

NEA teachers union convention ignores a year of COVID-19 deaths and teachers' resistance, salutes Biden

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8 July 2021

The National Education Association (NEA), the largest union in the US with roughly 3 million members, concluded its annual Representative Assembly (RA) on July 3. The convention was characterized by a cover-up of the immense toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on educators, school staff, parents and children, with the pandemic reduced to an “exacerbation of inequities and racism.”

Remarkably, the union failed to host an “In Memorium” for those NEA members and school workers who died from COVID-19 over the past 16 months. The teachers unions have admitted that over 1,000 educators have perished from the virus so far, but refuse to publish precise numbers or the names of those lost. The traumatizing events of the last year were swept under the rug while newly installed President Betsy Pringle and other top officials provided platitudes about “resilience,” “creativity” and “love,” telling NEA members, “It’s what you do.”

In addition, the event in no way acknowledged teachers’ courageous and widespread protests, strikes and other struggles against being herded into unsafe classrooms throughout the past school year. This is explained by the fact that, as with the wave of teachers’ strikes that swept across the US in 2018-19, all resistance to school reopenings was mounted in the teeth of the national union’s opposition.

The organization and content of the NEA convention was a pointed message from the union to its members to forget about the past year and a half and get back to “business as usual.” Or, as featured speaker President Joe Biden callously told educators, “It’s time to roll up our sleeves and get back to work.” Since Biden’s inauguration, the reopening of schools—as demanded by Wall Street to increase the labor participation rate—has been his first priority. Now school workers are being told the pandemic is “over,” despite growing case numbers and the development of more infectious and lethal variants, and under conditions in which the vaccines have not even been approved for children under 12 years old.

Pringle’s cheery keynote address focused on “imagining possibilities.” She said, “This year has defined what it means to reckon with our past, advocate for better in our present, and expand the possibilities for our future.” However, there was no “reckoning” by the NEA staffers with the union’s abandonment of teachers. We are compelled, therefore, to supply a political assessment of these bitter experiences.

Last summer, the two national American teachers’ unions, the NEA and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), cynically used the COVID-19 crisis to insist that union-administration partnerships must be expanded to embed the union apparatus more firmly in districts and government.

The NEA issued a document in June 2020, “All Hands on Deck,” which followed the AFT’s “A Plan to Safely Reopen America’s Schools and Communities” and likewise specified the creation of expanded “labor-management collaboration committees at the school and district levels.”

The unions made clear they would suppress teacher opposition to in-person learning as long as they were included in the decision-making—a promise they kept.

As the teachers unions crafted their blueprints for reopening schools amid rising daily death tolls, by early May there had already been at least 173 strikes across the US to oppose the lack of COVID-19 safety measures.

Educators began taking measures into their own hands. Hundreds of thousands joined independent Facebook groups to express their determination to fight. In July alone, the WSWS reported teacher protests in Jacksonville, Florida; Montgomery, Alabama; Chicago, Illinois; Salt Lake City, Utah; East Baton Rouge Parish, Louisiana; Scottsdale, Tempe, Gilbert, Glendale, Tucson and Yuma, Arizona; Atlanta, Georgia; Memphis, Tennessee; Fort Mill, South Carolina; Colorado Springs, Colorado and many more.

These demonstrations escalated in August with calls for a nationwide walkout. The SEP provided the leadership and perspective to take this movement forward, fighting for teachers to form Rank-and-File Safety Committees, break with the pro-capitalist Democratic Party and unify all workers along class lines, nationally and internationally.

For their part, the unions failed to lift a finger to safeguard teachers. They called not a single demonstration at the national or state level, leaving teachers isolated district-by-district. In line with the policies of the Trump administration and the Democratic Party, the unions worked to suppress walkouts, demonstrations, and petitions across every state, allowed outspoken teachers to be victimized, and prevented educators from uniting together against Wall Street’s demand for a return to work.

This crime cost the lives of uncounted hundreds of educators, allowed the pandemic to spread throughout communities, and devastated children tragically susceptible to COVID-19 and multisystem inflammatory syndrome (MIS-C). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated that by May 19 roughly 26.7 million children under 18 years old had been infected with COVID-19, with a huge percentage undoubtedly connected to school reopenings. In allowing this to take place, the moral and political decay of the union was on full display.

The profound stress suffered by the education community in the face of losing numerous colleagues and loved ones was compounded by districts demanding superhuman efforts to create virtual curricula out of the whole cloth, often requiring simultaneous in-person and virtual lessons. Teachers were left with next to no resources to handle unprecedented demands. They dealt with students suffering from serious mental health issues, handled insuperable technology problems and took care of their own families at the same time.

Across the US, teachers with health concerns and documented underlying conditions were threatened with termination when they sought

accommodations. The vast bulk of these teachers report that they received no help from their union at all. Thousands of educators who have devoted their lives to a profession they love were forced to quit due to stress or safety concerns.

The NEA and AFT collectively have over 4.7 million members, covering the vast majority of towns and cities across the US. These immense bureaucracies had ample resources to raise the alarm at the start of the pandemic by educating and mobilizing parents, educators, students and workers nationally. Instead, they dutifully collaborated with both big business parties to reopen schools. While in 2018-19 the NEA and AFT made clear that they accept capitalist austerity and attacks on public education, in 2020-21 they demonstrated their willingness to sacrifice the health and lives of their membership, as well as students, parents and their broader communities.

In contrast, the Socialist Equality Party spent this past year fighting to mobilize teachers, school workers, and the working class to shut down schools and all nonessential production and save lives. Our March 14 statement, “Shut down the auto industry to halt the spread of the coronavirus!” sparked walkouts that compelled a national lockdown, saving countless lives. The formation of rank and file safety committees among autoworkers was followed by the Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee on August 15. Numerous other educators’ committees were formed at the regional, state and local levels, nationally and internationally.

