scale to pay new nurses less and failed to address staffing shortages. Last week, two days before thousands of Kaiser workers were set to strike, the parties negotiated an agreement

that makes big inroads on safe staffing levels and provides decent wages and benefits.

This week, AFT-member lecturers at the University of California, who teach 30 percent of the courses at the university, negotiated landmark job security protections, paid family leave and double-digit pay increases—just hours before they were set to strike. Lecturers now won't have to worry from one semester to the next whether they will have a job.

Strikes are always a last resort. That's especially true in education and health-care because of our responsibilities to our students and patients. But they can't always be averted. Teachers and paraprofessionals in Scranton, Pa., where public schools have been shortchanged \$39 million annually, have been on strike for two weeks with strong support from parents and the community. Instead of getting the state funding the district needs, it is under a state-controlled "recovery" plan that has done great harm. The district has closed school libraries; eliminated prekindergarten, art and music; and cut other supports that help children thrive. Educators have sacrificed as well, working five years under an expired contract with no pay increases.

In these uneasy times, working people understand that we are stronger together. Collective bargaining can channel anger and frustration into action to achieve economic fairness, gain voice and agency on the job, and help Americans achieve their dreams. And for that I give thanks.



Photo: AFT

Weingarten addressing striking educators in Scranton, Pa., on Nov. 4.

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