

“This is one smart guy”

## US teachers union chief Randi Weingarten held secret meeting with Steve Bannon

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American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten held a secret meeting with then White House chief strategist Stephen Bannon at a Washington, DC restaurant just months after Donald Trump’s inauguration, according to an article on the *Intercept* website published earlier this week.

Weingarten had not previously reported her rendezvous with Trump’s neo-fascist aide, which the *Intercept* said occurred in March 2017 and “had been instigated by a mutual friend.” The AFT president later told the *Washington Post* that the meeting was held on April 19 in an empty restaurant near the White House and had been set up by Chris Ruddy, the chief executive of Newsmax Media Inc.

Ruddy’s conservative news outlet was an early supporter of Trump but had previously alienated right-wing circles by coming to the defense of the Clinton Foundation. Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee, is a Clinton ally, and the AFT has been a longtime financial backer of the foundation, which functions as a corrupt nexus between US corporate and political interests around the world.

Weingarten told the *Intercept* and the *Post* that she agreed to the meeting to “advocate for public education” after Trump’s proposed educational budget cuts that could reduce federal educational funding by \$9 billion and impose other cuts that would undermine special education and health programs.

“If you are the president of the union and you’re fighting fiercely to get budget restorations and to not have a dismantlement of public education or of higher education and the administration asks to—or it’s made clear to you that they want to meet—you meet,” she told the *Intercept*. “I wanted it to be a real meeting, I didn’t want it to be a photo-op, so I insisted that the meeting

didn’t happen at the White House.”

There is little doubt that Weingarten viewed with horror the potential of a social explosion over the destruction of public education, having spent the last eight years of the Obama administration suppressing teacher strikes and protests against school closings implemented under the Democratic president’s pro-corporate “school reform.”

The Bannon meeting took place amid growing popular protests against the new government of billionaires, generals and ultra-right figures. On February 10, just days after the US Senate confirmed Trump’s nominee for US education secretary, Betsy DeVos, teachers blocked the billionaire heiress and school privatizer from entering a middle school in Washington, DC.

In response, Weingarten tweeted, “Just heard a protester blocked & almost knocked Secy @BetsyDeVos down at Jefferson. We don’t condone such acts. We want her to go to pub schls.” A few days after her meeting with Bannon, Weingarten traveled to Ohio to visit a public school with DeVos, at the AFT president’s invitation.

The idea that Weingarten believed her meeting with Bannon could persuade Trump to change his mind about decimating public school funding requires suspending disbelief.

A far more likely scenario was that Weingarten and Bannon were courting each other over a potential political alliance. Indeed, after the debacle the unions suffered with the Clinton defeat, large sections of the union apparatus were jumping onto Trump’s bandwagon based on their mutual support for “America First” economic nationalism, trade war against China and Mexico, and unrestrained militarism.

Less than two weeks before the Bannon-Weingarten meeting, Trump was given a rousing welcome at the Building Trades Unions National Legislative Conference

at the Washington Hilton on April 3, while just two miles away at the National Press Club, Richard Trumka, the head of the AFL-CIO labor federation, also had warm words for Trump.

“I promise you that America’s labor leaders will always find an open door with Donald Trump,” Trump told the union conference, before launching into his standard rant against foreign countries and workers who had supposedly “stolen America’s wealth” and left US workers impoverished through unfair trade deals. The bureaucrats applauded approvingly as Trump pledged to lift environmental regulations on employers and pointed to his record of restarting the Keystone XL and Dakota Access pipelines. They cheered as he said his administration was cracking down on “illegal immigration” and preparing to end “visa abuses that undermine the American worker.”

In his remarks at the National Press Club, AFL-CIO President Trumka, a frequent visitor to the White House, praised Trump for pulling out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership trade pact and redrafting the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) with Mexico and Canada. He complained, however, that Trump failed to assure the unions that dues-paying members would be employed in federally funded infrastructure projects.

No doubt one of the central motivating factors for Weingarten was securing the White House’s support for boosting the business interests of the AFT bureaucracy. Weingarten, who nets an annual salary of \$497,300, has sought to shore up the income of union executives through joint schemes with Microsoft mogul Bill Gates. She hopes Trump’s infrastructure proposal will provide investment opportunities for the business executives who run the AFT.

As the *Intercept* article noted, the “AFT has sizable pension investments wrapped up in private equity, and the White House was hoping to leverage private equity to help fund the infrastructure package.” Indeed, Weingarten was ranked first on *Institutional Investor* magazine’s 40 most “influential players in US pensions” in 2013, according to Axios, which wrote that the AFT was considering investing some of the \$73 billion in private equity it controlled into Trump-backed infrastructure projects.

Weingarten walked away with great admiration for Bannon. “This is one smart guy,” she told the *Intercept*. “In the same way we have taken on the rich and crony capitalists and the hedge funds and the elite, you hear in his theory of the case that same scorn toward them as we

have,” she said. “But his is laced with a white-supremacist nationalism that is abhorrent.”

Weingarten’s squeamishness is about as sincere as the “shock” AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka expressed when he resigned from Trump’s manufacturing board after the president’s whitewash of the neo-Nazis who murdered a young anti-racist counter-protester in Charlottesville, Virginia.

The trade union bureaucracy is a natural constituency for the type of extreme nationalist movement Bannon is trying to build. The union executives share a pathological hatred of socialism and have long peddled the poison of American nationalism to divert the anger of workers over economic hardships and endless wars and prevent a unified struggle by the working class against the capitalist system.

Over the course of many decades, the American trade unions have funded and promoted far-right and fascistic forces against left-wing 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.

In March 2014, Weingarten joined a delegation of international union officials in Kiev to support the Western-backed fascist-led coup to install an anti-Russian government in Ukraine, which has since been used as the pretext for a further US and NATO military buildup. While there, she denounced as “Russian propaganda” the fact that this supposed “democratic movement” had been 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.

Having collaborated with these fascistic forces internationally, Weingarten, Trumka & Co. are courting similar forces in the US in a bid to suppress the political radicalization of workers and youth.



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