

# Shielding the Democrats: Randi Weingarten’s “Why Fascists Fear Teachers” obscures the necessary fight against fascism

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*Weingarten, Randi. Why Fascists Fear Teachers: Public Education and the Future of Democracy. New York City: Penguin Random House, 2025. ISBN: 9798217045419*

Randi Weingarten’s *Why Fascists Fear Teachers: Public Education and the Future of Democracy*, released in September, is being promoted as a manual for educators confronting authoritarianism. The book’s bulk preorders from union bureaucracies immediately propelled it to the *New York Times* “bestseller” list.

Weingarten—the longtime president of the 1.7 million-member AFT (American Federation of Teachers) and until recently a prominent figure in the Democratic National Committee—has embarked on a speaking tour to promote the work. These include events led by the Albert Shanker Institute and Education International, a pro-capitalist international association of teacher unions, under the title “Defending Democracy: How to Stop a Backsliding Democracy.”

*Why Fascists Fear Teachers* is not a serious work of political analysis. It fails to explain the rise of Trump, the nature of fascism, or the social forces behind authoritarianism. To be blunt, the book is a banal and dishonest work whose main goal is to hide the role of the Democratic Party and union bureaucracies in paving the way for Trump’s fascist movement. It aims to disarm educators and workers, not prepare them for struggle.

Yet because Weingarten describes the ongoing assault on public education and links it with fascism—a term largely avoided by the Democratic Party and corporate media even as Trump openly constructs a dictatorial regime—her book may attract a certain audience from those searching for a way to fight the threat. It is for this reason that the *World Socialist Web Site* reviews it.

## Weingarten’s core message: “Keep teaching”

The author begins with a description of the nonviolent resistance of Norwegian teachers during the Nazi occupation (1940-1945), symbolized by wearing paper clips. Teachers responded to the pro-Nazi Quisling government’s decision to shut down schools by continuing to teach their students, holding classes in private and refusing to join a union controlled by storm troopers.

Despite the bravery and resilience of these teachers, including nearly 500 who were sent to work camps for their resistance, this example deliberately misstates the lessons from the fight against fascism in that

period and the nature of tasks teachers face. Today, we are not under a fascist occupation; workers are not defeated and atomized by an army of stormtroopers.

The issue isn’t what to do after fascism, but how to stop the developing conspiracy for dictatorship. There is massive opposition to Trump, as expressed in the October 18 “No Kings” demonstrations across the country. There is enormous popular anger over the deployment of ICE agents and military troops to Chicago and other cities, as well as the withholding of food stamps as Trump builds a White House ballroom for the oligarchy. The burning question is: What political program and organizational forms are necessary to mobilize the working class to drive Trump and his fascist cabal from power?

Instead, Weingarten insists that “resistance” means “keep teaching”—that is, staying on the job. Indeed, preventing strikes and corraling teachers behind “Remember in November” and other campaigns to support the Democratic Party has been Weingarten’s unbroken record. Her book and speaking tour are an attempt to paralyze the growing opposition to dictatorship.

The AFT bureaucracy intervened in the “No Kings” demonstrations precisely for that purpose. Speaking in Washington D.C., Weingarten said:

We want the president to spend his time solving our country’s problems, not settling scores with political opponents. This is about loving America ... so we are sending a clear message to the president, rather than smearing those calling out problems, solve those problems!

This is the equivalent of begging Hitler to join all people of good faith to “solve” Germany’s problems. Weingarten heads a union capable of launching a nationwide strike of educators against austerity, privatization and the fascist policies of Trump and his allies. But this is the last thing the union bureaucracy and the Democratic Party want. That is because, despite their tactical differences with Trump, they defend the same class interests as he does.

## What Weingarten argues

Weingarten's book is constructed around the argument that teaching has essential aspects that fascists fear:

Teachers do four foundational things that are important to the future of our students and the well-being of our nation—but are antithetical to the fascist anti-government, anti-pluralism, anti-opportunity agenda. Teachers impart knowledge, including critical thinking skills that prepare our kids for their future and strengthen our democracy. Teachers work to create welcoming and safe communities so that we can meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of all children and their families. Teachers create opportunity for every young person to have their shot at the American dream. And teachers are anchors of the labor movement whose purpose is to champion the aspirations of working families.

