

American Federation of Teachers convention: In service of American capitalism's COVID-19 coverup, strike suppression, and war plans

Emma Arceneaux**25 July 2022**

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) concluded its biennial convention on July 17. The event, held in Boston, was characterized by a cover-up of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, support for US imperialism's war against Russia, and an overall deepening of the union's integration with the capitalist state. It serves as a warning of the role that the union will play in suppressing the working class as the crisis of capitalism intensifies.

Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, set the tone for the event in her keynote address. Other "high profile" speakers expressed the close collaboration between the capitalist state and the teachers union. They included First Lady Jill Biden, Labor Secretary Marty Walsh, Senator Elizabeth Warren, and AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler. Their speeches revealed the nervousness of the union bureaucracy and Biden administration about containing the growing movement of the working class and confining it into a dead-end Democratic Party voting campaign.

The speakers list also included Amazon Labor Union President Chris Smalls, the new darling of the AFL-CIO, which has embraced him in an effort to shore up its waning credibility.

The COVID-19 pandemic

Weingarten acknowledged in her speech the unprecedented crisis facing educators and American democracy as a whole, citing the pandemic, the January 6 coup attempt, the war in Ukraine, and the Supreme Court's overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. She asked for a moment of silence "for those we have lost." What took their lives and how many were lost, she did not say.

In fact, thousands of educators and school workers have died from COVID-19 since schools reopened in August 2020 according to an unofficial tracker. No official tally has been released by either the AFT or the other teacher's union, the National Education Association (NEA), which also held its convention this month. Over 14 million children have been infected and at least 1,700 have died according to the CDC. The vast majority of infections and deaths occurred after September 2021, when children and educators were forced back into classrooms during the Delta and then Omicron waves. This policy was demanded by the Biden administration and ruthlessly enforced by the AFT.

Whitewashing her own culpability in the deadly school reopening campaign, Weingarten said that during the pandemic "our members rolled up our sleeves to make in-person learning safe and welcoming. The AFT

embarked on an unprecedented Back to School for All campaign last summer, giving \$5 million in grants to 1,800 AFT affiliates serving some 20 million students."

It was Weingarten herself who boasted that she spent fifteen hours a day coercing educators and parents to return to unsafe classrooms. The AFT rank-and-file membership, meanwhile, waged a concerted struggle to keep schools, known to be central locations of viral transmission, remote.

Weingarten's admission to visiting "150 work sites in the last 14 months" is telling. Throughout January and February, thousands of educators and students staged walkouts in dozens of cities. Many of these were wildcats, organized independently or in defiance of the unions. In places where the unions were forced to call a temporary strike, they immediately sought to stifle and sabotage the struggle of teachers.

In Chicago, the AFT-affiliated Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), working closely with Weingarten and the Democratic administration of Mayor Lori Lightfoot, shut down a remote work action by 25,000 educators, who had halted in-person learning as the district faced record infection levels. The CTU shut down the job action before teachers even voted on an agreement negotiated with the district. The deal itself, which CTU President Jesse Sharkey claimed was the best they could get, did nothing to protect educators or students.

During her speech, Weingarten criticized "the extremists—the anti-public schools crowd, the anti-union crowd, the privatizers, the haters." This begs the question, why did the AFT collaborate with these very extremists to promote school reopenings?

In late September 2021, as the Delta wave was raging and adult and pediatric hospitals filled up across the country, Weingarten hosted a town hall event in partnership with far-right, anti-public schools parents' group Open Schools USA, which featured notorious pseudo-scientists Drs. Jay Bhattacharya, an author of the Great Barrington Declaration, and anti-mask, COVID minimizer Tracy Beth Høeg.

It is noteworthy that the AFT convention required proof of vaccination, masks, as well as multiple negative COVID-19 tests for entry. None of these basic, though inadequate, measures are guaranteed to the millions of educators and school children in the US. Over the past six months, the Biden administration has overseen the full dismantling of all mitigation measures, testing and reporting infrastructure. Most of the major school districts opening in the coming weeks will not even require masks, despite a huge surge of the BA.5 variant, which the administration has projected could infect 100 million people this fall.

Indicative of the vast chasm between the concerns of educators and the priorities of the union, of the three dozen resolutions adopted at the convention, not a single one was devoted to the pandemic. To the extent

that the pandemic was even mentioned in the resolutions, no concrete measures were proposed to protect educators or students.

The war in Ukraine

While no resolution was passed on the pandemic, the AFT did pass a resolution giving full-throated support to the US-NATO proxy war against Russia. In her speech, Weingarten, who supported the CIA-backed coup in Ukraine in 2014, denounced Russian President Vladimir Putin as an “oil gangster,” but raised no criticism regarding Biden’s meeting with Saudi Arabia’s blood-drenched despot Mohammed bin Salman.

The resolution reeks of imperialist lies and hypocrisy. In addition to covering up the well documented role of neo-Nazis and fascists within the Ukrainian state and military, it accuses Russian forces of war crimes, while ignoring evidence of war crimes on the part of the Ukrainian military.

The resolution goes on to claim that the AFT “affirms the fundamental principle that aggression should not be the answer to conflict among nations.” Where was this peace-loving principle and the respect for “sovereignty” and “democracy” during the last 30 years as the US waged endless wars in the Middle East and North Africa? Past AFT resolutions endorsed US imperialism’s aggressive wars against Afghanistan and Iraq, including one resolution from 2003 that, fully embracing the lies of the Bush administration, demanded Iraqi President Saddam Hussein “abandon … weapons of mass destruction” or else face “unavoidable” military conflict.

