

AFT President Randi Weingarten: A longtime agent for American imperialism

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American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten has returned from last week's extraordinary trip to Ukraine and Poland in support of US imperialism's proxy war against Russia. This was all in a day's work for the head of the teachers' union, who has been a valued overseas operative for the State Department for many decades.

Just a week following Biden's remarks on the heightened danger of nuclear "Armageddon," Weingarten cynically used the suffering of children and teachers in war-torn Ukraine to solidarize herself with the war's escalation.

Weingarten's mission aimed specifically to whitewash the Nazi-infested regime of Volodymyr Zelensky. It concealed the direct fascist lineage of the US-installed government—the better to promote the effort to oust Russian President Vladimir Putin and carve up Russia on behalf of Wall Street.

The AFT president met with Lviv's Mayor Andriy Sadovyi, a far-right politician with a long association with the Ukrainian fascist legacy of Stepan Bandera. A virulent anti-Semite, Bandera was the founder of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN) which collaborated with the Nazis in World War II and was involved in mass murder.

Weingarten has been neck deep in US conspiracies in Ukraine for some time. In 2014, she traveled to the region, backing the US-instigated coup which toppled the elected government and installed a regime supporting American geopolitical aims. This coup was implemented primarily by far-right shock troops including the Right Sector and the neo-Nazi Svoboda Party which also advances Bandera as a hero.

The AFT president has been sent to Ukraine to provide a "democratic" camouflage for US imperialism in keeping with the playbook of the State Department and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

In early April of this year, Weingarten was the first US trade union official to visit Europe after the war began, embarking on a tour of Poland and its border with Ukraine. During this tour she met with US Ambassador to Poland Mark Brzezinski, son of Zbigniew Brzezinski, the US national security adviser to President Jimmy Carter and an architect of US imperialist policy during and after the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Last week, just before boarding her plane to Ukraine, Weingarten solidarized herself with the Ukrainian bombing of the Kerch Strait Bridge to Crimea, an incendiary escalation of the war into Russian territory. Echoing US State Department-run media, Weingarten sanctions every attack on Russian civilians and territory, while decrying any Russian retaliation as criminal.

This is not new. As a longtime member of the Democratic National Committee (DNC), Weingarten's record supporting US wars of aggression is extensive.

In fact, Weingarten views her service to US imperialism abroad as her most critical role. For her, the collapsing state of public education, the fact that thousands of teachers have died of COVID-19 or that a whole generation of young people face potentially disabling Long COVID are non-issues.

As for her supposed concern for the Ukraine war's "effects on children, families and educators," Weingarten and the AFT have, for over two years, deliberately underplayed the deaths of educators, the orphaning of children and the human cost of the bipartisan "let it rip" approach to the pandemic.

She has been the linchpin of the deadly reopening of schools across the US, systematically blocking strikes and protests by educators and youth. Prioritizing "the economy" over the lives of educators, students and families, the AFT and the National Education Association have partnered with Trump and Biden, turning schools into centers of viral transmission.

Weingarten states that the AFT was invited on her current tour by the Trade Union of Education and Science Workers Union (TUESWU). This "union," however, is no more a genuine organization of workers struggle than the AFT. It was set up in the wake of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, played its US-assigned role during the Maidan coup in 2014, and is part of the Education International (EI).

Like similar CIA-labor outfits around the world, Education International is used to subvert genuine teachers struggles, spy on the working class and advance US geopolitical interests. For example, Education International is now also "very active" in Afghanistan "since the Taliban's return to power" according to EI consultant Samidha Garg. As of September, EI has established a new task force, the Afghanistan Teachers' Rights Observatory, to "monitor, document, assess and report on the situation on the ground in Afghanistan."

The pro-war activities of Weingarten, the AFT and EI demonstrate the truth of Trotsky's assessment that the unions "grow together" with the state power under conditions of imperialism. At the very end of his life, Trotsky emphasized this critical relationship in his unfinished article "Trade unions in the epoch of capitalist decay."

Explaining this integration of the unions with the state, he said, "This position is in complete harmony with the social position of the labor aristocracy and the labor bureaucracy, who fight for a crumb in the share of superprofits of imperialist capitalism." (Weingarten's annual pay package was \$543,562 as of June 2021, according to the IRS 990-O form filed by the AFT.)

Even more pointedly, Trotsky concluded: "The labor bureaucrats do their level best in words and deeds to demonstrate to the 'democratic' state how reliable and indispensable they are in peacetime and especially in time of war. By transforming the trade unions into organs of the state, fascism invents nothing new; it merely draws to their ultimate conclusion the tendencies inherent in imperialism."

Trotsky's analysis is timely, as the unions' integration into the capitalist state apparatus has reached new levels. Biden's newly created Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment is one example, but these developments are starkest in the overseas operations of the AFL-CIO. In fact, perhaps the most insidious element of the unions is their long association with the overthrowing of left-wing regimes and the subversion of workers struggles internationally.

One must call things by their right names: a labor movement that aligns itself with the foreign policy of Wall Street and the CIA is not a labor movement, but an imperialist agency. This criminal collusion has a long history.

What are the political origins of Education International?

EI, of which Weingarten is a prominent director, was formed in 1993 under the leadership of Albert Shanker, merging together AFT- and NEA-affiliated international anti-communist organizations. Shanker, the longtime AFT president and former head of the New York City teachers union, was politically trained by former Trotskyist-turned-apologist for imperialism Max Shachtman. Shanker, in turn, employed Shachtman's wife in his office and served as the political mentor of Randi Weingarten.

