

# AFT president to Wall Street: Be thankful for the unions

Jerry White

25 November 2021

In a paid advertisement in the *New York Times* last Sunday, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten made a sales pitch to the publication's well-heeled readers on the importance of unions "in these uneasy times."

Weingarten's target audience is not workers or teachers, most of whom will not read her musings, but the corporate, financial and political elite. Her argument is that the unions are the only thing standing between *them* and an increasingly restive and radicalized working class.

Her November 21 column, titled "Working people are stronger together," warns, "People are anxious about rising prices for food, gas and other essentials. They are frustrated that life isn't snapping back from the pandemic as quickly as they'd like. And they want fair wages and benefits, good working conditions and a voice on the job."

"New terms have emerged to describe the state of American workers—like the 'Great Resignation, the 'Great Exhaustion' and the 'Great Frustration.' I hear this sentiment from my members, most of whom work in education and healthcare, professions under enormous strain during the pandemic. We have a saying in my union: Together we can achieve things that would be impossible on our own. Collective bargaining allows workers not just to ask for things from those in power but to *have* some power of their own."

The last thing Weingarten wants is for workers to have more power. On the contrary, she is appealing to the ruling class to give the unions more power *over* the workers, to prevent them from losing power themselves.

As the chief enforcer of Biden's criminal open-the-schools policy during the pandemic, Weingarten bears

direct responsibility not only for the "strain" on educators, but for their deaths. According to twitter account @LostToCovid, at least 2,000 teachers, custodians, school bus drivers and other school personnel have died from the pandemic, including hundreds of AFT members.

Reading Weingarten's column, one would not know that COVID-19 is claiming the lives of 1,100 people every day, and that 775,000 Americans have died. Another 48 million—one out of every seven—have been infected. But these horrific numbers have no impact on Weingarten and the affluent, upper middle-class readers of the *Times*, who are largely insulated from this catastrophe and work safely out of the comfort of their homes.

Weingarten writes: "The pandemic has shone a new light on the importance of worker voice," by which she means the unions. "Our affiliates across the country negotiated health and safety protocols to reopen schools and keep them open for in-person learning during the pandemic. And some unions, like the Detroit Federation of Teachers, negotiated innovative programs like the DFT's home visit program to combat low student attendance exacerbated by the pandemic."

Indeed, Weingarten and the AFT-affiliated unions have led the charge in herding teachers and students back into classrooms, so their parents can be sent back to work to produce corporate profits. To the horror of educators, Weingarten and the AFT co-hosted a town hall meeting on September 30 with the right-wing parent group Open Schools USA, which featured Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, one of the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration, a manifesto of the homicidal "herd immunity" policy.

But opposition to this is growing, particularly as the US is hit by a new winter surge. Weingarten's column

appeared just days after hundreds of students and teachers at Detroit's Martin Luther King High School walked out to protest COVID-19 outbreaks at their school. So concerned were the DFT and school administrators that student protests and teacher sickouts could spread throughout Michigan—now an epicenter of the pandemic in the US—and beyond, that they decided to shut the schools prior to the Thanksgiving break, effectively closing for the entire week.

Anger over the criminal response to the pandemic, surging inflation and decades of union-backed wage and benefit concessions have sparked an increasing number of strikes over the last year, involving broad sections of workers. This has taken the form of repeated revolts and near unanimous rejections of union-backed contracts, by Warrior Met coal miners, Volvo Trucks, Dana and John Deere workers, Seattle carpenters and many others. In these struggles, workers are taking up the call by the *World Socialist Web Site* for the formation of rank-and-file factory and workplace committees to oppose the sabotage of the corporatist unions, unify these struggles and mount a counteroffensive against capitalist exploitation.

This eruption of class conflict has generated enormous fear in the ruling class and its servants in the union bureaucracy, who have enriched themselves from an environment of low wages, cheap credit and the continuous run-up of the stock market. Weingarten has an annual salary over \$500,000, a net worth of at least \$1.5 million and is regularly cited by the publication *Institutional Investor* as one of the most influential players in the multitrillion-dollar retirement fund market.

Alarmed at the growing number of walkouts last month, the AFL-CIO has done its best to convert “Striketober” into “No-Strike November.” It has blocked strikes by 60,000 film and TV production workers and 32,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers on the West Coast. At the same time, it has shut down the Deere workers’ and Scranton teachers’ strikes and isolated the 1,400 Kellogg’s workers, where the company just announced plans to hire permanent replacements.

In her column, Weingarten boasts of the efforts of the unions to prevent the expansion of the strike wave, writing, “Last week, two days before thousands of Kaiser workers were set to strike, the parties negotiated

an agreement that makes big inroads on safe staffing levels and provides decent wages and benefits.

“This week, AFT-member lecturers at the University of California, who teach 30 percent of the courses at the university, negotiated landmark job security protections, paid family leave and double-digit pay increases—just hours before they were set to strike.”

Weingarten also points to her union’s shutdown of the two-week strike by 800 Scranton, Pennsylvania, teachers, which they waged against the austerity measures of an AFT-backed Democratic governor. The teachers struck, Weingarten states, after “working five years under an expired contract with no pay increases”—as if these conditions have nothing to do with the policies and actions of the AFT!

Concluding, Weingarten says, “Collective bargaining can channel anger and frustration into action to achieve economic fairness, gain voice and agency on the job, and help Americans achieve their dreams. And for that I give thanks.”

The glowing accounts of the deals reached by the AFT and other unions to block or end strikes are totally false. In each case, the unions worked to channel “anger and frustration” not into “action to achieve economic fairness,” but into blind alleys and backroom deals at Kaiser, University of California, Scranton, Deere and Hollywood, which further erode living standards and sanctify increasingly dangerous and unbearable working conditions.

Connected by a million threads to the capitalist system, the union bureaucracy is determined to keep workers on the job no matter what the death toll from the pandemic, sacrificing lives to corporate profits.

If Weingarten is giving thanks, it is because she and her fellow union bureaucrats have thus far staved off a social explosion, which would threaten their own stock portfolios and positions. But a massive reckoning is coming, in the form of a far broader and politically conscious movement of the working class against the capitalist system Weingarten & Co. defend.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**