

American Federation of Teachers endorses Clinton

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Surprising absolutely no one, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) announced July 11 its endorsement of Hillary Clinton, the current frontrunner in the Democratic Party presidential primaries. The endorsement was the first by a major national union in the 2016 presidential elections, coming a full 16 months before the general election. The AFT also campaigned for Clinton in the 2008 Democratic primaries and poured money into her campaign.

The AFT endorsement confirms yet again that this organization exists not to defend teachers or public education, but to promote the interests of the bureaucratic apparatus of the union, the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, and American capitalism more generally.

Clinton is identified with the education policies of the Obama administration, in which she served for four years, based on promoting charter schools and school privatization, incessant testing of school children and punitive treatment of teachers based on test results.

The AFT sought to adapt to the mounting hostility among rank-and-file educators to these policies by publicly criticizing the federal Department of Education and even calling for the resignation of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. This didn't stop the union from then endorsing Obama's Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, to succeed him in the White House.

Both the AFT and Clinton supported the infamous Bush-era No Child Left Behind legislation, which is designed to scapegoat teachers and close down "failing" schools in impoverished areas, only demanding that Congress ensure that it is fully funded. Both also supported NCLB's continuation in Obama's Race to the Top program (RTTT), which pits states against each other in a competition to enact pro-charter "reforms" in exchange for paltry federal funding for cash-starved school districts. The AFT has actively

collaborated with local governments in developing bids for RTTT cash.

Both are supporters of Common Core, the nationwide standardized testing curriculum spearheaded by the Gates Foundation, one of the leading pro-charter nonprofits. The AFT even accepted millions of dollars from the Gates Foundation to "work on teacher development and Common Core Standards," before being forced to stop, following mass outrage from teachers. The Gates foundation is also one of the largest donors to the Clinton Foundation, having donating more than \$25 million over the years.

The AFT is perfectly willing to support pro-corporate education "reform," as long as they are retained as a full partner in the process, in order to safeguard the kickbacks and bloated salaries of the union bureaucracy (Weingarten alone took home \$557,875 in compensation from the AFT last year). This is demonstrated by the Michigan AFT's participation in the pro-charter Coalition for the Future of Detroit Schoolchildren, alongside Democrats, Republicans and various business executives. Republican Governor Rick Snyder named Paul Pastorek, who was instrumental in the charter school takeover of New Orleans public schools after Hurricane Katrina, as his liaison with the group.

Although the AFT's endorsement of Clinton was widely considered inevitable, certain layers of the trade union bureaucracy have expressed interest in, instead, endorsing Bernie Sanders, the pseudo-"socialist," independent senator running in the Democratic primaries, who has been rapidly gaining on Clinton in the polls in key early primary states. Sanders had already picked up endorsements from Larry Cohen, the former Communications Workers of America president responsible for the sellout of the 2011 Verizon strike,

and the South Carolina and Vermont executive boards of the AFL-CIO.

The early announcement by the AFT may have been calculated to circumvent any such movement towards Sanders and away from Hillary Clinton. AFT President Randi Weingarten has a close relationship with Clinton, going back to the latter's tenure in the Senate from New York state, when Weingarten was the head of New York City's United Federation of Teachers. Weingarten also serves on the board of a major Clinton super PAC, Priorities USA Action, which raised nearly \$80 million during the 2014 midterm elections alone.

Immediately after endorsing Clinton, the AFT invited her to speak at the union's biennial TEACH conference in Washington, DC, where she gave a perfunctory, two-minute video address to the well-heeled crowd of 2,000 union officials.

Many AFT members have taken to the Internet to express their anger at the AFT's decision to endorse a politician who has long supported charter schools and standardized testing.

The AFT's interviews with the Democratic candidates are themselves revealing. In their virtually identical remarks on the question, both Clinton and Sanders explicitly state their support for privately run charter schools, only stressing that they should be held "accountable" to the same standards of public schools. Clinton goes one step further in declaring that the "innovations" developed in charter schools (slashing of teacher salaries, military-style student discipline, etc.) should be implemented in traditional public schools.

The AFT endorsed Clinton, not in spite of her reactionary policies on education, but because it fully supports them. Similarly, in 2008, after initially backing Clinton, the AFT endorsed Barack Obama for president and has supported the Obama administration ever since.

In 2011, Obama applauded the firing of the entire teaching staff of a small Rhode Island school district, blaming them for low student performance in the poorest school district in the state. In remarks to the US Chamber of Commerce, Obama hailed the use of "strategies like closing a school for a time and reopening it under new management, or even shutting it down entirely and sending its students to a better school. And strategies like replacing a school's principal and at least half of its staff."

To the AFT, as well as the American trade unions as a whole, support for the Democratic Party is necessary in order to safeguard the narrow institutional interests of the union leaders. In return, the Democrats utilize the services of the unions to head off an independent political movement of the working class, to whose interests the unions are irreconcilably hostile.



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