

The National Education Association and American Federation of Teachers conventions: Empty promises and support for the Democrats

Renae Cassimeda, Nancy Hanover
28 July 2026

The National Education Association (NEA), the largest union in the United States, with 2.8 million members, held its Representative Assembly July 3-7 in Denver, while the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), with 1.9 million members, met July 16-19 in Washington.

Educators who hoped these gatherings would honestly assess the destruction of public education and mobilize millions of school workers against Trump's fascistic attacks were bitterly disappointed. In fact, neither convention gave any hint that the very existence of public education—the achievement of two American revolutions and decades of working-class struggle—is at stake.

Since Donald Trump's second term as US president began with his vow to scrap the Department of Education, billions of dollars have been stripped from schools, a national voucher plan has been put into place to further privatize education, and censorship, bigotry, racism, anti-communism and religious obscurantism are being promoted in classrooms. Immigration raids terrorize schoolchildren and their families, while Trump's executive orders demand patriotism and militarism.

The NEA and AFT gatherings exuded the upper-middle-class complacency of the bureaucracy. There was no serious discussion of the crisis, much less a call for unified strike action against the destruction of public education and culture. There was no call for a mass mobilization to uphold the democratic rights of children and families against the ICE gestapo.

The AFT convention was staged instead as a Democratic Party rally, its podium handed to House Democratic leader Hakeem Jeffries, Senator Raphael Warnock, Maryland Governor Wes Moore, former Attorney General Eric Holder and Stacey Abrams. Not one speaker mentioned the sustained, bipartisan assault on educators that has left teachers paid 26.9 percent less than comparably educated professionals, healthcare costs skyrocketing, class sizes mushrooming, and more than 1,000 schools closed nationwide.

Most revealing was the silence on the central struggle of educators over the past year: the "We Can't Wait" campaign, a joint NEA-AFT operation of the California Teachers Association (CTA) billed as uniting the bargaining power of "77,000 educators in 32 districts serving a million students." In practice, the year-long campaign was a public relations stunt while the union bureaucrats forced teachers to "wait." The unions forced teachers to work for months without a contract, isolated them district by district, and shut down the walkouts they could not prevent outright.

The betrayal reached its climax in Los Angeles, where 75,000 school workers, including 35,000 teachers, were poised to strike on April 14 against inadequate pay, rising healthcare costs and job insecurity. The United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA) union called off the strike at the

last moment, clearing the way for Democratic policymakers and district officials to impose nearly 6,000 job cuts.

The conventions rewarded the perpetrators. Cecily Myart-Cruz, the former UTLA president who played the decisive role in shutting down the Los Angeles walkout, was elevated to the NEA's nine-member Executive Committee, its highest governing body.

Longtime NEA vice president Princess Moss was elected president. She followed the same script in California, posing for photos on the Twin Rivers picket lines alongside CTA President David Goldberg even as "We Can't Wait" was sabotaging unified action.

Moss has proved herself to the bureaucracy for years—she also helped shut down the semi-insurrectionary 2018 West Virginia strike alongside AFT President Weingarten and then-NEA Vice President Becky Pringle. Her convention tagline, "organize, organize, organize," and her vow to move "from resistance to renaissance," was cover for active suppression of attempts by teachers to organize resistance.

The AFT, for its part, returned the longtime US State Department operative and warmonger Randi Weingarten to a tenth term as president. Adding to her long history of suppressing strikes and enforcing cuts, Weingarten worked with former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi to shut down the four-day San Francisco strike in February, pushing through a raise of roughly 4 percent over two years in a district dominated by millionaires, while food costs rose 16 percent in a single year and housing remained out of reach for most workers.

The same pattern is now unfolding in Chicago, where the school district has just imposed more than 1,700 job cuts despite the AFT-aligned Chicago Teachers Union signing an April 2025 contract billed as "Trump-proof" and "historic." The average Chicago teacher will lose \$2,300 as a result—cuts being carried out by Brandon Johnson, a former CTU lobbyist and Democratic Socialists of America-endorsed mayor.

Defending public education requires educators to build their own organizations—rank-and-file committees in every school, controlled by educators themselves, independent of the bureaucracy and both corporate parties, and linked nationally and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC). Only such committees, answerable to the ranks, can mobilize the strength of the working class.

What the conventions approved

Rejecting the class struggle entirely, the conventions focused on mobilizing educators to get out the vote for Democrats in the midterms. As *EdWeek* reported, the AFT wants members “deeply involved” in the midterms, “from monitoring polling places to knocking on doors for education-focused candidates, to running for office themselves.”

The NEA’s single most expensive adopted item, at \$997,968, funds “See Educators Run,” a program of regional academies training members as candidates for school board, municipal and state office.