The political role of Max Shachtman is highly significant. A former leader of the American Socialist Workers Party (SWP), he (together with James Burnham and Martin Abern) reacted to the 1939 signing of the Stalin-Hitler pact by abandoning the defense of the Soviet Union against imperialism. Giving up on the capacity of the working class to overthrow capitalism as well as the fight for a political revolution against the Stalinist bureaucracy, Shachtman advocated "third campism." He claimed that the USSR was no longer a workers state, but a "bureaucratic collectivist" regime. By 1942, he stated that a Soviet victory in the war would result in a "new slavery."

Abandoning the class basis of socialist politics, an orientation to the working class, Shachtman was swept up in the moods of a despondent pro-nationalist American intelligentsia. His political faction split with the SWP, formed the Workers Party and jettisoned the fight for socialism, instead pressing for minimal democratic reforms. The former Trotskyist eventually became transformed into a Cold Warrior and full-throated supporter of the US government.

In the post-war period, he became a die-hard advocate for the trade union bureaucracy, aligning himself with the Reutherites in the United Auto Workers. In 1946-47, a near-civil war erupted within the UAW over the new federal anti-union Taft-Hartley law, and specifically its requirement of anti-communist loyalty affidavits. Shachtman threw his support behind UAW President Walter Reuther who forced through Taft-Hartley's implementation. The UAW oversaw the purging of the entire generation of socialists and communists which built the union in the heroic sit-down movement. The political defanging of the UAW was the beginning of its long process of decay that culminated in its demise as a workers organization. It set the right-wing trajectory for the entire US labor movement.

Shachtman went on to become a political adviser to George Meany, the viciously anti-communist president of the AFL-CIO. Shachtman supported the most hawkish wing the Democratic Party and endorsed US wars in Korea and Vietnam as well as the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.

Shachtman's anti-socialist legacy continues today both in the form of the Democratic Socialists of America and in the US-controlled labor-CIA organizations which span the globe. As WWSW writer Eric London notes, Shachtman's "political progeny, including figures like Tom Kahn, became deeply embedded in the AFL-CIO's activity on behalf of American imperialism through the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD)."

These institutional anti-communist operations conducted by the American Federation of Labor (AFL) began in 1944 across Europe with the Free Trade Union Committee (FTUC). The FTUC was funded by the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union (ILGWU) under David Dubinsky and run by Jay Lovestone, the former US Communist Party national secretary-turned anti-communist, and his protégé Irving Brown. Brown had worked for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, forerunner of the CIA) during World War II. When the OSS was disbanded, Brown and Lovestone focused on labor operations, boasting "our trade union programs and relationships have penetrated every country of Europe."

In 1949, in the context of an immense postwar upsurge of the working class internationally including the Chinese Revolution, the US established the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU) to undercut the growth of support to the socialist-leaning World Federation of Trade Unions. Funding for the ICFTU was made available through the AFL's International Affairs department, via a "business" conduit.

According to Philip Agee, a former CIA agent and whistleblower, "The ICFTU established regional organizations for Europe, the Far East, Africa and the Western Hemisphere. ... At the highest level, labor operations congenial to the Agency [the CIA] are supported through George Meany, President of the AFL, Jay Lovestone, Foreign Affairs Chief of the AFL and Irving Brown, AFL representative in Europe—all of whom were described to us as effective spokesmen for position in accordance with the Agency's needs."

As the powerful working class of Latin America expanded and grew more militant, the US founded the notorious Latin American CIA front, the American Institute for Free Labor Development (AIFLD), in 1961. It served to back brutal US coups in Brazil, Argentina and Chile installing pro-US military dictatorships. Under Meany's successor, Lane Kirkland, the AIFLD stepped up its backing of right-wing unions in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. At the same time the Reagan administration increased its funding for the death squad regimes in Central America and the contras seeking to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua.

AFT President Al Shanker served as AIFLD vice president. Domestically, the AFT set up the Albert Shanker Institute to promote "pro-democracy" policies, making Weingarten its president.

The AFL-CIO continues to run filthy counterrevolutionary operations around the world through the rebranded American Center for International Labor Solidarity (ACILS), funded by the National Endowment for Democracy and the United States Agency for International Development.

EI and Solidarity Centers partner together on their ideological campaigns in many countries. Weingarten sits on EI's board for North America-Caribbean; Lily Eskelsen-Garcia, the former president of the NEA, is likewise the vice president for North America-Caribbean.

EI provides position papers on issues of grave import to world imperialism, funnels funds to right-wing groups, spies on the working class around the world and carries out other assignments by the imperialist powers. A look at its public activities, most recently published for 2018, demonstrates its preoccupation with US geopolitical influence: "Asia Pacific Strategy Meeting on Trade Justice," "WTO Forum Trade 2030" and "Trade and International Development."

Workers everywhere have paid a heavy price for the union bureaucracy's promotion of anti-communism and its corollary, the international suppression of the class struggle—both ideologically and physically. Weingarten's highly choreographed war propaganda trip epitomizes this bitter opposition by the union apparatus to the working class, both at home and abroad.

The working class, nevertheless, is bursting onto the scene of history. A sign that workers are increasingly breaking free of the decades of reaction imposed by the AFL-CIO bureaucracy is the growing support for socialist autoworker Will Lehman and his campaign for United Auto Workers (UAW) president.

Lehman's campaign, endorsed by the *World Socialist Web Site* and International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees, has made the fight for socialism and the international unity of the working class the centerpiece of his campaign. Join us today.



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