Thank you, Zinga. It’s you who taught me so much. You—and your classmates at Barton, you, and the millions of students in America—are why we teach. And thanks to our hosts, Education Minnesota and your terrific president, Denise Specht, and to my two fellow officers, Lorretta Johnson and Mary Cathryn Ricker. And one more thank-you: While many of you know I try to move heaven and earth to be home Friday nights, you might not know that my other job is rebbeitzin—the rabbi’s wife—of the largest LGBTQ synagogue in the world. Thank you, Sharon, for everything.

It’s wonderful to celebrate our centennial in Minnesota—a state that has been instrumental in shaping the AFT from our earliest years. But it’s a somber time in the Twin Cities as we mourn Philando Castile. He was a beloved member of the staff at St. Paul’s J.J. Hill Montessori School. May his memory be for a blessing.

Be it 1916 or 2016, our union occupies a proud place at the intersection of the fight for economic dignity, educational opportunity, worker voice and civil rights.

Each of us has followed our own path to becoming activists in this great union. But we share a common purpose—to make a difference throughout our work, to provide a good life for our families and ourselves, and to create a more just world.

My path took some twists and turns, but it started with family. My mother was a second-grade teacher. I often think about how hard she fought for professional latitude in her classroom and a decent pay check for our family. She didn’t start as an activist. You should have heard the conversations around our kitchen table. But that changed when she and her colleagues went on a seven-week strike. Being involved in the union gave them the confidence to fight for dignity and the power to achieve it.

My parents were at the 2008 convention when I was elected AFT president. It’s bittersweet because that was the last trip my mother made before she passed away, but so moving because I became the president of her union. She—like Zinga, like my colleagues at Clara Barton and the United Federation of Teachers, like Ed McElroy, Charlie Cogan, Al Shanker and Sandy Feldman, and like all of you—is my inspiration.

But it’s more than inspiration. It’s values: democracy and fairness, education and economic opportunity, professional voice and agency, racial and social justice for all; values that have endured from generation to generation.

I wonder if our founders could have even imagined what their union would have achieved by its centennial.
100 Years Strong

When the AFT was founded in Chicago in 1916, “union headquarters” was a spare room in the financial secretary’s house. The president lived next door.

This was a time in America when women didn’t have the right to vote—an America where legislation outlawing lynching was routinely blocked, and Jim Crow meant de facto segregation of schools across the country. Children weren’t required to attend school, and child labor was entirely legal. Teachers had to sign yellow-dog contracts promising they’d never join a union. Wealth in America was at its most concentrated in history. Americans were still two decades away from a minimum wage. Workers were inhaling asbestos, losing limbs and dying on the job.

So much of what we take for granted today took the work of people just like us, coming together, demanding better. We have done a lot that to our founders would be inconceivable, but we made inevitable.

In 1916, we came together. In 1925, the AFT worked with the ACLU to defend John Scopes when he was put on trial for teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution—and we have fought for academic freedom ever since.

In 1932, we helped put an end to yellow-dog contracts.

In 1948, we said “no more” to chartering segregated locals. And in 1956, we expelled all segregated locals from the AFT—even though it meant losing 14 percent of our members.

While the first teachers’ union strike was in 1946 in St. Paul, the walkout in 1960 by the United Federation of Teachers sparked a movement that would win collective bargaining rights for public sector workers across the country. Our lowest-wage school employees, support personnel, secured their first contract in 1970.

And in 1978, when healthcare workers wanted the same voice teachers had, they came to the AFT. Soon after, public employees joined our ranks. Today, we empower nurses and therapists, researchers and physicians, scientists and accountants, probation and corrections officers, doctors and so many more.

And our work hasn’t been limited to the United States. We’ve supported Chilean teachers against the Pinochet dictatorship, Polish workers and Solidarność against communism, and South African teachers against apartheid.

That which was bequeathed to us—we have not squandered.

Yellow-dog contracts are gone, but we hear their echoes in the intimidation of charter school teachers, from Alliance charters in Los Angeles to I Can Schools in Cleveland.

