

AFT President Weingarten's AI "safety standard" is a corporatist pact with Microsoft

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Within a single week last month, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) President Randi Weingarten signed an AI "safety standard" with Microsoft, the company that bankrolls the union's own AI training academy, and presented it at the "Pro-Human Assembly" in Washington. There she shared a platform with the fascist strategist Steve Bannon and January 6 coup plotter Amy Kremer, alongside Bernie Sanders and AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler, in a red-brown alliance against artificial intelligence.

Despite Weingarten's posturing, these two events lay out the union bureaucracy's corporatist program for AI in the classroom, a partnership with the technology giants and the state, sold to teachers and parents as a defense of children.

On September 9, Weingarten and Microsoft Vice Chair Brad Smith unveiled a standard she called "iron-clad," with "real teeth." It is a memorandum of agreement between Microsoft and the AFT's own National Academy for AI Instruction, which Microsoft funds. No educators within the union voted on this deal or were even consulted.

The agreement bars Microsoft from training its AI models on student and teacher data, yet by its own definitions it excludes general-purpose productivity, collaboration and cloud products, which is to say Microsoft 365, Copilot, Teams and Azure, i.e., the products schools use every day. Districts get its protections only on request, the only party to it on the school's side is the AFT's Academy, and it expires in two years. The sharpest prohibitions, against using AI to grade, discipline or monitor students, are aimed at disciplining teachers and impose nothing on Microsoft. In effect, the union bureaucracy has agreed to police its own members on the company's behalf.

Who pays the AFT?

The National Academy for AI Instruction was launched on July 8, 2025, eight days after Microsoft and OpenAI signed the White House's "Pledge to America's Youth." "We went to them, they didn't come to us," Weingarten said. The academy's five-year budget of \$23 million comes from Microsoft (\$12.5 million), OpenAI (\$10 million) and Anthropic (\$500,000), and its goal is to train 400,000 educators on the companies' products.

The Academy forms one piece of Microsoft Elevate, a \$4 billion

program through which the company donates its own software and cloud credits to schools, trains and certifies teachers on Copilot, and places its AI in lesson planning and assessment. The aim is to bind a generation of teachers and students to Microsoft's products. The AFT, alongside the AFL-CIO, serves as Elevate's labor partner, lending the operation the union's endorsement. Elevate was announced the week after Microsoft cut 9,000 jobs, amid a data center buildout that will reach some \$190 billion this year, an investment the school market is meant to help pay for.

The AFT has played this corporatist role many times before. In 2009 Bill Gates told legislators that the Common Core standards would create "a large uniform base of customers eager to buy products." The Gates Foundation spent some \$200 million promoting them and paid the AFT more than \$10 million between 2009 and 2014 to sell them to teachers. The same foundation had already spent \$135 million seeding charter schools, including the KIPP and Green Dot chains, and by one estimate the Gates and Walton foundations together were spending more than \$500 million a year on the privatization of public education.

Common Core was one arm of a bipartisan assault in which No Child Left Behind and Race To The Top imposed a testing regime designed to brand schools "failing," close them and hand students to charter operators. At least 4,000 public schools were shuttered between 2009 and 2014 alone. The AFT and NEA acted as accomplices.

The AFT is a corporatist body, fused with management and the state, whose services the technology giants purchase today as the testing industry did before. The companies receive a union seal, a workforce trained on their products and entry to a classroom market worth billions. The apparatus receives millions of dollars and a place inside the arrangement as certifier of "safe" products and enforcer against its own members.

Weingarten's alarm over the technology is posturing. Her May 27 speech at the National Press Club, in which she called "all this tech" a "huge experiment on kids" and demanded sweeping restrictions on screens and AI, came 10 months after she launched an academy funded by the companies she was denouncing. The alarm serves as a smokescreen for the AFT's role in subordinating public education to the tech giants. It also legitimizes a far deeper involvement of the state in regulating and monitoring how teachers and students use AI, through "self-policing" arrangements that build in surveillance.

