

Head of US teachers' union decries danger of "revolution"

Walter Gilberti, Jerry White
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Earlier this month, the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Randi Weingarten, visited Detroit to meet with local union officials. The AFT-affiliated Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) has increasingly faced opposition by teachers for its complicity in the destruction of their jobs and living standards and in plans to privatize the public schools.

DFT President Keith Johnson, who barely won reelection in a January vote that was widely believed to be rigged, worked closely with Weingarten, then-Detroit schools Financial Manager Robert Bobb and Detroit Mayor Bing to ram through a contract in 2009 that cut teachers' pay by \$10,000, destroyed seniority and tenure protections, and integrated the DFT into the process of firing so-called "underperforming" teachers.

Like Johnson, Weingarten is a thoroughly discredited figure. She has collaborated with the Obama administration's attack on public education on a national scale and overseen the destruction of the gains won by educators over decades of struggle. She has cultivated the closest of ties with the bitterest opponents of public education.

Microsoft Chairman Bill Gates, who addressed the 2010 AFT national convention, has given the union millions of dollars. In return, the AFT has helped implement joint labor-management "teacher effectiveness" projects across the country, which include performance-based "merit" pay and other tools to further victimize teachers.

At a meeting of roughly 100 school-level building representatives at the DFT headquarters, Johnson introduced Weingarten with the comment, "We are a school district and profession in crisis."

The AFT leader began her comments with a demagogic attack on "anti-union, anti-teacher, anti-government people [who] are attacking public education by dividing, dehumanizing, delegitimizing and de-funding." The union, she said, was the "force against the power of evil"

and the only organization that "fights at the bargaining table and the ballot box."

Her remarks were aimed at presenting the Republicans as the sole opponents of public education, while whitewashing the role of the Obama administration and the Democrats. The AFT backs the Democrats at the ballot box not because they defend teachers. They do not. The AFT does so because the Democrats carry out their anti-teacher attacks with the assistance of the unions, thereby preserving the institutional and financial interests of union executives like Weingarten and Johnson.

The AFT president soon got around to her most important point: the attack on public education was provoking massive opposition in the working class, which could escalate into a threat to the entire corporate and political order.

Weingarten said she did not want a "Les Mis strategy" or "to see kids fighting a revolution." The AFT, she said, knew "the right way to fight," pointing to the 2009 contract in Detroit as the "foundation to stop this attack."

In the context of the bitter struggle to defend education that teachers, parents and youth confront, Weingarten's reference to "revolution" and "Les Mis"—the award-winning musical based on the famous work *Les Misérables* by 19th century French novelist Victor Hugo—is telling.

Hugo's work tells the story of the initial revolutionary struggles of the French working class, lower-middle classes and urban poor in the 1830s against the retrenchment of monarchical rule following the disintegration of Napoleonic Europe. It focuses on the life of Jean Valjean—a laborer imprisoned for 19 years for stealing a loaf of bread who ends up fighting on the barricades during the June 1832 rebellion in Paris.

In her association of the current struggle with these earlier revolutionary upheavals in Europe, Weingarten expresses fear of the growing radicalization of teachers

and other sections of the working class. She is aware of what is being said by teachers and workers--the disappointment and anger over Obama and his complete support for Wall Street. The words "capitalism," "revolution," even "socialism" are increasingly heard. Workers see the upheavals in Egypt, Greece, or Wisconsin, for that matter, and express solidarity and a desire to emulate these struggles.

The metaphor of the street barricade--which commonly divided the revolutionary elements from the forces of reaction in so many struggles throughout 19th century Europe—is particularly apt. Weingarten is well aware that in the coming upheavals she and her fellow labor executives will be with the ruling elite on the other side of the barricades.

Like other officials within the AFL-CIO hierarchy, Weingarten is part of an increasingly wealthy upper-middle class stratum whose incomes are out of the reach of ordinary teachers. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, Weingarten received total compensation of more than \$600,000 for 2010, including \$194,188 accrued from New York City's United Federation of Teachers before she left to become president of the AFT. Her counterpart in the National Education Association, Dennis Van Roekel, received \$397,721 in salary and benefits.

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These sums were amassed while the unions signed contracts robbing underpaid teachers of thousands of dollars each year and sanctioned the destruction of their jobs. At the same time, the union officials sit on corporate and political boards where they aid and abet corporate interests and the Obama administration in the destruction of public education.

During the course of the Detroit meeting, one building representative asked Weingarten why the AFT accepted \$6.3 million from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which, under the name of school "reform," was spearheading the attack on teachers and the spread of charter schools.

Weingarten's answer should be posted above every under-served and overcrowded classroom in the Detroit Public Schools: "I am proud of getting money from Gates," she said. "The more money we get from Gates, the less we take from union members. I refuse to be demonized by billionaires. If they want to give us money--fine."

To say that the AFT is in the pocket of the corporate and financial aristocracy in the United States is no figure of

speech. Having seen the loss of dues income—resulting from their complicity in the destruction of hundreds of thousands of teachers' jobs—the union executives have secured new sources of revenue from billionaire opponents of public education. In return, the AFT has assumed the role of a labor syndicate, disciplining teachers, opposing any struggle, and guaranteeing school districts and charter schools a supply of highly exploited, cheap labor.

At the height of the mass demonstrations of workers and students in Wisconsin earlier this year, Weingarten was attending a conference with Obama's Education Secretary, Arne Duncan, charter schools advocates and billionaire foundation representatives in Denver, Colorado. The topics of discussion centered on how best to institute Obama's "Race to the Top" education agenda and insure the removal of the "incompetent" teachers supposedly infesting the education system.

Weingarten's praise for Gates was apparently too much even for the generally friendly crowd of DFT representatives. Replying to a few moans and groans from the audience, Weingarten pointed to Johnson and said, "Don't call this man a sellout or me a sellout. We can't win by screaming--I've fought Giuliani and Bloomberg--we're in a different time now."

In her 14 years as president of the UFT in New York, Weingarten collaborated with the mayor's office. Nevertheless, her reference to "a different time now" makes it clear that the union executives have thrown in their lot entirely with the corporate and political enemies of public education, asking only that they be made junior partners.



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