

American Federation of Teachers president seeks common ground with Trump's pick for Secretary of Education

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After decades of bipartisan attacks, public education as a social institution within the US is in severe crisis. Tens of thousands of teachers and staff have received layoff notices this year alone, schools are closing by the scores, and vital programs are being axed as districts reel with major budget deficits. With the incoming Trump administration, and selection of Linda McMahon as Secretary of Education, public schools face an existential threat.

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and Becky Pringle, president of the National Education Association (NEA), have continued to downplay the fascist character of the incoming Trump administration.

After the election of Trump both union bureaucrats issued calls for unity. More recently, they were effusive over Trump's pick for Secretary of Labor, Lori Chavez-DeRemer, who they claimed had a pro-worker and pro-public education record.

With the selection of McMahon provoking widespread concern and anger among educators, the AFT president in particular has signaled her willingness to collaborate with Trump's nominee. In a recent MSNBC interview, Weingarten said of McMahon, "People were surprised that I am taking a reserved judgment 'wait and see' attitude. ... I mean she wanted to be a teacher once. And she served on the Board of Education in Connecticut for a year."

In fact, McMahon is a multi-billionaire and die-hard Trump loyalist who made her fortune as a top executive of World Wrestling Entertainment (WWE). After serving in Trump's first term as head of the Small Business Administration, McMahon founded the America First Policy Institute (AFPI) after Trump's defeat in the 2020 elections. One of the chief co-founders of the AFPI was billionaire oil man and Christian nationalist pastor Tim Dunn, a violent opponent of the separation of church and state, as guaranteed by the US Constitution.

The AFPI is a far-right think tank, which has been churning out conservative policies and loyal supporters for Trump's agenda. McMahon currently sits as chair of the AFPI board of directors, and chair of its Center for the American Worker. Herself an ardent advocate for school choice and so-called "parents' rights," McMahon's main role as Secretary of Education will be to entirely gut public education as outlined in the AFPI's Center for Educational Opportunity and the Center for 1776.

Weingarten recently showered praise on McMahon's X post supporting apprenticeship programs in Switzerland's schools, calling for the US to implement similar programs. This is why "our union" is taking a "wait and see" approach, Weingarten declared.

In her own X post, Weingarten stated, "Students & educators need us to focus on career pathways and CTE (Career and Technical Education) programs. That's what AFT has focused on through partnerships like our

work with Micron. There's so much that can be done on this. I invite Linda McMahon and anyone who wants to work together to join us."

Notably, one of the top priorities of the AFPI for public education is to encourage states to reform high school graduation standards to funnel more youth into military enlistment and skills-based training for direct placement in the workforce.

The AFT has been actively supporting the school to factory pipeline. Their latest project includes a partnership between Micron Technology and New York state schools to send high school students into the high-tech semiconductor industry. This corresponds with the deepest needs of American capitalism, which is in a fierce competition with China over semiconductors and other critical high-tech industries needed for commercial and military use.

The AFL-CIO bureaucracy, which President Biden referred to as his "domestic NATO," has played a critical role in suppressing working class opposition to the transformation of the US economy and political structure for "total war" against Iran, Russia and China.

This will entail vast cuts to social spending and the diversion of public resources to war interests and the further enrichment of the corporate and financial oligarchy. Biden allocated over \$280 billion for semiconductor production and research under his CHIPS and Science Act, which was the very funding source for Weingarten's Micron partnership. American imperialism's wars for global domination will only intensify under the Trump administration.

In an MSNBC interview, Weingarten further clarified these aims, saying "this is actually why you need a federal Department of Education, why you need a federal Department of Labor to work with the federal Department of Commerce, so that we can actually create these pipelines to make sure that kids, not schools, but kids have choices in terms of what they want to do in the future."

In other words, Weingarten is offering her services as recruiting sergeant for the Pentagon and corporate America. Young people should be discouraged from pursuing their intellectual and career interests through higher education, she insists, and instead be fast-tracked into the workforce or military.

The AFT president also signaled her support for Trump's plans to shut down the half-century-old Department of Education. "I don't, I mean, my members don't really care about whether they have a bureaucracy of the Department of Education or not," she told MSNBC.

Speaking on the KPFA radio program Hard Knock Radio this week about the threat to eliminate the federal agency, Weingarten declared, "[W]ho cares what the bureaucracy looks like, I care about the function."

Weingarten is more than willing to work with the incoming fascists in the White House—as long as the AFT bureaucracy has a "seat at the table" and can protect its vast institutional and financial interests.

Weingarten is no stranger to working with such ultra-right forces. During the last Trump presidency, Weingarten held a secret meeting with the neo-fascist and Trump loyalist Steve Bannon in 2017. In 2021, Weingarten co-hosted a town hall meeting with the far-right parents group Open Schools USA, endorsing herd immunity policies. The panel featured Dr. Jay Bhattacharya, COVID-minimizer and recent Trump-nominated head of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

In a trip aimed at promoting the US-NATO proxy war against Russia, Weingarten toured Ukraine in 2022 to cover up the role of Ukrainian fascism during the Holocaust, and met with Mayor of Lviv Andriy Sadovyi, an outspoken supporter of fascist Stepan Bandera. Weingarten has continued to stand by “Israel’s right to defend itself,” promoting the lying claim that anti-genocide protesters are “antisemitic,” and supports Washington’s full backing of Netanyahu’s war of extermination against the Palestinians.

