

UNION SPOTLIGHT

AFT Washington, AFL-CIO

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March 2024



AFT Washington, WEA, SEIU and labor allies rally at Olympia for the School-Related Personnel Respect campaign, calling for increased wages and improved working conditions.

Photo credit: Cortney Marabetta

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Growing Our Power, Growing Our Membership

By AFT Washington Staff

In 2011 we saw Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin swing a big bat at workers with the passage of Act 10, a law requiring every union to hold an election yearly in order to maintain their bargaining rights. The law has harmed our union siblings, even as they continue the fight for representation. Not to be outdone, in 2023, Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida drove the passage of SB 256, a law that requires unions to maintain 60% dues-paying membership in order to keep their union. In both cases, the governors exempted police and firefighters from the requirement. It's clear they're dedicated to silencing working people with this union-busting.

While we live in the third most unionized state in the country, and while our governor and legislature are strong advocates for workers, we aren't safe from union-busting tactics. Many of you have received mail from the Freedom Foundation urging you to save a little money by dropping your membership. Naturally, they don't mention the fact that workers with a union earn more than those without. In a 2021 National Education Association report, represented school-related personnel earned an average of \$37,695 whereas SRPs without a union earned \$31,497.

Imagine your workplace without your collective voice at the bargaining table. The better pay, job security, and fair processes you and your co-workers have won over the years could simply go away. There are down-stream consequences, too. As so many of you know first-hand, vacancy and turnover rates currently present challenges in your workplaces; without a union, public sector jobs become less appealing, and hiring and retention become even more challenging.

We may not see bills like Act 10 or SB 256 on the horizon in Washington, but the same interests that supported those bills

and other anti-worker efforts in other states are keeping an eye on us here, too. They know – and so do we – that workers who have union protection are workers who are better off and live in stronger communities than workers without a union. And they hate that we know this.

The best way to stand up for our rights, build our collective power and position ourselves to have the greatest impact we can at the bargaining table, with elected leaders, and in our communities? We do the work of getting as close to 100% membership as we can.

One of our locals - Federated Collective of Washington Chartered Teachers, Local 6616 – is there! The rest of us have some work to do...but don't despair. This work is fun and righteous! We are working with several locals on membership drives and many leaders talk to new employees at a new employee orientation every month. When people are offered the chance to join their union, they almost always say "yes, I'm in!" The act of asking non-members to join pays off in other ways, too. You get to know your coworkers better, find out what's going well and what could be improved on the job, and strengthen the collective voice of the workforce. Every member can help bring non-members into the union. If you want to pitch in and help, talk to your local leadership.

While SB 256 is infuriating and unjust, Florida teachers' unions are taking the bull by the horns. The 1601 teachers of Bay County increased membership from 54% to 61%. The 2800 teachers of Manatee have made even greater progress, going from 53% to 73% membership! This is a powerful showing of solidarity and wisdom – let's take that lesson and apply it here and now, before we find ourselves fending off attacks we didn't expect.

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Board meetings are usually held on the first Saturday of the month except for holidays and summer months. Board members are elected to two-year terms. AFT Washington represents over 6,500 members and prospective members in early childhood education, K-12, and higher education in Washington State and is affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers, which represents 1.7 million members nationwide.

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Karen Strickland

President's Column

I suppose any election year is a good year for our 2024 Spotlight theme, but I have to say it anyway – our theme couldn't be more compelling than it is this year! In this *Spotlight* issue I want to elaborate what Democracy is a Verb means to me as a union leader, specifically, as an educators' union leader.

Core to democracy is a robust public education system – one that is open to all, providing the opportunity to explore, examine and develop a full range of ideas, skills, and aspirations. This system needs to be of high quality and affordable, e.g. cost-free. Furthermore, this system needs a workforce that enjoys working conditions that allow them to thrive, both at work and in their personal lives. In her column on page 4 Randi Weingarten points out that 45 states – including Washington - have proposed hundreds of laws which attempt to squelch freedom of thought, critical thinking, honesty and more in public schools. This is an attack on democracy!

I have long said that public education and organized labor are the two best pathways to economic security; that is the truth. What's more is that they also contribute to a healthy democracy. In the face of the destructive and disingenuous attacks on public education, the imperative to boost our democracy-building activity cannot be ignored.

Cynicism, a perceived absence of incentive, a sense of being left behind, left out, left to struggle are prevalent, leading some to consider sitting the upcoming election out. If this is you, I urge you to stay in it. If you have friends and family who are there, I urge you to urge them to stay in it. The differences between a Biden presidency and a Trump presidency are real.