The NEA’s hostility to its own membership is an expression of the broader decades-long transformation of all the unions into corporatist bureaucracies. The well-paid executives that run the unions—whose salaries place them in the top 5 percent of income earners in the US—are petty bourgeois layers who are integrated into the Democratic Party, one of the two capitalist political parties.

Pringle spoke to this reality in her June 30 opening address to the RA, telling the delegates, “We’ve done a lot of difficult and inspirational and impactful work—from electing President Biden—a true friend of educators and their unions—to voting in a new Senate, to securing historic investments in our schools; to winning court and legislative battles attacking our students’ rights to safe and equitable schools, our rights as educators to organize, our rights as a union to exist.”

In other words, the really important task of 2020 was promoting the Biden candidacy and ensuring the existence of the unions, not protecting educators. Pringle’s claim that Biden has secured “historic investments” in schools is absurd, as the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) provides on average only \$50 billion per year through 2023, as experts warn that states require at least \$200 billion by the end of 2022. During the Obama-Biden administration, more than 300,000 public education jobs were cut, a figure likely to be dwarfed in the coming years as a result of the pandemic and austerity implemented by the Biden-Harris administration.

The only truth in Pringle’s speech was her concern over the “rights” of the union “to exist.” To provide political insurance on that score, the NEA once again poured millions of dollars into campaigning for the Democrats in 2020. While the Republicans seek to totally dismantle the unions, the Democrats have long relied on them as a secondary agency to suppress the class struggle. In return for these services rendered to capitalist stability, the Democrats have retained the legal pathways by which union dues are extracted and union business operates.

These business interests for the NEA are substantial. According to the most recent government-required LM-2 filing covering September 2019 to August 2020, the union took in a staggering \$603,332,048 in annual revenue. Not a penny of this ample sum went to strike pay; the bulk was spent on Political Action Committees, Wall Street investments, and executive payouts, with the higher-paid bureaucrats inching upward toward the coveted top one percent of US earners.

Then-president Lily Eskelsen Garcia took home \$416,568, Secretary-

Treasurer Princess Moss \$396,651, and then-VP Betsy Pringle \$361,390. Countless members of the Board of Directors, “organizational specialists,” “analysts” and others conducting “representative activities” make salaries triple, quadruple or more times the most senior, well-educated teachers.

Indicative of the organization’s internal rot, the union’s staff voted by 98 percent to strike last month. They accused the NEA leadership of gross hypocrisy after months of refusing to bargain in good faith, attempting to “hike healthcare costs,” “slash retirement benefits” and keep subordinates at “stagnant pay now and well into the future at a time when inflation and the cost of living are skyrocketing.”

On the third day of the NEA convention, Pringle ecstatically introduced featured speaker Joe Biden, whose speech emphasized a pressing concern of the ruling elite—America’s declining political and economic hegemony. Quoting NEA member and First Lady Jill Biden, he emphasized that “any country that out-educates us is going to out-compete us.” He added, “We have to build for the rest of the 21st century because the rest of the world isn’t sitting around waiting,” noting, “The NEA is one of the nation’s indispensable organizations.”

The president’s remarks followed the militarist drumbeat which has characterized his government from the start. This inevitably translates into an increasing subordination of funding and a public policy tailored to America’s geopolitical interests and preparations for new wars with China, Russia and beyond.

Whatever modicum of funding for school infrastructure or programs provided by the ARPA and other measures, it will be entirely inadequate to reverse decades of the defunding of public education. Their central purpose will be to ensure a workforce and military which is competent and battle-ready. Current initiatives already pursued by the Bidens encourage “practical skills” acquisition at the expense of the classical critical thinking associated with history and the humanities.

Pivotal to implement the deeply unpopular drive to war is the anti-communist and pro-capitalist NEA and its sister unions. In her July 1 convention speech on “defending democracy,” NEA Executive Director Kim Anderson (annual salary \$381,925) echoed the anti-Russia and anti-China campaign of the US political establishment, stating, “Think about how ‘foreign adversaries’ have interfered in the integrity of our elections—without consequence.”

Despite her focus on democracy, Anderson made no mention of the January 6 coup attempt or the continued growth of authoritarianism—fully in line with the Democratic Party’s cover-up.

Bromides, lies and militarism were complemented with a predictably large dose of identity politics designed to distract educators from the fundamental class issues and inject racialist divisions within the working class.

One approved New Business Item (NBI) called for “increasing the implementation of culturally responsive education, critical race theory and ethnic Studies curriculum in pre- K-12 and higher education,” with another calling for a union study criticizing “empire, white supremacy, anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, racism, patriarchy, cisheteropatriarchy, capitalism, ableism, anthropocentrism, and other forms of power and oppression at the intersections of our society.”

There were no NBIs passed, or even proposed, which demanded the resources necessary to address the decades-long defunding of public education, crumbling buildings and technology deserts, raise school workers’ salaries, secure full wrap-around services for students, establish generous retirement for teachers or ameliorate the well-known effects of poverty on American children of all ethnicities. Only demands which did not encroach on the financial oligarchy and its record profit-taking were tolerated.

All in all, the RA graphically demonstrated the parasitic and completely right-wing role of the unions today. Not a single step can be taken to save

lives in a pandemic or secure the rights of students to high-quality free education without the widespread creation of rank-and-file committees in every district and neighborhood, independent of the unions and all the capitalist political parties. Only a socialist program which demands the expropriation of the ill-gotten wealth of the financial oligarchy can provide the necessary resources to secure the future of public education. We urge all educators, parents and students to join or build a committee near you today.



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