We won due process rights, but we’re still defending them from people who use the courts to try to strip them away and who think you can fire your way to good schools.
And nationally, we’ve been fighting against the misuse of testing and the encroachment of private corporations on public education, and fighting for the education of the whole child.

Remember this formula?

All those data points fundamentally missed the point. But they were baked into federal education law. Thanks to our work, Race to the Top is over. And No Child Left Behind? Gone.

And with the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act, we got rid of something else: the federal government’s mandate of standardized tests in teacher evaluations. ESSA is a fundamental reset, but the work to make that reset a reality in our classrooms must now begin in earnest.

We took on the largest education corporation in the world, Pearson. And today, here’s part of their reality:
But here’s part of our reality: social justice. Decades ago, we championed anti-discrimination protections for the LGBTQ community, including negotiating the first domestic partner benefits in New York in 1993. But even my generation of activists couldn’t have envisioned winning marriage equality for same-sex couples.

**This Union Is a Vehicle Built to Empower**
Our founders couldn’t have imagined that their vision would grow from eight locals to 3,500 locals—a union of more than 1.6 million members. And I am proud to announce that since our last convention, more than 36,000 members have joined our ranks, bringing the AFT’s membership to our highest level ever: 1,637,412.)

Thousands of new members have joined AFT Nurses and Health Professionals, including the Alaska Nurses Association. We have welcomed thousands of higher education faculty and staff, teachers in charter schools from Buffalo to New Orleans, and members in traditional public schools throughout the South, including Calhoun County, Fla. Now, teachers in every county in Florida have the dignity that comes with a union contract. And in September, we will welcome 24,000 additional members as a result of the merger of the AFT and the National Education Association units of the United Teachers Los Angeles.
People want a union. And the reason is obvious: The union is a vehicle. A vehicle that empowers you in your hospital ward, in your classroom, in your communities—to promote and protect professionalism, to provide economic security, to develop and deploy solutions, at the bargaining table and at the ballot box. A vehicle to fight for civil and human rights, and against discrimination in all its forms. A vehicle that addresses—rather than stokes—the righteous anger Americans feel and gives them a way to act.

Earlier, I mentioned that in 1916, wealth was the most concentrated on record. And that was true, until now.

So in a time when the wealth gap is growing, union membership is declining and the middle class is shrinking; when elected officials are destabilizing public schools and public services in order to promote flawed privatization schemes; when a presidential nominee says that wages are “too high” and that he welcomes a harsh recession because it would benefit him financially, this union is more necessary than ever before.

**A Vehicle to Turn Anger into Aspiration, and Aspiration into Action**

People are angry, and we get why. It’s fear—the fear of being left behind.

It’s the anxiety of wages that don’t rise with expenses, of not knowing whether you can afford college without the burden of crippling debt. It’s the feeling many of our millennial members know, the feeling that you’ve done everything right but are left with lots of debt and not a lot of job prospects. It’s worrying whether you’ll be able to retire, or make your next mortgage payment. It’s outrage that the top 25 hedge fund managers make more than all kindergarten teachers in the United States combined.

The Scott Walkers of the world have exploited this anxiety and turned scapegoating into an art form. They blame professors’ salaries for the college debt crisis, while they disinvest from higher education. They blame public employees’ and teachers’ pensions for draining state budgets, while they hand out corporate tax cuts.

Donald Trump has taken this brand of politics from dog whistle to bull horn. In his world, people should blame Mexicans and Muslims for, well, basically everything—from job insecurity to global instability. In our world, that’s called racism.

We feel the breakneck change taking place—deindustrialization, globalization, the technological revolution—yet it’s met with austerity and polarized politics that have taken a huge toll on the middle class. No wonder people feel like the economy is rigged and our politics are broken.

We’re not just calling this out, we’re taking it on. Because underlying the anger that people are feeling, are aspirations for a better life. And those aspirations compel us to act.

That’s why the AFT helped launch the Take On Wall Street campaign with Sen. Elizabeth Warren. That’s why we helped create Hedge Clippers, a campaign that has exposed the hypocrisy of hedge fund managers
who try to profit from public employees’ pensions, at the same time they support organizations trying to abolish those very same pensions. Even the Wall Street Journal noticed—and put it on its front page. Why? Probably because the AFT has become the Consumer Reports for pension funds—demanding truth and transparency and good returns.