In lining up behind the Biden administration promotion of the proxy war in Ukraine, the AFT seeks to pull a veil over the eyes of its membership as to the existential dangers the conflict poses. It did not mention that the escalation of the conflict, fueled by the Biden administration, threatens to spiral into a nuclear third world war, which threatens the annihilation of humanity. It supports the sanctions against Russia that have led to an international food crisis for billions of people, while absurdly stating that the US has avoided “direct U.S. military involvement,” ignoring unprecedented levels of military assistance, including tens of billions of dollars in high tech weaponry, that will be paid for out of the pockets of American educators and the broader working class.

Integration of the unions with the state

The AFT’s policies in relation to the pandemic and the war against Russia are dictated by the fact that the union, like the entire AFL-CIO, has become an appendage of American capitalism and specifically the Democratic Party.

In concluding her speech, Weingarten spoke about the ongoing danger posed to American democracy in the aftermath of the January 6 coup attempt, stating “we may have seen our last free and fair election.” She continued, “If this isn’t a 10-alarm fire, I don’t know what is. We have one shot at changing this.” Her only answer, however, is to vote for the Democratic Party, a party that continues to call the Republicans “colleagues” and has refused to arrest and prosecute Trump or his wide network of collaborators.

The speeches by Marty Walsh and Liz Shuler, which emphasized the Biden administration’s ongoing efforts to institutionalize the union apparatus, reveal the real nature of these organizations as a pro-capitalist police force over the working class.

Walsh stated that the “Administration should make it easy for workers to join unions.” In addition to the administration’s support for the PRO-ACT, he touted Biden’s “Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment,” which includes high level officials from the State Department, the Pentagon, and the Treasury. Such an organization is organically hostile to the interests of workers and is seen by the Biden administration as an avenue for stifling the working class during an historic upsurge of strikes and walkouts, which are increasingly taking the form of a rebellion against the trade unions.

Walsh ended his speech with a burst of perhaps unintended candor, declaring that “the unions are the only chance for the middle class!” Indeed, the union apparatus, swollen with bureaucrats making six-figure salaries, who suppress strikes, manipulate votes, and sit on billions of dollars of assets, represent the interests of the affluent upper middle class, not the working class. Weingarten’s published salary, for instance, is nearly \$500,000.

Shuler, who spoke on the urgent need to “lead in every election moving forward” and to corral more workers into the union apparatus, painted an imaginary picture of a thriving labor movement. She praised the fact that there are “12 million [union members] in 57 unions” in the United States. With a certain dose of delusion, she asserted that, “Even as public trust in institutions, whether it’s Congress or religion, it’s cratering, but there’s one they still trust, *unions*. They trust us.”

In reality, workers have left the unions in droves for decades. Union membership has plummeted since the 1950s, when 30 percent of workers were unionized, down to only 10.3 percent in 2021. Since the betrayal of the PATCO strike in 1981, the unions have overseen an endless series of concessions, wage cuts, and plant closures, giving back to the corporations nearly all the gains won in an earlier period.

Finally, the speech by Chris Smalls, whose ALU won a rare organizing victory at an Amazon Warehouse in Staten Island, New York, sought to cultivate illusions in the union apparatus and the capitalist system.

Smalls vaguely referred to a “war going on outside and the other side is winning.” If he were honest, he would say that there is a *class* war going on between the capitalists and the workers, and that the capitalists are supported by the so-called labor unions and every other political organization that seek to bind the working class to the Democratic Party.

Smalls asked the crowd to envision the following fantastical scenario: “Imagine, imagine, if Liz Shuler told the AFL-CIO, if Randi said, ‘You know what? Teachers don’t go to work today.’ Imagine if everybody in the country, all unions came together… if we all withheld our labor.”

Of course, millions of educators and other workers around the country have asked themselves this very question and are increasingly calling for a general strike. Why haven’t the AFT or any other union called a nationwide strike to stop the reopening of schools and workplaces at any point during the pandemic? Why weren’t any of the dozens of walkouts by educators in Chicago, New York, Montgomery, Oakland, Detroit, Minneapolis, Baton Rouge, to name just a few, combined into a unified movement?

The working class does require unification on a national and international scale to harness its collective strength and put an end to mounting social misery in the form of ongoing mass infection and death, imperialist war, the threat of dictatorship, and the unbearable cost of living.

But the trade unions, in the United States as in every part of the world, are founded on reformist and nationalist politics and have degenerated under conditions of globalized production into corporatist bodies defending “their” national capitalist class and the state against the strivings of the working class. The ever closer integration of the unions with the Biden administration is a conscious response based on their mutual fear of the growing movement of rank-and-file workers which threatens to break free from the confines of the corporatist unions and

develop into a mass movement against capitalism.

The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC), initiated by the International Committee of the Fourth International, seeks to foster this movement of educators and the entire working class on a global scale and unshackle it from the strangling grip of the trade unions.

Teachers across the US and internationally have taken up the call to form rank-and-file committees in their districts, independent of the unions, to fight against the pandemic and the relentless bi-partisan attacks on public education. To carry forward this work and prevent another disastrous school year, the IWA-RFC must be greatly expanded, and rank-and-file committees built in every school.



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