National Education Association

NEA president Becky Pringle has taken a somewhat different approach to the selection of McMahon. In an official statement, Pringle called on the Senate to reject her selection as Secretary of Education. On X, she feigned opposition to McMahon, posting, “Students deserve better than an extreme and unqualified Secretary of Education. By selecting Linda McMahon, Donald Trump shows that he could not care less about our students’ futures. Instead of strengthening our nation’s schools, Donald Trump has picked Betsy DeVos 2.0.”

Pringle and the NEA bureaucracy do not fundamentally disagree with the corporate overhaul of public education. Like the AFT, the NEA has a sordid record of backing the various “school reform” and privatization schemes under Democratic presidents Clinton and Obama. The teacher unions signed onto school choice and “organized” charter schools to offset the loss of dues money from the closing of public schools and mass teacher layoffs.

In the years since the last Trump presidency, the teachers union bureaucracies have systematically sought to suppress and isolate the struggles of teachers and school workers, as they did during the explosive wave of wildcat strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states in 2018-2019. Also, throughout the pandemic as teachers, parents and students fought against the unsafe reopening of schools, Pringle and Weingarten, carrying out the interests of Wall Street, forced teachers and students back into infected classrooms, so parents could be forced back to work.

With a collective membership of 4.8 million members, Pringle and Weingarten lead two of the largest trade unions in the US. Despite this, they have no interest in waging a genuine struggle against the fascist policies of Trump. What the bureaucrats and ruling elite fear, above all, is the emergence of an independent movement of the working class that breaks free from their control.

Major strikes and protests have burst out under the current attacks on living standards and resources for public education as shown in the recent strikes of Massachusetts teachers, and in the ongoing strike of Albany, Oregon teachers. Teachers, students, and parents have powerfully rallied to protest mass school closures and cuts across the US, most notably in San Francisco, Seattle, Oakland, Pittsburgh, Chicago, Albuquerque and elsewhere. Opposition to these budget cuts will only intensify.

This is why, under conditions of a monumental assault on the living standards and democratic rights of teachers and students, Weingarten and Pringle have called for “coalition building” and “grassroots” organizing. They are aware that the election of Trump was the result of a massive

collapse of support within the working class for the Democrats, which long ago abandoned any policies of social reform and are up to their necks in endless wars.

Fearing correctly that the coming explosion of opposition to Trump’s policies will create conditions for socialists to gain popular support for the fight for the political independence of the working class and a socialist alternative to capitalism, the union bureaucracy is desperately seeking to revive the authority of the discredited Democratic Party.

This has already been demonstrated in the growing support for the Socialist Equality Party’s call for the formation of rank-and-file committees, which organize educators and other school workers to defend public education in opposition to the craven capitulation of the union bureaucracies.

In a recent interview on *Hard Knock Radio*, Weingarten stressed that those “closest on the ground” are “going to have to work with them across party lines about these issues.” Weingarten presented former AFT President Al Shanker—her mentor—and past United Auto Workers President Walter Reuther as the models for “coalition building.”

Teachers must reject this and recall the histories of these figures. Reuther’s legacy was one of class compromise, the explicit acceptance of the capitalists’ “right” to a profit, and red-baiting witch-hunts against socialists and left-wing militants.

Both Shanker and Reuther were staunch defenders of US imperialism and politically subordinated the struggles of the working class to the Democratic Party and the geo-political interests of the American ruling class.

While Reuther came out against the Vietnam War due to mass popular opposition, Shanker was a staunch Cold Warrior who backed the slaughter of millions of Vietnamese and denounced anti-war protesters. As AFT president from 1974-1997, he shocked teachers in 1983 when he called for the formation of charter schools and endorsed *A Nation at Risk*, the Reagan administration’s report on education that laid out its corporate “school reform” agenda.

In addition to calling on the Senate to oppose the selection of McMahon, Pringle is urging her members to participate in her NEA-established electoral organization called Education Votes.

Under the Education Votes action plan of the NEA, teachers can sign up for updates on the latest electoral processes “from school boards and statehouses to the halls of Congress” calling on teachers to urge “elected officials to oppose Trump’s deeply unpopular & harmful agenda for schools, students, and educators.”

The 2024 elections made clear that the Democratic Party has absolutely nothing to offer the working class except more war and austerity, yet Weingarten and Pringle are prepared to funnel their members’ anger back into this very same apparatus in order to suppress the opposition of educators to the policies of Trump. There is no end point to the craven collaboration by the trade union apparatus with the capitalist state, precisely because of the fact that they are tied—through their income streams, overall material interests and ideological allegiance—by a thousand threads to the profit system and capitalist state.

Weingarten and Pringle only seek to defend the crisis ridden capitalist profit system. Teachers must reject this and the dead-end calls to appeal to the powers that be. The struggle for high quality public education, the defense of democratic rights, and for an end to war and exploitation cannot be won outside of developing new forms of struggle, independent of the union bureaucracies, and the politically conscious fight for socialism.

For more information on building educators rank-and-file committees, fill out the form below.



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