And while some of these hedge funders changed their practices, others have tried to wipe us out. Let me be crystal clear: We will never back down—not from the fight for retirement security and not from the fight against bad actors who want us out of their way.

And this is what else the Journal noticed: We’re using workers’ capital for the greater good. Since 2014, the AFT has led the way in pulling together $16 billion in pension assets for investment in U.S. infrastructure. We’ve created more than 100,000 jobs in the process and delivered retirees a solid rate of return. That includes, with the Building Trades and the Clinton Global Initiative, the rebuilding of LaGuardia Airport.

This is the power and the potential of a strong labor movement—the power to make real change. Shaping solutions in our worksites and in the corridors of power throughout the land.

But a union is all of us working together, and member engagement and community involvement are essential. We’ve made it our priority to double the number of member activists, triple the number of members who engage in union activities, and have conversations with all of our members. I know many of you are doing this work, and I thank you.

And community is our new density. Take AROS, the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools. Together, we are building a movement that’s fighting for the strong neighborhood public schools all children deserve. One strategy we’ve employed is walking in to public schools—parents, students, educators and community members. This October, we aim to expand our walk-ins to 200 districts, 2,000 schools and 100,000 people saying yes to great neighborhood public schools.

That’s how we challenge—and change—bad policies. That’s how we’re going to empower people, fortify our locals, fight tough enemies and achieve our goals.

Just consider the fundamental shifts we’ve achieved: the end of No Child Left Behind; the delay of the misnamed Cadillac tax, which simply penalized working people’s health benefits; etching tough on for-profit colleges like Corinthian. And we’ve launched student debt workshops, saving our members and their children thousands of dollars. An adjunct professor in Miami attended our clinic and reduced her monthly payments from $2,000 to $700. She is now a trainer herself, helping others relieve their debt.

Just last week we led a labor alliance petitioning the Occupational Health and Safety Administration for a comprehensive workplace violence-prevention standard to protect healthcare and social service workers, and we are trying to get the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health to address the stress educators increasingly feel.

We’re fighting the Trans-Pacific Partnership and other trade deals that would hurt American workers.
We’re playing offense in states as well. Last year, New York State United Teachers’ fight against Gov. Cuomo was one for the ages, and this year, as a result, public schools in New York secured $1.5 billion more, including $175 million for community schools. In Connecticut, our state federation won legislation to curb for-profit healthcare corporations buying up hospitals as if they were playing Monopoly. And the Oregon Nurses Association won a legislative victory ensuring nurses a final say in hospital staffing so patients receive safe care.

And make no mistake, we are fighting back when privatizers and austerity hawks put urban school systems in their crosshairs—in Chicago, Detroit and Philadelphia. We run in when others have run out—when SUNY Downstate Medical Center in Brooklyn repeatedly risked closure, and in the City College of San Francisco’s fight to keep its accreditation.

We’re making a difference in McDowell County, W.Va.—the eighth-poorest county in the nation, and in the 28 districts where our members are creating community schools that are directly addressing the well-being of students and their families. And our Innovation Fund plans to do even more.

Then there’s Massena, in upstate New York, where Erin Covell, our local president, rallied the community and got Alcoa to reverse its decision to close its plant—saving 500 union jobs. Now we’re working with the United Steelworkers to keep more manufacturing jobs in the United States.

We’ve partnered with First Book to provide students in need with books of their own and to create classroom libraries—4 million books and counting. And almost 1,000,000 people use Share My Lesson—AFT’s union-made online resource that’s available to all educators, for free.

And our work is not just in the United States. In Israel, we are fighting bigotry and promoting understanding, partnering with Hand in Hand, one of the few Jewish and Palestinian integrated schools in the Middle East.

All this work has not just helped our members, it has strengthened our bonds with the community and given children a better shot in life. Because for us, it’s not about finding a scapegoat; it’s about finding a way to help people solve whatever problem is standing in the way.