There is no question that the right wing fears knowledge—this is a major goal in the destruction of public education. *Why Fascists Fear Teachers* identifies some of the authoritarian attacks on education, including the decades-long campaign by powerful corporate interests to privatize, defund and censor schools, and the historical pattern of authoritarian movements targeting teachers and students.

But what has Weingarten done to fight this? After taking over the presidency of the AFT in 2008, Weingarten collaborated with the Obama administration's Race to the Top program, which used federal funds to reward school districts that imposed merit pay and punitive teacher accountability schemes, while lifting restrictions on the expansion of charter schools.

The book falsely claims the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strike was a "clear victory" for educators, citing supposed commitments to hire more teachers and increase pay. In reality, the pseudo-left leaders of the CTU, under the direction of the AFT and Weingarten, surrendered to city demands: 4,000 jobs were lost, 49 schools closed, and contract terms were locked in. This resulted in major attacks on teachers, including a longer school year, weaker job security and increased standardized testing.

In exchange, Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel assisted the CTU bureaucracy in getting its foot into the door to "organize" the poorly paid and highly exploited teachers in the expanding charter schools in the city. Shortly thereafter, the CTU and AFT largely dropped their rhetoric against charters.

Under the slogan "school reform with us, not against us," the AFT accepted \$11 million in funding from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. It only broke off relations with the pro-privatization organization in 2014, due to the outrage of teachers.

During the first Trump administration, Weingarten made repeated overtures to Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, the billionaire enemy of public education. When a rank-and-file revolt erupted against years of school defunding in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona and other states in 2018-19, Weingarten criss-crossed the country to shut down the wildcat strikes and prevent a nationwide walkout against Trump.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, Weingarten first collaborated with Trump and then Biden to beat back resistance and force educators and students back into COVID-infested schools at the cost of untold numbers of lives. Aligning the union with right-wing anti-vaxxer organizations in 2021, Weingarten played a central role in reopening the schools, which was key to the Biden administration's effort to restore confidence in the stock market and get people back to work in the factories.

In her book, Weingarten laments that she didn't force the school reopenings earlier.

Should schools have opened sooner than they did during the COVID-19 pandemic? Of course! Which is why, in April 2020—just one month after schools shuttered—I led the AFT in developing a concrete plan to reopen schools as quickly and safely as possible.

During Trump's second term, the AFT president has deliberately blocked strikes by educators in Chicago, Los Angeles and other cities in California and Minneapolis, which would have become catalysts for a broader struggle by educators against Trump and his fascist policies.

Asked by a WSWS reporter at a recent Detroit area event why every AFT and National Education Association member was not currently on strike to oppose Trump's existential threat to public education and all democratic rights, Weingarten replied, "I'm not opposed to a strike. A strike is one of the vehicles that one does. They are normally an economic vehicle against a boss."

Weingarten's evasive statement that she is "not opposed to a strike" against Trump is belied by the fact that the AFT bureaucracy and its counterparts in the NEA (National Education Association) have worked might and main to prevent any such collective action. This has only emboldened Trump to escalate his attack on public education, immigrants and democratic rights.

What does Weingarten propose? She sums this up with a few platitudes: "Keep teaching. Keep welcoming. Keep advocating. Keep organizing."

"We fight not only in our classrooms, but in the courts, in Congress, and in the court of public opinion."

In other words, Weingarten preaches prostration in the face of the fascist president who ignores the law, controls the highest court and, if he permits another election, plans to do so under martial law.

### Fascism as moral failure, not class rule

Weingarten is incapable of presenting a historical and scientific analysis of fascism and goes so far as to declare that an "exact definition of fascism is not important." It is simply a coalition of people who "oppose diversity and pluralism" and "want to shrink government," she says, deliberately separating the violent suppression of democratic rights—which is an international phenomenon—from the social and class forces that are employing it to defend their rule.

