

After years of betraying teachers' struggles, AFT and NEA endorse Biden for reelection

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Last Friday, the executive board of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the second largest teachers' union in the US with 1.7 million members, officially announced their endorsement of the reelection of Joe Biden and Kamala Harris in the upcoming 2024 presidential elections.

In a video tweet that day, Randi Weingarten, president of the AFT, stated, "President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris really care about people. They get the importance of workers having a voice and students having real opportunity. They are unabashedly pro-labor and pro-public education."

Weingarten turned off comments to her tweet, yet despite the censorship, teachers, workers, and parents expressed their opposition to the treacherous role of Biden and the unions in suppressing the interests of workers.

One user noted, "What kind of corrupt union president endorses for president a man who made strikes illegal for RR workers? Working people deserve representation—Randi Weingarten is a traitor to teachers, students & all working people."

Indicating Biden's failed campaign promise of student loan forgiveness, another user said, "How dare you make some propaganda nonsense like this. He has literally fulfilled NONE of his promises to teachers."

The AFT endorsement coincided with the formal endorsement of Biden-Harris by the pro-corporate AFL-CIO bureaucracy. The announcements came just in time for Biden's first reelection campaign rally in Philadelphia Saturday, sponsored by the trade unions, and attended mostly by union bureaucrats.

The National Education Association (NEA), the largest teachers' union, with close to 3 million members, announced their endorsement for Biden back in April. Becky Pringle, president of the NEA, parroted the line of the union bureaucrats throughout Biden's term as president, claiming the Biden administration "is the most pro-public education and pro-union administration in modern history."

That all the major trade union bureaucracies, including both national teacher unions representing close to 5 million members, have given their early endorsement of Biden is yet another indication of the deep ties between the trade union bureaucracies and the state. In this sense the mention of a "pro-union" administration has nothing to do with the interests of the working class but points to the Biden administration's reliance on the union bureaucracies to carry out the wholesale attacks on workers' wages and living standards.

Biden has utilized the trade union apparatus as a critical component in crushing growing opposition of workers by suppressing, isolating and shutting down strikes, enforcing deadly pandemic policies on workers, imposing austerity contracts and budget cuts, and promoting

the reckless drive of US imperialism to war with Russia and China.

Working with the trade union bureaucracy, the Biden administration blocked a nationwide strike of railroad workers and imposed a contract workers overwhelmingly rejected. Just last week, the Biden administration's acting labor secretary, Julie Su, intervened in contract negotiations between the longshore union and the shipping companies to reach a tentative agreement behind the backs of workers, averting a strike of 22,000 West Coast dockworkers.

In 2021, Biden launched the "Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment" for the very purpose of increasing unionization efforts throughout the US and strengthening the pro-corporate trade unions as critical instruments for the suppression of class struggle.

For educators and school employees, the whole experience of the Biden administration within the context of the pandemic has been a nightmare. Over the past three years, the Biden administration has led a bipartisan campaign to systematically cover up the pandemic, undermine basic public health measures, and subordinate the lives of millions of educators, school employees, children and their families to private profit.

An estimated more than 8,000 educators have died in the US to COVID-19. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), 2,213 children have died from the virus. With all mitigations and reporting having been lifted, children and educators continue to get infected and reinfected.

Despite the mantra that the "pandemic is now over," schools continue to serve as petri dishes for ongoing spread of infection of new variants of coronavirus and other respiratory diseases. Millions of children suffer from the effects of Long COVID, and over 280,000 children in the US alone have lost a parent or caregiver to the disease.

The AFT and NEA spearheaded the back-to-school policy, functioning as the necessary linchpin to the Biden administration's back to work campaign, ensuring parents could go to work as kids were forced back into crowded classrooms.

The record of Weingarten and the AFT must be highlighted here. In the interests of the Biden administration and the financial elite, Weingarten flew across the US to shut down strikes despite immense opposition from rank-and-file teachers to the dangerous reopening of schools.

In 2021, Weingarten collaborated with the far-right parents' group Open Schools USA to co-host a town hall meeting that promoted lifting mask mandates and anti-scientific policies of herd immunity. On the panel discussion were leading figures of pandemic misinformation Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, one of the authors of the Great Barrington Declaration, and Dr. Tracy Høeg.

The AFT and NEA have functioned as the main arbiters of sellout

contracts for teachers and education workers fighting against the debilitating impacts of inflation and accelerated attacks on public education. Every strike that has taken place over wages and school resources in schools during Biden's term as president has been systematically shut down by the union bureaucracies.