The Union as a Vehicle to Fight for Civil and Human Rights

And one of those problems is the unequal treatment of people of color.

We were so proud when Americans elected our first black president. But many vestiges of separate and unequal treatment remain and, in fact, have gotten worse—from the under-resourced and increasingly segregated schools many children of color attend, to the 17 states that have restricted voting rights since President Obama’s election.
The United States has not come to grips with pervasive racism—not even close. And that shows in the disproportionate use of deadly force against black people. A month after our last convention, Michael Brown was killed. This month, Philando Castile lost his life. Alton Sterling, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, Sandra Bland, Eric Garner, Rekia Boyd, Walter Scott, Trayvon Martin. We will never know all those who could be named.

We need more than thoughts and prayers. Our justice system needs to be more just. We must be partners in that work. But it takes more than a legal change or a change in policing—our economy and our culture must change too.

We’re doing this in our own union. After what happened in Ferguson, Mo., the AFT created our Racial Equity Task Force, issuing a report on racism and inequality. Our report confronts institutional racism and offers concrete steps to create excellent public schools for all students, with a focus on boys and men of color.

And after the Shanker Institute released a study revealing a sharp decline of black teachers in major cities, the U.S. Department of Education answered our call by holding a summit on teacher diversity.

And we are also looking at our own biases. We’ve had tough conversations about race and racism, about school discipline policies, about the differences between how people of color and white people are treated—when stopped by the police, or when walking into a store. We need to acknowledge the effects of privilege, the effects of discrimination, and confront them.

And now, our Racial Equity Task Force is working with the AFT’s Criminal Justice and Public Safety Task Force, building on the belief that communities are safest when all stakeholders—safety personnel and community members alike—are searching for common solutions.

Working to make the criminal justice system more just and supporting police are not mutually exclusive. This is a matter of ensuring that everyone feels safe—those who swear an oath to protect us, and those they are sworn to protect.

There’s another reason that our police, and more and more Americans, feel unsafe, and that's because America is awash in guns.

Three police officers were murdered in Baton Rouge just yesterday. Five officers were shot dead as they protected peaceful protesters in Dallas. Forty-nine mostly Latino LGBTQ clubgoers in Orlando. Nine churchgoers in Charleston. Twenty children and six educators in Newtown. One of the Baton Rouge officers, Montrell Jackson, a 32-year-old African-American new dad, posted these words on Facebook days before his death: “I swear to God I love this city, but I wonder if this city loves me. In uniform I get nasty hateful looks, and out of uniform some consider me a threat.....These are trying times. Please don’t let hate infect your heart.”
There are 33,000 gun deaths in the United States each year. The second amendment is the law of the land, but the National Rifle Association’s interpretation of it is not. Should it really be easier to buy an assault weapon than to get a driver’s license or register to vote? We are better than this.

We must never accept that mass murders or indiscriminate killings are the new normal. We must call out the hypocrisy of elected officials who offer condolences after gun violence in one breath and defend civilians’ right to own weapons of war in the next. Next month, as part of the commemorations of the March on Washington, the AFT will demonstrate with clergy, LGBTQ and other civil rights activists on the national Mall to end gun violence.

And that leads me to one more challenge—the rights of LGBTQ people for whom inclusion is a matter of safety. That’s why we’ve spoken out against bathroom bills and other forms of discrimination. And why some of the bathrooms in this convention hall are gender-neutral. We have transgender students, members, friends and family. So just like you embraced a lesbian as your president in 2008, let’s make sure our transgender colleagues can come out of the shadows, too.

This fight to disarm hate is a righteous fight and worth every bit of blood, sweat and tears we can possibly exert.

**A Vehicle that Empowers You to Exercise Power at the Bargaining Table and the Ballot Box**

Our ability to make our values a reality depends on exercising our strength at the ballot box and the bargaining table.

When unions are strong, we set a standard that helps all workers. Union members earn higher wages and are more likely to have pensions and employer-provided health benefits. African-American union members earn 33 percent more than nonunion workers do. Latino unionized workers earn 42 percent more. Female union members average 31 percent more. One of the strongest predictors of how well your children will do economically is the percentage of union members in your community. So it’s no surprise that Tom Perez, the secretary of labor, recently said, “The more you strengthen collective bargaining, the more you strengthen the middle class.”

