

National Education Association's annual convention ignores plight of US teachers fighting COVID and austerity

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The largest union in the US, the National Education Association (NEA), held its annual Representative Assembly (RA) July 3-6 in Chicago. The event occurred amid the gravest assault on public education and democratic rights in American history. As the caucuses met, Omicron BA.5 surged, COVID-19 deaths and hospitalizations leapt, and teachers and schoolchildren continued to die. All the while, inflation careened through family budgets like a wrecking ball.

Universally, educators have described the 2021-22 school year as the most difficult in their careers. Uncounted thousands of educators died from COVID-19. Tens of thousands continue to suffer from Long COVID. Many have had repeated infections.

Attending the RA were reportedly 4,500 delegates plus 1,500 online, down from 10,000 in 1998. The dwindling numbers reflect the ever-widening gulf between teachers and the well-heeled union hierarchy.

That gulf was underscored by the speeches which all but ignored the crisis in education. NEA President Betsy Pringle opened the event on July 3. Her keynote address *mentioned* COVID-19 in one phrase. But this was only as context for “lifting up our incredible students” and “our phenomenal educators.”

One would be excused for mistaking the union president for a corporate motivational speaker. Teachers were told, “Resistance is the secret of joy,” “Justice must be an action!” “Every day, all day, we will remember who we are!” concluding, “Delegates, lift up your heads, the sun is still shining.”

Pringle’s phony hoopla was only window-dressing for the real message of the RA—the bureaucracy’s urgent need to get out the vote for the mid-term elections and an endorsement of President Joe Biden’s “Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment.”

The event’s tone was nervous, with the union clearly worried about losing their “seat at the table” should the Democrats be trounced in November. The union’s fear of their membership was also demonstrated by the tightened security around the RA and the removal of the proposed measures—called “new business items”—from the public portion of its website.

A nonbinding vision statement was highlighted as the main achievement of the RA, the result of a year’s work, according to the union. The statement calls for “safe, just, and equitable public schools.” This amorphous goal was then tied to a series of “core

principles,” including restorative justice, culturally competent instruction, an end to discriminatory discipline practices, and “community-centered” schools. The union said nothing about draconian budget cuts looming in New York, California or around the country, much less waging a fight for high-quality public education for all.

In line with the priority of tightening the union’s alliance with the Democrats, Vice-President Kamala Harris was selected as the RA’s featured speaker. Addressing the group on July 5, she emphasized it was only 126 days until the elections.

She lamely tried to associate the elections with various “hopes” while promising nothing. She said, “We are determined to fight for a future where a teacher’s wage can provide for a family.” “We are determined to fight for a future where you never again have to spend your own money on school supplies to meet your students’ needs.” “Teachers should not have to know how to treat a gunshot wound.”

The well-known fact that NEA members cannot support a family on their salaries is an unassailable indictment of union betrayals over decades, along with the austerity measures imposed by Harris’ Democratic Party and the Republicans. This crisis is worsening by the day, as every contract, without fail, ensures teachers fall further and further behind raging inflation.

For example, last March, the union worked in tandem with the AFT to isolate and shut down two of the year’s most powerful strikes in two Democratic-controlled cities, Minneapolis and Sacramento, forcing teachers back to work with 2 percent (for each of two years) and 4 percent (one year), respectively. Official inflation is now 9.1 percent, with real-life price hikes closer to 20 percent.

The same month, the NEA announced to media fanfare (apparently without irony) a unique partnership with Airbnb, whereby “teachers who are NEA members and are first-time Airbnb hosts will receive a one-time \$100 stipend.” NEA marketing director Leona Linder gushed that educators could “turn their home into a tool for connection and financial empowerment.”

Harris promoted Biden’s “Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment,” stating, “The President and I are determined to lead ... the most pro-union administration in American history.” She said that federal dollars are being funneled into educating nonunion workers because “many people still don’t know how to

join a union.” She also pledged to make it easier for federal workers to join a union.

Biden’s pro-union policy is pro-apparatus, not pro-worker. The task force was launched last year to further integrate the pro-capitalist unions with the government and business. Its mission is to police the working class, stop strikes and prevent the rank and file from pursuing its demands. As it acknowledges, the task force aims to “promote stability” and “minimize disruption” to safeguard “national interests.” The WWS has emphasized that the development of such corporatist boards, modeled on those created by Italian fascist Benito Mussolini, also aim to “discipline the working class on the ‘home front’ as the United States prepares catastrophic new wars abroad.”