In his 1934 work, "Whither France?" the great Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky explained the basic features and causes of fascism:

*The bourgeoisie is leading its society to complete bankruptcy. It is capable of assuring the people neither bread nor peace. This is precisely why it cannot any longer tolerate the democratic order. It is forced to smash the workers by the use of physical violence. The discontent of the workers and peasants, however, cannot be brought to an end by the police alone, ... That is why finance capital is obliged to create special armed bands, trained to fight the workers just as certain breeds of dog are trained to hunt game. The historic function of Fascism is to smash the working class, destroy its organizations, and stifle political liberties when the capitalists find themselves unable to govern and dominate with the help of democratic machinery.*

Today, American capitalism is facing an acute crisis: a decades-long

economic decay and decline, the explosion of corporate, government and other forms of debt, the rise of powerful rivals like China, unprecedented levels of social inequality and mass hostility from ever more economically distressed workers and young people against the corporate and financial oligarchy. The oligarchy's program of social counterrevolution—the destruction of public education, Social Security, Medicare and other vital social programs—cannot be achieved peacefully.

After Trump's return to power, the WSWS wrote that the coming to power of a second Trump administration

represents the violent realignment of the American political superstructure to correspond with the real social relations that exist in the United States. ... Mega-millionaires and billionaires—led by the likes of Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, Peter Thiel and Larry Ellison—are utilizing Trump to effect in their interests a reactionary restructuring of American society.

In other words, there will be no “return to normal” as Weingarten preaches. The only answer to fascism is socialist revolution, the expropriation of the oligarchy, and the establishment of a workers' government, based on genuine democratic forms of rule in every workplace and neighborhood.

#### **The claim “strong unions” are the antidote to authoritarianism and oppression: The real record**

Weingarten makes more than half a million dollars a year as AFT president, and is no doubt a multi-millionaire herself. She is therefore desperate to conceal these revolutionary implications from the working class. The antidote to fascism, she claims, is the expansion of unions, which she asserts are “models of democracy.”

To reach this conclusion, Weingarten draws a fundamentally false conclusion from the coincidence of the rise of inequality and extreme right-wing politics over the last four decades and the substantial decline in union membership. She claims that inequality was *caused* by the decline in union membership, and therefore the expansion of unions would lead to a lessening of inequality and strengthen democracy.

But this turns reality upside down. Union membership fell as a consequence of the bureaucratized unions all but abandoning strikes over the last four decades, in the name of boosting the “competitiveness” and profitability of American capitalism.

In her chapter “Teachers Build Strong Unions,” Weingarten refers to the 1981 strike by the Professional Air Traffic Controllers (PATCO) as “a significant shift” in the decline of the unions. This is true, but she draws the deliberately wrong conclusion. The fact is the AFL-CIO sabotaged a powerful rank-and-file movement against Reagan's smashing of PATCO, including widespread calls for a general strike.

This is because union leaders, who were sitting on one corporate competitiveness board after the other, agreed that American workers had to accept a substantial cut in wages for US corporations to compete, at that time, with Japan. They saw Reagan's smashing of PATCO as the means to beat back the militant opposition of workers to wage cuts and other concessions.

The AFL-CIO betrayal led to decades of union busting, wage concessions, plant closures, the charterization of schools and a historic increase in wealth of the capitalist class at the expense of the working class.

Weingarten's claim that unions are “models of democracy” would come as a surprise to rank-and-file teachers who are routinely kept in the dark by union bureaucrats cutting backroom deals with city and school officials. Weingarten—who has been president for 17 years—is not even elected by the membership but installed by delegates loyal to the apparatus at the AFT's biannual national convention.

#### **Who is Randi Weingarten?**

Weingarten—who had a reported income of \$514,488 last year, or eight times an average teacher—presents herself throughout the book as an ordinary teacher, recalling her days at Clara Barton High School in Brooklyn, New York. This is highly disingenuous, as this was her only teaching job—a part-time position assigned to her by the union bureaucracy. At the same time, the trained lawyer was already the chief negotiator for the United Federation of Teachers (UFT).

Her long career is as a highly paid union bureaucrat, a major national money manager overseeing billions of dollars in pension funds, and, most critically, a US State Department asset.

