

American Federation of Teachers convention stumps for Democrats, genocide and budget cuts

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The biennial convention of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) concluded last Thursday in Houston, Texas.

The concerns of teachers found no expression at the meeting, except by way of dishonest phrase-mongering. It had more the character of a Democratic Party rally staged by the union bureaucracy, which is joined at the hip with this pro-war, pro-Wall Street party. Vice President Kamala Harris, the newly-appointed Democratic nominee, spoke on the last day of the convention.

Posturing by Harris

Harris' speech was full of the usual platitudes, thanking teachers for their "service to our nation." She attempted to contrast her record and that of the Biden White House to a bastion of "darkness" represented by Trump. But every policy she ascribed solely to Trump has bipartisan support, underscoring that the rise of fascism is only the most extreme outcome of massive inequality which pervades the US and dominates the political system.

For example, Harris claimed that "no child has to grow up in poverty" and "every student has the support and resources to thrive," even as Biden has cut off billions in COVID emergency funding, triggering massive budget cuts at school districts nationwide. She denounced Trump for supporting "tax breaks to billionaires and corporations," as though Democrats have not also voted to funnel trillions in free money to prop up Wall Street.

At the close of her speech, she denounced the threat of right-wing extremists to democracy, asking rhetorically whether the US would be a country of "freedom, compassion and rule of law, or a country of chaos, fear and hate?"

This claim to be the last line of defense for democracy was exposed by the circumstances around her speech. Immediately before speaking, Harris issued a statement denouncing last Wednesday's protests against the appearance of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as "despicable", "un-patriotic" and "hate-fueled." Immediately after speaking, she met with Netanyahu, who is carrying out the US-backed genocide in Gaza.

The only semi-truthful part in her speech is when she identified herself with Biden's labor policy, boasting of her role as the chair of the White House Labor Task Force. The White House supports, not the self-organization of the working class, but unions which are totally controlled by a pro-corporate bureaucracy.

This union bureaucracy is playing a critical role in attempting to shore

up a Democratic Party which is increasingly discredited among workers and youth. Mere hours after the collapse of Biden's reelection campaign last week, the AFT executive council issued a preliminary resolution endorsing Harris for president, which the convention delegates passed on Monday, making the AFT the first union to endorse her.

AFT President Randi Weingarten, a member of the Democratic National Committee, and other speakers sought to portray Harris's election as a bulwark against a Trump dictatorship and for the survival of public education. This required a high degree of falsification to cover not only for the real pro-war, anti-working class policies of the Democrats, but for the AFT bureaucracy's own role in helping carry them out.

The bureaucracy itself is in deep crisis, and the AFT leadership was terrified that the convention would blow up like the National Education Association's did in early July. On Wednesday, Weingarten nervously admonished delegates not to protest during Harris' speech on the grounds that it would project "disunity" in the media. In the end, no such protests occurred.

AFT bureaucracy whitewashes genocide

In her keynote address, Weingarten ignored the Gaza genocide, while condemning the October 7 " Hamas massacre" and whitewashing the genocide as merely a "conflict" between Israel and Hamas.

Weingarten personifies the integration of the union bureaucracy with American capitalism and imperialism. She criss-crosses the globe supporting US-backed wars, making a visit to Israel last year where she postured as supporting "peace" while ignoring Israeli war crimes. An arch-Zionist, Weingarten denounced protesting students as "antisemites", even after she herself promotes neo-Nazis who are NATO's shock troops in the proxy war in Ukraine against Russia.

The AFT bureaucracy's support for war is deeply unpopular among teachers, but this had no real representation at the convention. Multiple local resolutions were proposed that gave detailed descriptions of the genocidal character of the war and Israel's intentional obliteration of education infrastructure in Gaza, which have been defined as "scholasticide." These resolutions died in committee.

Instead, the bureaucrats passed mealy-mouthed "bi-lateral ceasefire" resolutions which, like earlier resolutions passed by the AFT and AFL-CIO apparatus, covered up the real nature of the war and were fundamentally in line with the political interests of Washington, especially in their promotion of the smokescreen of a "two-state solution."

Another resolution which was tellingly suppressed by the convention

committees denounced the “repressive and violent crackdown” against protests against the genocide, noting that many educators within the AFT have been “arrested, forcibly removed from the protests and suspended from work.”

Corporatism and the unions

Weingarten claimed that the AFT made a “great choice” to endorse Biden and Harris in 2020, who she said were “the leaders best prepared to lead our country out of crisis and to a brighter future. They have created the strongest economic recovery in our lifetime. They’ve restored integrity to the White House. This is the most pro-labor, pro-worker, pro-family, pro-public education administration in our history.”

In reality, Biden is using the union bureaucracy, which is deeply hostile to workers, as key allies in attacks on the working class. He infamously banned a railroad strike in late 2022, and has worked with unions in every industry to impose contracts paving the way for layoffs.