What is the state of affairs? With more than half of all educators considering leaving their profession, tens of thousands have grown disgusted with the refusal of the unions to defend either their lives or their livelihoods. According to the NEA budget reports, some 75,000 have dropped their membership during the past two years.

This ongoing decline has not, by any means, left the NEA strapped for cash. Current government reports show the union’s assets top \$412 million. According to the government LM2 2021 filing, Pringle brings home over \$431,000 annually, while an army of some 700 functionaries receive double, triple or quadruple the salaries of average educators.

As a result of the NEA’s suppression of strikes, the union reports that “teachers are bringing home on average \$2,179 less per year than they did a decade ago.” The last year was no exception in the union forcing through contracts that failed to protect teachers against raging inflation. No contract has even begun to make up for the years of poverty wage scales.

In other matters, Harris touted the recent toothless changes in gun control legislation as the most significant in 30 years, called on schools to invest in paid tutors for children, and claimed the administration was providing funds for mental health, school infrastructure and clean drinking water.

In point of fact, the Biden administration omitted \$100 billion for school modernization originally in last year’s infrastructure bill, depriving schools of funding for HVAC retrofitting. While \$125 billion in education funding was passed in the American Rescue Plan of 2021, a whopping \$72 billion was needed to upgrade school ventilation systems. School and work sites have been the primary sources of coronavirus infections.

In an NEA survey this year, 95 percent of teachers identified improved ventilation as the most pressing issue to mitigate the effects of the pandemic in schools. Educators are laboring in buildings without HVAC updates, or HEPA filters, constructing their own Corsi boxes or opening creaking windows. Only 38 percent reported having adequate systems in place.

Teachers have desperately attempted to protect their students, but watched them become sick and pass the deadly virus to their families. As of February, a staggering number of K-12 students, more than 200,000, lost a parent or caregiver. Teachers and students alike are suffering unprecedented mental health crises. Everywhere, educators doubled and tripled up to overcome the shortage of staff. They covered classes, drove buses, and served lunches, as the virus devastated the workforce.

The NEA, together with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), is responsible for this unprecedented crisis. They insisted that educators must return face-to-face so that parents could stay on the job. On the second day of his administration, Biden summoned Pringle and AFT President Randi Weingarten to the White House to collaborate in reopening public schools, which they did with full-throated support.

The 2022 NEA convention once again endorsed this homicidal policy, prioritizing profits over lives. It voted down, for the second year in a row, a new business item calling for high-quality virtual education for immune-compromised students and all families who want it, as well as mandatory masking and COVID vaccines in school buildings. The measure was defeated by 84 percent by this bloated, complacent bureaucracy.

These policies in no way represent the will of educators. Teachers and students across the US have spent the last two years looking for the means to oppose the government’s demands to “let the virus rip.” In strikes, protests, petitions and sickouts, they waged a battle against the disease, lies by the government at all levels, indifference by administrators, case-count coverups by Democrats and Republicans alike, and demands by the unions that they submit to work in unsafe conditions. Strikes and demonstrations erupted throughout the world, from throughout Europe, Latin America, Asia, Australia and North America, independently and in opposition to the union hierarchy.

In the US, these struggles—encompassing districts across the country—have grown into open rebellion against the unions in many areas. In 2022 alone, walkouts or sickouts occurred in Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis, Sacramento/San Francisco/Oakland, California, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, Pennsylvania and more. Graduate student-workers have struck in Indiana, New York and Oregon, and high school students walked out in districts too numerous to list, but include New York City, Oakland, Seattle, Detroit, Montgomery County, Maryland, Washington D.C. and Huntington, West Virginia.

Increasingly, educators have supported the call by the *World Socialist Web Site* for the formation of rank-and-file safety committees to mobilize educators against unsafe conditions, the coverup of COVID outbreaks, and the bipartisan attacks on public education. Formed by educators independently of the corporatist union bureaucracy, the democratically controlled committees are part of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), which is coordinating the struggles of workers across national boundaries. This work must be expanded dramatically. We urge all educators to join today and link all sections of the working class in this fight for our future.



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