Executive Director Kim Anderson told delegates that more than 4,000 members have already run and won, urging them to build “pro-worker majorities across the political spectrum.”

The union’s answer to the destruction of public education is not to mobilize its members against it, but to elect more Democrats to administer the cuts—the same Democratic Party that has produced charter schools, merit pay, school closures and austerity from Clinton through Obama to Newsom and Johnson.

The NEA’s 2025 LM-2 filing shows roughly \$175 million spent on “Political Activities and Lobbying” and “Contributions, Gifts and Grants”—about four times what it spent on “representational activity,” and nearly 39 percent of the union’s total spending. The AFT contributed another \$41 million to the Democrats.

Third-party trackers compiling NEA and AFT LM-2 and FEC/PAC data since 2015 put the two unions’ combined political spending in the hundreds of millions, cumulatively approaching \$1 billion. This is not a union that exists to organize strikes and defend its members. It is a political slush fund for the Democratic Party that happens to collect dues from educators.

This financial umbilical cord to the Democratic Party is one mechanism through which the bureaucracy secures its “seat at the table” and its privileges.

True to form, the NEA convention dutifully raised member dues, adding another \$20 million to its coffers. Current LM-2 filings show both the NEA and AFT presidents now collecting annual compensation of \$514,000—seven to nine times a teacher’s salary. A 2026 analysis found the AFT paid additional undisclosed “costs,” including ghostwriting and legal review for Weingarten’s book *Why Fascists Fear Teachers*, with some proceeds routed through her personal LLC.

On the administration’s assault on immigrants, the adopted items committed the union to nothing meaningful in defense of educators, students and their families. NBI 27 commits the NEA only to “publish information” on 287(g) police-ICE agreements; NBI 46 funds printing know-your-rights “Red Cards” in NEA Today. Against a state machine detaining and deporting educators and their students’ families, the union offers an explainer and a leaflet.

An emergency fund for members targeted by ICE raids, NBI 63, was adopted only after being gutted to a \$100,000 seed fund—which the membership itself must now replenish through donations. The organization that found nearly \$1 million for a candidate pipeline could spare only a tenth of that, plus a fundraising appeal, for members facing deportation.

The resolutions the leadership refused to consider

Every resolution which tended to run against the interests of the two capitalist parties was kept off the floor at both conventions. This fact is documented by NEA NBIs. They include measures for the impeachment and removal of Trump and a march on Washington (NBI 10); a vote of no confidence in Education Secretary Linda McMahon (NBI 47); a press conference against the \$1.5 trillion war and ICE budget “at a time when

schools are being closed and educators are being laid off” (NBI 55); an end to the war on Iran (NBI 91); solidarity action to shut down the GEO Group and CoreCivic detention centers (NBI 89); and defense of educators fired for teaching about the genocide in Palestine (NBI 85).

All fell under the catch-all category “Ensure a Lasting Democracy,” scheduled second-to-last, and the clock ran out before delegates reached it. Even the limited opportunity for delegates—themselves union officials, not the rank and file—to vote on action against Trump, the war and deportations was closed off, in a body the NEA hypocritically calls “the world’s largest democratic deliberative assembly.”

Another resolution invoking broader action failed to reach the floor for debate: a task force to align the NEA with UAW President Shawn Fain’s “May Day 2028 General Strike” (NBI 35). The 2028 date, actively promoted by Weingarten, is not a plan for a general strike but a means of preventing one and covering for the UAW bureaucracy and Fain’s own sabotage of strikes which have led to mass layoffs. Significantly, the UAW refused to call any action during the anti-ICE protests in Minneapolis earlier this year, when the call for a general strike was winning mass support.

But the experience in California shows that contract alignment in the hands of the bureaucracy is not a weapon of struggle but an instrument for controlling and dissipating it, worked out in direct collaboration with management.

What the conventions represent

The NEA and AFT bureaucracies are a privileged social layer bound to the Democratic Party by material interest: six-figure salaries, control over pension fund investments, and a shared stake in Wall Street’s fortunes. What this layer fears above all is not Trump but the prospect that opposition among educators escapes its control and becomes an independent movement of the working class, arriving at revolutionary and socialist conclusions.

It is incumbent upon educators to create an insurgent movement and launch a national movement to halt every attack on public education and the social rights of the working class.

That fight requires the formation of rank-and-file committees in every school, democratically controlled by working educators and independent of both capitalist parties—linking teachers with classified staff, bus drivers and cafeteria workers regardless of union affiliation, and joining them to workers across the country and internationally through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees.

Only the independent, unified mobilization of the working class, armed with a socialist program, can defend public education against the ruling class and its two parties. That is the fight the NEA and AFT leaderships were elected to prevent. It is the one educators must now take up.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact