American Federation of Teachers convention devoted to boosting Democratic Party candidates

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The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) held its biennial national convention July 12-16 in Pittsburgh, drawing some 3,000 delegates.

The convention bore little resemblance to a discussion between real teachers, whose lives are increasingly dominated by financial hardship and the decimation of public education. The spring strike wave and the national de-funding of education were not seriously discussed. Instead, the bureaucracy turned its attention to promoting Democratic Party politicians. The official slogan was "We care, we fight, we show up and we vote," with emphasis on the latter.

If one wasn't already aware that the biggest mass action of educators in 40 years had taken place just weeks before the convention, one would not have gleaned it from the proceedings in Pittsburgh.

Statewide teachers' strikes, walkouts and large-scale demonstrations erupted in six states across the US between February and June: West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Colorado, Arizona and North Carolina. Teachers and school workers marched, protested, defied state anti-strike laws, challenged both Democratic and Republican lawmakers and gave voice to the outrage of millions of educators, parents and students over the ongoing destruction of public education.

These actions were initiated by rank-and-file teachers in opposition to the teachers' unions, which eventually sanctioned them only to contain, isolate and terminate them.

In all of these states, teachers are preparing to return to work with virtually the same poverty-level salaries, poor benefits and lack of educational funding that propelled them into strike action in the first place. Yet there was no assessment of these strikes or their outcomes at the biennial convention. This can be explained only by the fact that the AFT has no accountability to its membership.

To the limited extent that the convention, dominated by the AFT bureaucracy, acknowledged the teachers' rebellion, it was to declare the strikes victorious and portray voting and/or running in the mid-term elections as their logical extension. The AFT and its Democratic Party partners wanted nothing to do with further strikes or any other form of mass action by rank-and-file teachers.

Among the dozens of resolutions submitted to the convention, only a couple even referenced the strikes. One called for launching a national campaign of "labor action and education," another for declaring "a day of solidarity for our striking comrades." But these mild measures were blocked from being introduced on the floor of the convention. As far as the union hierarchy is concerned, the only permissible action is not in the streets, but at the ballot box, where the choice is between two right-wing parties of big business.

AFT President Randi Weingarten opened the convention on Friday and outlined its political agenda. Her speech, titled "Hope in Darkness," began with the June Supreme Court decision in *Janus v. American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 31*, which outlawed the compulsory payment of "agency" or "fair share" fees charged to nonunion employees covered by collective bargaining agreements in 22 states. The resulting decline in AFT membership could translate into millions of dollars of lost revenue for the union hierarchy.

Weingarten then briefly referred to the West Virginia strike, which she labeled a victory, ludicrously emphasizing the delivery of pizza from a California local to West Virginia strikers. She proceeded quickly to move on to "membership engagement," by which she meant recommitting union members to pay dues.

She told the delegates that the Supreme Court decision was the result of President Donald Trump's efforts to "take our voice away." She continued: "The good news is that we are not silent… This year, nearly 300 of your fellow AFT members aren't just casting their ballots—they're on the ballot. Walkouts are turning into walk-ins to the voting booth."

Weingarten's speech was followed by a rare joint appearance by Lee Saunders, president of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), Lily Eskelsen-Garcia, president of the National Education Association (NEA), and Mary Kay Henry, president of the Service Employees International Union, who all lined up on the stage to embrace Weingarten and denounce *Janus*.

A significant amount of time was devoted to a roll call of pre-selected delegates, who gave rousing speeches from the floor claiming that they had a large percentage of signed recommitment cards from their locals.

Not to leave the flow of income to the bureaucracy to chance, however, Weingarten and company proposed a constitutional amendment to increase both members' dues and locals' per capita taxes. Weingarten herself is on the payroll at over half a million dollars. Hundreds of highly paid union staffers were looking on from the convention floor.

The opening day's keynote was delivered by Hillary Clinton, the AFT's early nominee for president at the last gathering. She mentioned teacher activism, emphasizing "school safety" issues, that is, gun control, a standard plank of the Democratic Party. However, her main focus was on getting out the vote. "If we take back one or both houses [of Congress]," she said, "which I pray we do, we can start holding people accountable again, the way they should be. The alternative is too grim to think about."

The Saturday speaker was Senator Elizabeth Warren, who has not yet declared her intention to run for president in 2020, but is clearly testing the waters. Completely absent from her speech were any policies to expand K-12 funding. Warren referenced the fact that many teachers have second or third jobs and spend their own money on school supplies, yet she advocated no policy to seriously reinvest in schools.

The Massachusetts senator touched on the teachers' strikes only to imply, falsely, that the AFT had been leading the struggle, rather than working to block and then betray it.

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Warren concluded her address by calling for a “fight back” against “powerful forces,” but then clarified that she was not at all talking about resuming a strike offensive. She declared: “You took to the streets in the women’s march, the greatest protest movement in the history of the world [!]… You stormed the halls of Congress to help save the Affordable Care Act … We’ll register the voters and come November 6 we will vote to save this democracy.”