And it’s also not surprising that our right to bargain is in the right-wing’s crosshairs. Just remember *Friedrichs*—and how the right tried to use the Supreme Court to decimate us. Sometimes in the age of privatization and austerity, our victories are hanging on to what we have.

But bargaining holds the potential to transform and innovate. The New York City Chancellor’s District was a case in point. In the 1990s, rather than closing struggling schools, the reflexive “reform” of the deformers, we turned them around. We negotiated for higher salaries, research-based strategies and, yes, lots of resources: smaller class sizes, a common curriculum aligned with high standards, teacher planning time and student tutorial time. And what did that produce? Sustained student achievement gains in high-poverty neighborhood schools.
The UFT continues to innovate in bargaining. Under the PROSE (Progressive Redesign Opportunity Schools for Excellence) program, staff members at 200 PROSE schools have designed programs ranging from promoting teacher inter-visitation and peer review, changing student-to-teacher ratios to allow for small-group learning and increasing student integration.

The Baltimore Teachers Union contract pays educators more for creating programs that meet student needs. Teachers have developed a Green Leaders program that transforms learning environments into green spaces and supports the growth of urban farms near schools.

Sometimes what we win for our members sets a standard for entire communities. In 2014, the graduate teaching fellows at the University of Oregon went on strike when the university refused to provide paid sick days. They won paid sick days for themselves, and soon after, the Oregon state Legislature required paid sick leave for all workers, followed by California and New York.

Last month, Health Professionals and Allied Employees members at Bergen Regional Medical Center in New Jersey won contract language that will make them safer. The facility had been cited by OSHA for multiple incidents of violence against healthcare workers. Our union won increased health and safety training and adherence to OSHA standards—and a healthy pay increase and better staffing.

The Washington State Nurses Association won a big victory protecting rest breaks for nurses.

Both UTLA and the Toledo Federation of Teachers have used many tools—member and community engagement and political power—to win impressive collective bargaining agreements. In Los Angeles, the union won a 10 percent salary increase and its first-ever contract language on class size and counselor-to-student ratios. Toledo won a 13.5 percent salary increase and secured additional Teacher Leaders to deliver peer-to-peer professional development. And they negotiated a paraprofessional-to-teacher career ladder program.

And just a few weeks ago, the members of New York’s Public Employees Federation voted in record numbers for a contract that retains employee health benefits, raises salaries, and provides funds for their committees and programs.

Every victory ripples out beyond us, strengthens the community and strengthens our country.

And when it comes to strengthening our country, nothing we do this year matters more than who we elect—to be our mayors, our legislators and our president. Walter Reuther said it best: “There’s a direct relationship between the ballot box and the bread box, and what the union fights for and wins at the bargaining table can be taken away in the legislative halls.”

Take what happened here in Minnesota when voters elected Gov. Mark Dayton. He’s been a great friend to working people—boosting the minimum wage, investing in public education and supporting workers’ rights. He shepherded this state after the Great Recession and turned Minnesota’s budget deficit into a $2 billion surplus. Right next door, is Gov. Scott Walker. He slashed funding for public schools and universities,
eliminated workers’ rights and increased Wisconsin’s budget deficit to $2 billion. Neighboring states, opposite directions. Elections matter.

With Citizens United, we can’t possibly outspend our opponents, but we can outwork them and out-organize them! And we do. We’ve won against billionaires, ideologues and political attack dogs. But in my lifetime, we’ve never faced anything like what we’re facing this year.

What do you call it when a candidate for president debases an entire religion, mocks a disabled reporter, refers to women as pigs and calls Mexicans rapists? I call it a threat to civil society, to decency and to the values that underpin our country. Frankly, it is perilously close to fascism.

You’ve heard his insults so repeatedly that maybe it has drowned out his education ideas. Well, he “loves the poorly educated,” so it’s no surprise he pledged to cut education spending “way, way down.” But really, encouraging single mothers to take out exorbitant loans to attend Trump University?

