

# Creating the freedom to thrive

**Randi Weingarten**, President  
American Federation of Teachers

America's once-thriving middle class did not appear out of thin air. Federal economic policy helped seed it: New Deal programs, the GI Bill and the National Labor Relations Act's enabling of union organizing all created conditions for shared prosperity and upward mobility—not for all Americans, to be sure, but for many. Today, the American economy has been described as an hourglass, with extreme wealth at the top, tens of millions of people struggling at the bottom and an ever-narrowing middle class. Our country built a robust middle class once before, and we can do so again.

The clearest line tracking the inversion from upward to downward mobility in the United States is this: As the percentage of workers in unions plummeted, inequality soared.

Many forces have conspired to erode union density—starting 50 years ago with a [memo](#) by Lewis Powell, a future U.S. Supreme Court justice. Powell crafted the blueprint for corporate political and economic dominance, which many in corporate America followed to the letter. From the breaking of the air traffic controllers' union in the 80s to Amazon's relentless campaign to defeat the recent union drive in Alabama, powerful forces have crushed workers' power. Today, Americans are twice as likely to have a Costco card as they are to have a union card.

Research by the [Economic Policy Institute](#) shows that the erosion of collective bargaining lowered the median hourly wage by 7.9 percent from 1979 to 2017. Millennials generally have lower earnings and wealth, and more student debt, than earlier generations. Working people are now losing about \$200 billion per year because of declining union coverage over the last four decades—with that money redistributed upward, to the rich.

Yet, even with much-reduced union [density](#)—34.8 percent of public sector workers, and only 6.3 percent of private sector workers, belong to unions—the union advantage is still plain to see. Union members have greater access to health insurance and paid sick days, and they are [paid](#) 11.2 percent more than their nonunion counterparts. The edge in wages is even greater for Black and Hispanic workers represented by a union (13.7 percent more and 20.1 percent more, respectively). Women in unions earn 30 percent more than non-union women.

Public [support](#) for unions is the highest in nearly two decades, and nearly half of nonunion-

ized workers would [join](#) a union if given the opportunity. Why don't American workers have more opportunities to join a union? Because many employers want to keep the balance of power in their favor and have used that power to fight union organizing drives and hack away at the worker protections in U.S. labor laws.

That is why the Protecting the Right to Organize Act is so important. Under the PRO Act, employers would no longer be able to retaliate against or fire workers who support union drives, or to engage in endless delays to prevent newly formed unions from reaching their first contract.

## Our country built a robust middle class before, and we can do so again.

Working families need help from the officials we elect to represent us. Decades of anti-government propaganda have stoked Americans' distrust. But President Joe Biden is changing that, launching ambitious programs that provide solutions and support, and proudly declaring: "Help is here."

Biden's core economic strategy is threefold: rescue, jobs and families. The recently passed American Rescue Plan is a lifeline for millions of Americans and for the country itself. Earlier this year, the U.S. Census Bureau's Household

Pulse Survey found that nearly 81 million adults (35 percent) reported it was difficult to cover usual expenses. That figure rises to 41 percent for adults living with children. Some 22 million adults (11 percent) said their household sometimes or often did not have enough to eat, rising to 14 percent in households with children.

The American Rescue Plan will cut child poverty in half, extend aid to the unemployed, increase food benefits, help families pay their bills and keep a roof over their heads, and help states and local communities maintain schools and protect the jobs of people who provide essential services. The plan shows the power of government to be a force for good and to pave the way for a more equitable recovery. Polling shows that Americans—including Republicans—overwhelmingly support the legislation.

Now Congress must pass the American Jobs Plan, which will put millions of Americans to work in well-paying jobs and invest not only in traditional infrastructure, like roads and bridges, but also in clean water, high-speed broadband and infrastructure resilience from the effects of climate change. And Biden's American Families Plan is expected to center on child care, universal prekindergarten and paid leave to care for family members.

Every person in America deserves the freedom to thrive. That requires family-supporting jobs, rights at work, educational opportunities, a voice in our democracy and pathways to get ahead. A vibrant middle class must not be a thing of the past. This robust economic agenda will help rebuild it for the future.



Weingarten, foreground, volunteering with members of the United Federation of Teachers at a Bronx food bank, June 2, 2020.

**FOLLOW RANDI WEINGARTEN:** [twitter.com/rweingarten](https://twitter.com/rweingarten)