Weingarten's political outlook was shaped by the legacy of Max Shachtman and Cold War anticommunism. Shachtman, who abandoned the Fourth International and Trotskyism and became an advocate for US imperialism during the Korean War, Bay of Pigs and Vietnam War, mentored UFT President Albert Shanker and Weingarten's predecessor, Sandra Feldman. Shanker founded the AFL-CIO-backed Education International to combat socialist-oriented unions around the world. Michael Harrington's Democratic Socialists of America also emerged from this circle, designed to keep opposition movements contained within the Democratic Party.

Weingarten stands squarely in this lineage. In her book, she praises Shanker as her “mentor” and “one of the greatest union leaders and civic leaders of the twentieth century.” Weingarten's worldview is an updated version of Shachtmanism: American capitalism as the defender of “democracy,” the unions as patriotic institutions, socialism as the enemy.

A member of the Democratic National Committee from 2002 to mid-2025, Weingarten traveled in 2014 to Ukraine to support the US-instigated Maidan coup, implemented primarily by far-right shock troops, including the neo-Nazi Svoboda Party.

In line with the Democratic Party's preoccupation with war against Russia, Weingarten's book goes out of its way to repeatedly describe Putin as a fascist. The two primary academic sources in *Why Teachers Fear Fascists* are Timothy Snyder and Anne Applebaum, vehement pro-war hawks with deep ties to the US State Department and right-wing extremists. Snyder, with whom Weingarten has worked since 2008, relativizes the Nazis and whitewashes collaborationist crimes in Eastern Europe in his book *Bloodlands*.

As an ardent Zionist, Weingarten backed the Biden-Trump funding and direction of Netanyahu's genocide as “Israel's right to defend itself.” Despite her protests in the book against the attack on free speech and campus protests, Weingarten previously smeared opposition to the genocide as “antisemitic” and allowed teachers to be fired and victimized for speaking up.

Weingarten's book is a response to the rising radicalization among teachers and students who are coming into direct conflict with the Democratic Party, the union bureaucracy and the capitalist system they defend.

The Democrats long ago abandoned the social reforms associated with the New Deal and Great Society programs, embraced privatization, promoted identity politics and played a central role in driving the growth

of inequality under the administrations of Clinton, Obama and Biden. This rightward shift is the outcome of the collapse of American capitalism's economic and political dominance.

An experienced politician, Weingarten senses the impending and explosive eruption of the class struggle and profound leftward shift within the population. Earlier this year, she resigned her DNC post and recently promoted DSA member Zohran Mamdani, now the mayor of New York. Her book is aimed at putting an "anti-fascist" mask on the Democratic Party, even as it collaborates with Trump's program of austerity and war.

Furthermore, as a leader of the anticommunist union federation Education International, she is highly aware of and concerned about the growing global class struggle among teachers, alongside a broad movement of workers internationally. This year alone has seen strikes involving 1.2 million educators in Iraq, 51,000 teachers in Alberta, Canada and mass teacher strikes in Kenya, Cameroon, Mongolia and Nigeria. In May, 20,000 Mexican education workers began a sustained strike, and major teachers' strikes have taken place in Argentina, Brazil, Peru, Panama and Israel.

### **The way forward for teachers to fight fascism**

The increasingly radicalized working class in the US and across the world is the only social force capable of defeating fascism and putting an end to the bankrupt capitalist economic and political system that spawns it.

To mobilize the enormous social strength of the working class, new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by workers themselves, must be established. Rank-and-file committees in every school, workplace and neighborhood must be built as centers of resistance to Trump's attack on democratic and social rights.

These committees must abolish the union apparatus and transfer power to the rank and file. They will link up the struggle of educators, parents and students with health care, manufacturing, logistics, service, technology, cultural and other sections of the working class, to prepare collective struggle, including a general strike, to defend immigrants and the right to public education, healthcare, free speech and other social and democratic rights. This is the only way to drive Trump and his fascist cabal from power.

The lessons of history demonstrate that fascism cannot be crushed outside expropriating the oligarchs behind it and redistributing their ill-gotten fortunes to fund universal education, healthcare, and secure employment for all. This requires breaking completely from the two parties of Wall Street and fighting for workers' power and socialism to end the threat of fascism, dictatorship and war for good.



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