Despite claims by officials that union locals have recently reached "historic" contracts, the only thing historic about these settlements is the scale of the cuts in real wages imposed by the union on education workers and teachers in Los Angeles, Oakland, Sacramento, Seattle, Minneapolis and elsewhere.

No real improvements were made regarding rank-and-file demands for more resources for public education. Now, many of these same districts face significant budget cuts in the form of layoffs, school closures, and cuts to programs and services.

In fact, the upcoming school years will be characterized by massive budget cuts to public education. The Edunomics Lab at Georgetown University has named the 2024-2025 school year as "the bloodletting" for school districts across the US. Federal Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds are set to dry up completely in 2024. Budget cuts will deepen further as a result of the estimated \$1 trillion in cuts to social spending as part of the recent bipartisan debt ceiling deal as well as the decline in state revenues.

According to an investigative report by the *World Socialist Web Site*, more than 2.6 million K-12 educators and school workers left the education sector between 2020 and 2022. A February 2022 NEA survey indicated that more than 600,000 K-12 teachers have left education between 2020-2022 and over half, or 55 percent, of current teachers have indicated they will leave the teaching profession in the next few years.

The teacher and school worker exodus has further exacerbated the level of overwork and stress among remaining staff. Teacher vacancies are being eliminated, unfilled, or with teachers hired under temporary contracts to be fired at will. The country has also seen an increase in the use of emergency credentials, meaning underprepared teachers have become more and more common in the public school system. In California alone, there was a 28 percent increase in short-term emergency teaching permits for the 2020-2021 school year.

In her official statement last Friday, Weingarten called the Biden administration's record on education "stellar," arguing, "From funding schools, to reviving pensions, to game-changing student loan debt cancellation and fixing the Public Service Loan Forgiveness Program, to expanding the child tax credit—Joe and Kamala have been focused on the programs that make a difference in people's everyday lives."

This is an outright lie. Nothing has been done to seriously remedy student loan debt. The recent debt ceiling deal ended the federal student-loan payment pause, meaning millions of borrowers will have to resume payments by the end of August. The expanded child tax credit was completely ended at the beginning of last year, throwing more than 3 million children into poverty. This was further exacerbated by Biden's ending of universal free school lunches across US public schools in September last year, placing more than 10 million children into conditions of food insecurity.

The whole experience of the past few years has caused enormous dissatisfaction among teacher union members, reflected in part by the number of members leaving the union. According to LM-2 financial documents, there has been a decrease of 103,198 members from the NEA and a 10,035 decrease in members from the AFT from 2020 to 2022.

Indicative of their corporate character, the unions still manage billions in revenue, even with a decline in membership. The combined income of the NEA and its state unions reached almost \$1.75 billion in 2020-21 alone. Also, over half of its staff at the NEA headquarters in Washington D.C., close to 400 people, earn six-figure salaries, and across the country, more than 2,300 NEA affiliate employees made more than \$100,000 in salary.

The combined salaries of AFT president Weingarten (\$487,953) and NEA president Pringle (\$534,243) reaches well over \$1 million per year.

It should be further noted that in addition to funding bloated salaries of union bureaucrats, a vast amount of NEA and AFT resources go toward lobbying for Democratic Party campaigns and donations to Democratic Party politicians and campaigns.

The integration of the trade unions into the state is above all expressed in the AFT's support for the Biden administration's reckless drive toward war. The AFT has a long record of providing a "democratic" cover for US imperialism. Weingarten has played a direct role in supporting the 2014 Maidan coup, whitewashing the role of fascist forces in Ukraine, and vehemently promoting the US-NATO proxy war against Russia.

The AFT passed a resolution last summer which covered up the role of neo-Nazis and fascists within the Ukrainian state and military as well as the growing danger of nuclear war.

The Biden administration has made a staggering \$1 trillion budget request for military spending for the upcoming fiscal year, on top of a record \$114 billion in military spending just for the war in Ukraine.

All this is being paid for by the working class, as the recent budget ceiling deal calls for an estimated \$1 trillion in cuts in social spending and places no restrictions on military spending.

The alternative for teachers and school workers who are in a direct confrontation with the trade union apparatus and the state is to chart an independent course. The ruling class fears above all the growing upsurge of the working class. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) is building a movement of educators and the entire working class throughout the world to break from the stranglehold of the union leadership. The fight to defend social rights such as public education and for a higher standard of living for all requires a fight for socialism.



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