Donald Trump exploits people’s anger to further divide an already polarized country. And he does so with gravely disturbing glee. Let’s remember, we are a nation of immigrants. My own grandparents came from the Ukraine to escape oppression. The way Trump talks about Muslims and Mexicans is all too reminiscent of the way Jews and Italians were talked about in the 1930s. He uses the kind of talk that evokes the fear that led to the internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

The horror in Nice reminds us that the world must be united in condemning and acting against terror. But that is far different from condemning an entire religion or barring refugees because they are Muslim.

The snake oil Trump’s selling will make economic inequality even worse. He has assiduously courted working-class voters, but his proposals would leave them in even worse shape. He says he’s against trade deals that would send jobs overseas, but where does he manufacture his own products? Sweatshops in Bangladesh, China and Mexico. He bankrupted his businesses four times, and while he boasts he was unscathed, his employees, contractors and vendors were devastated. His tax-cut plan for the rich would add $30 trillion to the deficit. And he’d end Dodd-Frank, letting the big banks go back to the kind of legalized gambling that wrecked our economy.

Thankfully, on the other side, we have Secretary Hillary Clinton.

When Hillary graduated from Yale Law School, she chose to work at the Children’s Defense Fund. She took on what, in that era, was a dangerous assignment—working undercover in Alabama to expose the continuation of segregated schools after Brown v. Board of Education.

As first lady of Arkansas, Hillary advocated for early childhood education and children’s healthcare, for public education and juvenile justice reform—and she’s never stopped.
As first lady of the United States, after losing the fight for universal healthcare, she entered the fray again to help create the Children’s Health Insurance Program, through which 8 million kids get health coverage every year.

And she’s always leaned in to fights for women and girls. Indeed, while Donald Trump was having his ties made in China, Hillary was challenging Chinese authorities, telling them, “Women’s rights are human rights.”

I’ll never forget the moment I went from supporter to believer. After 9/11, Hillary made it her mission to get those first responders and emergency personnel the healthcare they needed. Her compassion, her tenacity and her belief in the power of government to improve people’s lives—those qualities were front and center in that fight. Since then, she’s proved time and time again that she is a dreamer, and a doer.

And while I don’t think anyone should vote for her just because she’s a woman, I know from experience that to achieve what she has is harder because she is a woman. How many of us in this audience have been told, “You sound shrill, don’t yell,” or “You’re not smiling enough”? That listening is a sign of weakness? We know.

And I want to say something about Bernie Sanders. This is the first generation of young people in our history that might be worse off than the generation before. That can make people feel hopeless and helpless. But Bernie inspired his supporters to act. And that’s been a great gift. Bernie worked with us to make the Democratic Party platform the most progressive in American history—proof positive that we are stronger together.

Bernie’s right—Hillary is “far and away the best candidate” for president. Indeed, as President Obama has said, she is the most qualified person to be nominated for president in our lifetime.

Hillary understands the most urgent issues confronting our country. Her bold economic plan puts unions front and center. She will level the playing field for the middle class, raising incomes for hardworking families, creating debt-free college for students and lifting children out of poverty. She is ready to assume the solemn responsibility of keeping Americans safe from violence and terrorism. And in healthcare, public services and public education, she has our back.

This, my friends, is a moment of reckoning for our country; a battle for its soul and for our children’s future. So for these and so many other reasons, the only choice in this election is Hillary Clinton.

**A Vehicle Built to Carry Us into the Next Century**

Earlier, I talked about our values and the pathways we’ve taken to fight for them: democracy and fairness, education and economic opportunity, professional voice and agency, racial and social justice for all. These are values that have endured over the course of our history, from generation to generation.
Of course, there will always be threats, challenges and setbacks. So while the path is never easy, we should heed the words of Martin Luther King Jr.: “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.” But it doesn’t bend on its own. We bend it—year after year, fight after fight, election after election—by acting on the values that we’ve held so close for the past 100 years.

This union is our vehicle in this journey for justice. It was that vehicle in 1916; it is today; and because of you, it will be in the century ahead.

Thank you.