Austerity behind the “bans”

Teacher use of AI is now widespread. Sixty percent used it for their own work in the 2024-25 school year, according to Gallup. At the same time many teachers distrust AI, above all, due to the state and corporations’ harvesting of student data, the surveillance built into classroom software and the prospect that it will be used to replace their jobs. Concern over how the technology is used is legitimate. But the AFT bureaucracy works to channel it into panic over cheating and screen time, and away from the question that decides everything: Who controls the technology?

Under capitalism, as with every new technology, AI is being used to accelerate the attacks on the working class already underway. In the schools that means layoffs, larger classes, curriculum restrictions, surveillance and teachers ordered to do more with less. Restrictions on students’ chatbots will alter neither the direction nor the tempo of this assault, which is far advanced.

More than half of the 50 largest districts are cutting deeply this year and hundreds of schools are closing. Los Angeles, with nearly 6,000 layoffs planned, has been warned by county officials that it will be unable to make payroll by November 2027. Trump has halved the Education Department’s staff and frozen \$7 billion in school funding for weeks last summer. On January 1 the first federal voucher program will take effect, a tax credit for private school tuition that 31 states have joined, intended to deal public education a death blow. The districts announcing AI “bans,” New York City and Los Angeles among them, are carrying out these cuts, and the AFT and NEA have suppressed every serious struggle against them, including canceling the strike of 77,000 Los Angeles educators this spring.

The AFT’s alignment with the far right

This program took Weingarten on September 15 to the Pro-Human Assembly, alongside Bannon and Kremer. She presented the Microsoft deal as the model for what “conservatives and liberals” could achieve “because we don’t have it in law.” She declared that “the American workforce should share in the bounty of America,” a nationalist conception in which workers’ share is fixed by the state and the two capitalist parties, never by workers themselves. She reported the AFT’s meetings with GM, Siemens, Micron and Meta on career “pathways,” programs that feed students into the corporations’ labor pipelines, including war production. She said nothing when Bannon demanded the expulsion of Chinese nationals from American AI laboratories.

The bureaucracy’s drive to police a new technology for the state aligns it with the extreme right, as its campaign to reopen schools at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic did. In September 2021 Weingarten co-hosted a town hall with the far-right parents’ group Open Schools USA and Jay Bhattacharya, a co-author of the Great Barrington Declaration, which called for the mass infection of children and healthy adults in pursuit of a mythical “herd

immunity.” Trump has since made him director of the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

By the time of the 2021 town hall, more than 1,000 educators and more than 250 children had died of COVID-19 in the previous school year alone. Thousands more educators and children died as schools were kept open through the waves that followed, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates that roughly 1 million American children now live with Long COVID.

Weingarten is a functionary of the capitalist state. She sat on the Democratic National Committee (DNC) for 23 years and has served for decades as an agent of American imperialism. She traveled to Israel in December 2023 to lend cover to the Gaza genocide and branded students who protested the genocide “antisemitic.” Her record leaves no room for the claim that children’s safety is her concern.

For workers’ control of AI technologies

The WSWS has characterized AI as augmented intelligence. These systems automate and amplify human intellectual labor, drawing on humanity’s digitized inheritance of writing, science and art, and let workers and youth engage directly with the sum total of human culture as never before.

Educators already use AI to lift the burden of administrative and clerical work and can go much further, building courses to their own pedagogical aims, adapting lessons for students with disabilities and multilingual learners, and designing work that trains young people to question, reason from evidence and argue rather than memorize for a test. It is precisely this potential, the placing of humanity’s accumulated knowledge within reach of every student and worker, that makes the question of who controls it a class question.

None of this is possible so long as the technology is owned by a handful of monopolies and policed by the state and its union partners. Educators must form rank-and-file committees, independent of the union apparatus and both capitalist parties, to decide how AI is used in their classrooms, to oppose every layoff and school closure carried out in its name, and to reject the surveillance built into the corporate products.

The same fight confronts every section of the working class as the corporations deploy AI against jobs and conditions. It requires the expropriation of the technology monopolies and their transformation into public utilities under the democratic control of the working class. The only social force capable of carrying this out is the international working class, and educators must unite across borders through the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) to carry it forward.



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