Consider the toll student loan debt takes on us individually and collectively - on the personal economy, health and well-being of individuals and our strength of our economy overall. 3.9 million people have benefitted from the Biden administration's various approaches to debt relief, totaling \$3.8 billion dollars. Today I read that 7.5 million people are enrolled in the SAVE plan which will eliminate the debt workers with modest incomes carry; it's estimated that 85% of future community and technical college students who borrow will benefit from this plan. I still like cost-free college for future students more, but this is no small win, and we have taken action in both policy progress and direct assistance to members so they can access the debt relief they need to thrive.

Infrastructure, financial supports during the active phase of the pandemic, promotion of rights for the LGBTQIA+, Black, Indigenous, Asian-American, Pacific-Islander, Latinx and other marginalized people, and climate-related initiatives are additional examples of progress over these last, challenging several years.

Here in Washington, with a Democratic trifecta, we can name a string of terrific policies passed in the last several years that improve the quality of life for our members and our centers, schools, and colleges, including wage-related wins, benefits like paid family and medical leave, and increased wrap-around services for students at every level. We have also succeeded in expanding labor rights, such as the provision of member

information to the union and bargaining rights for student workers in colleges and universities. These wins must not be taken for granted – we have to continue to be active, moving our endorsement process, knocking on doors for our candidates, registering voters, getting out the vote, and meeting with elected leaders both between and during legislative sessions. This is what democracy is a verb looks like.

What can we do as individuals? I've been complaining for months about the bombardment of campaign ads, telling myself to reinforce my psychological barriers because the campaigns are just warming up! One of those barriers is to be selective in the information we consume. You may recall our series on mis- and dis-information from 2022 – I recommend another read of it. (You can find it on the Spotlight page on our website.) One change since then is the prevalence of AI. An article in Platformer, "The AI-Generated Propaganda is Working" (2/20/24) reported on the effect of AI-generated campaign propaganda. One study showed that seeing such propaganda nearly doubled the likelihood (24.4% to 47.4%) that a related thesis was believed. In other words, if I see something in the news and am then presented with a statement about that subject, I'm more likely to believe it regardless of its veracity. Nefarious interests can exploit this phenomenon by flooding media with AI-generated content designed to increase confusion, distrust and large-scale shared but inaccurate beliefs. We know that campaigns already create echo chambers of information to promote whatever they're campaigning for; the development of AI will amplify this. We could cover our eyes and ears (and there are moments when this may be the best approach!), but we could instead develop our strategies and tools for defending against disinformation campaigns and remain engaged – this is what democracy as a verb looks like.

(Continued on pg.6)

Democracy Is A Verb

Introduction

By Cortney Marabetta, Communications Specialist

This year's theme for the Spotlight is Democracy Is A Verb. You are undoubtedly already aware of the momentous election happening in November, with opportunities at the federal and state level to set a new direction, but verbing democracy goes beyond the act of voting. We are living in a time that is notable for the culture wars – there are so many, around whether a given group of people gets to have human rights, or whether some people are fully able to control their bodies, or whether our children are allowed to read and learn from challenging books, or whether billionaires should pay taxes, or whether we should work on the climate crisis, or the myriad of other issues we face. All of them are, at their heart, fundamental questions about the kind of country we live in.

To consider democracy a verb is to consider the active practice of answering those questions. While many times, we see change at the ballot box, there are other ways to guide and shape our democracy. Running for office and supporting political candidates, like voting, are in the political realm. Respectfully sharing your experiences and thoughts on issues that some try to make into a wedge can give courage and a voice to people who believe no one shares their vision. As union members, we know the value of standing together in solidarity to support each other in making our union stronger; when we stand together for what we believe, we make our democracy stronger, and assert that those seeking to destroy it will not succeed.

AFT President Randi Weingarten's May 2023 column in the New York Times, talks about those culture wars and how she sees AFT standing up and asserting our

shared love of a robust, diverse, powerful democracy that uplifts and gives hope.

Culture Wars Harm Education

By Randi Weingarten, President, AFT

Nowadays I am the president of a union, but I am harking back to my years as a civics teacher as I write this column. Governors and education officials in Florida and other states are doing exactly what extremists baselessly accuse educators of doing—imposing their ideological agenda on public schools, rewriting history, stifling free expression and creating intolerance.

Such threats are increasing throughout the country, but the education culture wars in Florida are especially dangerous, and they are growing along with its governor's political ambitions.

Much has been written about Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis' war on what he calls "woke ideology." He is presiding over an orgy of laws, bans and threats—censoring books; barring students' access to Advanced Placement African American studies and threatening to prohibit all other

AP courses; banning diversity, equity and inclusion efforts; targeting the LGBTQ+ community; waging a conservative takeover of higher education in the state; limiting what schools can teach about race and racism; demanding that publishers edit social studies textbooks to sanitize history, including omitting references to topics such as the Black Lives Matter movement and the murder of George Floyd, and eliminating content that incorporates social-emotional learning, which is now banned in Florida. But what impact is all this having?