Bernie Sanders, also a potential candidate for 2020, addressed the group Sunday morning. Weingarten, a prominent member of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), played a critical role in torpedoing his presidential bid in 2016, operating as a hatchet-woman for Clinton. This spring, moreover, she applauded the decision by the DNC’s rules committee to prohibit the endorsement of a non-Democratic candidate, a maneuver designed to block a repeat Sanders bid.

Nevertheless, Sanders appeared on the stage in order to do his duty for the DNC. In his inimical, two-faced, pseudo-populist manner, he attacked wealth inequality while supporting the Democratic Party, the main party of Wall Street, whose essential policies today are cooperation with the Trump administration on domestic policy, support for war around the world, including with nuclear-armed Russia, and the criminalization of dissent.

Sanders hailed the primary win of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) member, in New York’s 14th Congressional District, and endorsed Rep. Conor Lamb in western Pennsylvania and Randy Bryce in Wisconsin, both of whom followed him to the podium to deliver their own campaign addresses.

It was Sanders who apparently evoked the one element of dissent that emerged at the tightly-scripted convention. This concerned the Executive Board’s early endorsement of Clinton in 2016.

“I was deeply disappointed when our national AFT leadership preemptively endorsed Hillary Clinton in 2016,” said delegate Jessica Buchsbaum during the floor debate, according to *Education Today*. “Many of us passionately supported Bernie.”

A resolution, which passed unanimously, stated that to win the union’s future endorsement, candidates had to support a list of largely Sanders-influenced priorities, including universal health care, free public college tuition and higher taxes on the rich to fully fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Title I. The resolution, however, did not mandate that a candidate embrace these points as policies, but instead called them “aspirations.”

Another phony “left,” Jesse Sharkey, vice-president (and acting president) of the Chicago Teachers Union and member of the International Socialist Organization (ISO), attended the conference, but failed to lift a finger in opposition. He was quoted by the *Guardian*, as part of a staged “Walk for Equitable Funding” event, shouting, “Whose schools? Our schools!”, without evincing a trace of opposition to the AFT’s betrayals.

This is not only because Sharkey is climbing the career ladder in the AFT, but also because the ISO and the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) which it dominates are working in tandem with the union hierarchy.

A former member of the Chicago Teachers Union and close associate of CORE, Brandon Johnson, was given a speaking slot by the AFT Executive Board. Johnson addressed the convention not just as a CTU delegate, but as an incoming Cook County commissioner, having won the Democratic primary.

Clearly “on message,” he denounced *Janus* and ended with a rhetorical flourish: “I command you to run for office … Run until drinking water in Michigan is safe … Run until the neighborhoods in Chicago are safe … Run until the rights of workers are protected … Run until Black Lives Matter.”

There was apparently no mention at the convention of “Race to the Top” or Arne Duncan, Obama’s education secretary. It was not convenient to remind teachers what they faced under the Democrat Obama—the elimination of hundreds of thousands of jobs, the promotion of charter schools and for-profit edu-businesses—when the bureaucracy was turning the entire convention into a launching pad for the Democrats in 2018 and beyond.

Weingarten was anointed for her sixth term as president. A laundry list of resolutions was offered by the AFT Executive Council and various locals, with dozens approved. None of the demands were linked to any strike action.

Perhaps the most strongly worded resolution was the AFT leadership’s “Organizing and Collective Bargaining” document, which resolved that the “immutable priority” of the union was to organize more dues-payers, “doubling down” on nurses and health care professionals and new geographic areas.

Significantly, a resolution was introduced calling for support to the investigation by Special Counsel Mueller and the impeachment or forced resignation of Trump—not because of his assault on public education, his immigration policies or his military buildup—but because of his supposed collusion with “Russian meddling.”

Weingarten herself issued a statement following the convention denouncing the meeting of Trump with Russian President Putin. She called it a “dark day for America,” adding, “there is little if no doubt Russia interfered in the 2016 election, yet the United States president is supporting Russia...”

It was fitting that the convention closed with a nostalgic nod to the late AFT President Albert Shanker, a notorious anti-communist neo-con and supporter of imperialist war.

The American Federation of Teachers convention in Pittsburgh demonstrated once again the reactionary and anti-working-class character of this organization. The lesson of the “teacher spring” is that the fight in defense of public education requires that teachers break free of the suffocating grip of the strike-breaking AFT and NEA and all the pseudo-left outfits that lend them credence.

In opposition to the corporatist trade unions, the Socialist Equality Party calls on educators to build rank-and-file committees in every school and neighborhood, independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, to mobilize and unite the working class and youth in defense of public education. This must be linked to a political struggle based on a socialist program. Nothing can be achieved without a frontal assault on the wealth and prerogatives of the capitalist ruling elite.

The author also recommends:

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