Biden also sees this corporatist alliance with the bureaucracy as key to preparing society for war, as he frankly stated this when he called the AFL-CIO his “domestic NATO” earlier this month.

He worked closely with the United Auto Workers to impose a deal last year which has led to over 8,000 layoffs with more on the way. Significantly, UAW president Shawn Fain was another guest speaker at the convention. Recent developments have exposed his administration as totally illegitimate. This includes a ruling in favor of a lawsuit alleging mass vote suppression in the federally supervised UAW election in 2022, as well as a federal monitor’s investigation into allegations of corruption.

Among autoworkers, support is growing for new elections, controlled by the rank-and-file, to throw out Fain and the bureaucracy.

Support for school cuts

The administration Weingarten called “the most pro-worker” and “pro-public education” in US history has triggered massive budget cuts at districts across America by cutting off \$190 billion in Covid funding for education.

Some of the deepest cuts being prepared are in Chicago, where the teachers contract has expired as the district faces a \$500 million deficit. But Mayor Johnson, an ex-Chicago Teachers Union staffer, was an honored guest at the convention. CTU President Stacy Davis Gates hailed Johnson as “my brother, our brother, the world’s brother,” making clear that the union intends to help ram these cuts through.

The CTU, which has imposed massive concessions included dozens of school closures, has been controlled for more than a decade by the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators, which Johnson also comes out of. This is a pseudo-left faction with ties, first to the International Socialist Organization, and then with the Democratic Socialists of America following the ISO’s breakup. These forces devote all of their efforts to bolstering the left flank of the Democrats and the union bureaucrats, while completely supporting their basic policies.

Johnson is infamous for his police attacks on anti-genocide protesters, including arrests in April outside the venue of the Labor Notes conference, when he himself was speaking. He has also moved against migrants and will be the point person for repression against protests at the Democratic National Convention in August.

Fascism and democracy

The convention promoted the Democrats as the only answer to dictatorship in the US. Weingarten discussed the recent Supreme Court ruling that established a presidential dictatorship in the US. She noted that it “laid the legal foundation for American autocracy” and granted “almost limitless power” to the presidential office which is acknowledged is now “above the law.” This is true, but her solution was to ensure that Harris, rather than Trump, control this “almost limitless power.”

Meanwhile, Democrats have spent the last four years trying to downplay the real threat of dictatorship in America, protecting Trump and his co-conspirators after the January 6 coup attempt, with Biden proclaiming the need for a “strong Republican Party.”

On all fundamental issues for American capitalism, especially war, the Democrats and Republicans are in agreement.

The bureaucracy’s nationalism and deep ties with the state make it a natural base of support for fascism. On Twitter, Weingarten hailed a speech by Teamsters General President Sean O’Brien at the Republican National Convention. “Personally, I am glad Teamsters president Sean O’Brien was at the RNC. And glad that he savaged big business for their greed.”

In the first place, her support for O’Brien’s overtures to Republicans this totally contradicts her own support for the Democrats as the last line of defense for democracy. But in fact, O’Brien did not attack “corporate greed” but gave an ultranationalist speech attacking corporations for their lack of patriotism. He channeled Hitler’s attacks on “rootless international elements” when he declared that “elites have no nation,” which is disproven by the eruption of war in a bid to save the dominance of US capitalism.

Weingarten herself has ties to the extreme right. In 2021, she took part in the infamous “town hall of death” with extreme-right COVID denialists, while she and the AFT bureaucracy were helping to force schools to reopen against rank-and-file opposition.

Rank-and-File Committees

Weingarten’s own association with the extreme right disproves her assertion that either the Democrats or the union bureaucrats are a bulwark against fascism. In reality, the defense of democracy requires the independent mobilization of the working class against the entire political set-up, including the corrupt union apparatus.

The decisive question for not only workers, but world society, is how this is to be achieved. The working class, the most powerful social force on earth, needs the organizational mechanisms and an independent strategy through which this power can be expressed.

Earlier this month, a very different perspective from the one at the AFT convention was put forward by the Educators Rank-and-File Committee. In a statement calling on teachers to organize in defense of education, it wrote:

The fight to defend public education is a political struggle...On the one hand, Donald Trump, four years after his failed January 6 coup, is running to become an American führer, openly threatening violence and mass arrests of his political opponents. On the other, Biden, whose clear mental decline has called his viability as a candidate into question, is hated for his role in supporting the Gaza genocide and in coordinating mass arrests of protesters across the

country.

The statement continued:

Teachers and the working class as a whole must emerge as vanguard fighters for the defense of democratic rights because these can only be defended through a fight against control of society by the corporate oligarchy. The working class, the vast majority of society and the source of all its wealth, must determine how society's resources are used, not a handful of super-rich individuals.

It concluded:

The first step is for teachers to organize themselves outside of the control of the [union] bureaucracy. They must take their place in the growing world movement for rank-and-file committees, democratic organs of workers' power being formed in opposition to the union bureaucracy and the pro-corporate parties.

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