

What was US teachers union president Randi Weingarten doing in Kiev?

Jerry White
26 March 2014

Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), joined a delegation of international union officials that traveled to Kiev March 13-14. The trip, coordinated with officials from the US embassy and the European Union, was aimed at providing a democratic veneer for last month's Western-backed fascist-led coup, which installed an anti-Russian government in Ukraine.

Weingarten was part of a delegation organized by Education International (EI), including officials from teachers unions in the UK, Poland, Bulgaria, the Netherlands and Denmark. The group met with Ukrainian teacher unions, visited Maidan Square for photo ops, and held discussions with US embassy officials and EU representatives.

Public statements by EI General Secretary Fred van Leeuwen and Weingarten dovetailed entirely with US and European propaganda against supposed "Russian aggression." This propaganda campaign has been used to justify a build-up of US and NATO military forces throughout Eastern Europe and threats of devastating economic sanctions against Russia.

In a statement on the trip, van Leeuwen declared, "The annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Mr. Putin is a gross violation of international law, if not an act of war, which should not be accepted."

According to the EI statement, the Trade Union of Education and Science Workers of Ukraine (STESU), the largest union in the country, hosted the delegation. STESU's central office building on Maidan Square was apparently an organizing center for the Maidan protests and was demolished by Ukrainian police forces under the since-deposed president, Viktor Yanukovych.

Like her Dutch counterpart, the AFT president's public statements were aimed at concealing the fact that the supposedly "democratic movement" backed by the

trade unions was spearheaded by ultra-right Ukrainian nationalists and fascists who trace their history to those who collaborated with the Nazis in the mass killing of Jews, workers, intellectuals and others during the German invasion of Ukraine in World War II.

In her public tweets, Weingarten wrote: "saw effects of Russian propaganda—Revolution4Dignity as Ukrainians call it—broadly supported," "Don't believe Russian propaganda abt Ukraine's 'fascist' protesters," "After spending 48 hours speaking to activists, trade unionists, clergy, educators its clear #euromaidan movement in #ukraine is abt democracy."

Weingarten told FoxNews.com, "I decided it was important enough to go, and the most important thing I've learned during this trip is that the Russian propaganda about how the Ukrainian government is fragile and destabilizing is totally and completely wrong."

In a display of utter cynicism, the EI statement on the trip concluded: "Before departing Kiev, the representatives visited the memorial at Babi Yar where between 100,000 and 150,000 lives were taken by the Nazis during the Second World War, including tens of thousands of Jews and thousands of Soviet prisoners of war, communists, gypsies, Ukrainian nationalists and civilian hostages."

The forces Weingarten and van Leeuwen traveled to Ukraine to support are the political descendants of those who helped perpetrate this horrific crime. The Svoboda party, which was the major political force in the protests that overthrew Yanukovych, was originally called the Social-National Party of Ukraine (SNPU) and its members wore swastika-style insignias. It was compelled to change its name because its open association with fascism complicated the US effort to integrate it into the "Orange Revolution" of 2004-2005.

Weingarten visited Kiev not on behalf of Ukrainian teachers—who will face devastating cuts as the new Western-backed regime imposes a Greek-style IMF austerity plan—but as an operative of the US State Department.

These efforts are not new. The AFT and AFL-CIO were deeply involved in the so-called Orange Revolution, the first effort by US-backed forces to install an anti-Russian regime in Ukraine. The AFL-CIO, through its State Department-funded American Center for International Labor Solidarity (Solidarity Center), cultivated close ties with Mikhail Volynets, the president of the Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KVPU), who was elected to parliament in 2005 as a deputy of the Fatherland Party of energy oligarch Yulia Tymoshenko. The AFL-CIO awarded “Brother Volynets” the 2004 George Meany & Lane Kirkland Human Rights Award.

This reactionary activity in Ukraine is part of a broader foreign policy pursued by the AFT and the AFL-CIO. Over the course of many decades, the American trade union federation has funded and promoted far-right and fascistic forces against left-wing and Communist trade unions around the world. The former long-time president of the AFT, Albert Shanker, was a particularly rabid anti-communist, who supported the Vietnam War and CIA subversion campaigns around the world.

Organizations such as the Inter-American Regional Labor Organization (ORIT) and the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), the predecessors of the AFL-CIO Solidarity Center, functioned as labor fronts for CIA-organized coups in Guatemala (1954), British Guiana (1963), Brazil (1964), the Dominican Republic (1965) and Chile (1973). Solidarity Center was a conduit for money from the National Endowment for Democracy to right-wing trade unions active in the failed attempt to overthrow Venezuela’s Hugo Chavez in 2002.

In the protests that led to the February coup in Kiev, the Solidarity Center’s Ukrainian “partner,” the Volynets-led KVP, collaborated with leading oligarchs to call an “All-Ukrainian strike” to destabilize the Yanukovych regime. (See: The US State Department’s “labor man” in Ukraine). The effort, however, failed to garner any significant support in the working class, given that the opposition parties were

committed to implementing an IMF-dictated austerity plan and provoking a confrontation with Russia that threatened a catastrophic war.

The support for American imperialist interests in Ukraine and around the world is closely linked to the policies the AFT and Randi Weingarten pursue in the United States. The AFT has collaborated with the Obama administration and billionaires such as Bill Gates to implement a corporate-driven “school reform” agenda. This has led to the destruction of hundreds of thousands of teachers’ jobs, the abolition of long-standing rights such as teacher tenure, and an explosive growth of privately run charter schools. The main role of the AFT has been to suppress opposition among teachers, parents and students to the destruction of public education.

Teachers cannot defend their interests through an organization that is a tool of the US State Department and corporate America. There is deep opposition to the danger of a new world war in the US, Ukraine, Germany, Russia and every other country. Such a catastrophe can be prevented, however, only if the working class intervenes as an independent and internationally unified political force to put an end to the capitalist system, which is the cause of war.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:
wsws.org/contact