Longtime journalist Steven Greenhouse spoke with teachers throughout Florida for a piece in the Guardian last week and found that intimidation—and its chilling effect—is the point of DeSantis' efforts.

Vivian Taylor, a seventh-grade teacher in Miami, was told to scarcely discuss the lynching of Emmett Till in her civics classes so as not to run afoul of Florida's "Stop WOKE" law. Carol Cleaver, a middle school science teacher in Pensacola, worries she'll violate the so-called Don't Say Gay law if she tells students in crisis about a support hotline for LGBTQ+ students. Brandt Robinson, a high school history teacher in Palm Harbor, said, "Everything we do as teachers to promote critical thinking is undermined by what (officials) are doing."

You may have seen photos of school libraries in Florida with every book removed and classroom bookshelves covered by tarps and signs warning, "Books are NOT for student use!!" DeSantis' Department of Education has threatened teachers and librarians with felony prosecution, with punishments of up to five years of prison and a \$5,000 fine, for giving students access to books it later decides were inappropriate. And he's trying to crush teachers' unions in Florida, so educators will be on their own in this Orwellian environment. He is using children and educators as pawns in service of his political ambitions.

DeSantis' press secretary recently tweeted, "The political indoctrination of children through the K-12 public education system is a very real and prolific problem in this country. All CAUGHT & all FIXED under @GovRonDeSantis' watch." But as history teacher Brandt Robinson said in the Guardian, the DeSantis administration is "modeling the kind of indoctrination they're so fast to accuse other people of."

It's not just Florida, of course. Over the last three years, legislators in 45 states proposed hundreds of laws placing public schools at the center of culture wars—and leaving teachers teaching on eggshells.

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Democracy Is A Verb

(from pg. 4)

It is impossible for teachers to do their best work—to answer students’ questions fully and accurately, to help them understand context and to consider different viewpoints—if they are rightfully worried that doing so could get them fired. This is what happens in autocracies, not democracies.

My AP government students routinely debated significant historical and current events. I don’t think we could do that if I were teaching in Florida today. Could we debate what changed—and what didn’t—in the 55 years between Bloody Sunday in Selma, Ala., and George Floyd’s murder in Minneapolis? Or compare the policies of the Trump and Biden administrations? Or address any number of topics that interest students? Educators want young people to think critically and think for themselves. We want students to learn about both our nation’s achievements that make us proud and the failings that make us strive to do better. That is becoming impossible in Florida.

Sixty-nine years ago this week, the American Federation of Teachers filed an amicus brief in the U.S. Supreme Court in support of the plaintiffs in *Brown v. Board of Education*—the only union and education organization to do so. The case embodied the hopes of innumerable Americans seeking justice and equity, and while the United States has yet to fully achieve those goals in education and society, we have made great progress. But that progress is imperiled at this moment by extremist forces working to reverse advances made since the civil rights era, to erode the quality of education our children receive, and to use public schools for their political and ideological goals.

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The Current State of The Culture Wars

By Cortney Marabetta, Communications Specialist

As President Weingarten described, we faced then, and still face today, strong attacks from people who see education as the venue to reshape the face of this country. But a look at some of the events of the months since that article was written sheds some perspective on how successful such interests are.

- Moms for Liberty (M4L), the conservative group central to ongoing battles over how race, racism, gender, and sexuality are taught in schools, has pushed for control of school boards. According to the Brookings Institute, in 2023, M4L endorsed 166 candidates; 54 won, for a 33% win rate. Their core suburban demographic is turning against the misguided beliefs espoused by the group.
- Another front in the culture wars has been school libraries. Book bans have seen a surge since 2021, particularly targeting books that talk about LGBTQ+ people and people of color. PEN America reports that in 2021-2022, 140 school districts in 32 states banned more than 2500 books. But drilling down into that number, the *Washington Post* found that 11 people were responsible for filing 60% of those book challenges. Eleven people want to dictate what our nation’s children read in order to create a less just future.
- Here in Washington, the Dayton library in southwest Washington faced an initiative that would have closed the library over the books it offers to residents – an initiative that ultimately was ruled unconstitutional because

it would have limited the vote to rural county residents, depriving the town’s residents of an opportunity to make their opinions known.

- The issue of abortion access has also turned out to be a loser in the culture wars. Many more Americans believe pregnant people should have the right to make such decisions for themselves, in consultation with only the people they choose – not in consultation with state and federal government officials. When abortion access is on a ballot, it has consistently won. It does not matter the other political leanings of the electorate; decisions about abortion are something Americans believe should be a choice made by the people facing pregnancy and no one else.

There are other urgent issues facing our country. Gun safety legislation is gaining traction; climate legislation is being approved by voters – the Guardian called the sweep of climate measures approved in the 2022 midterms the “silent surprise” of that election; same-sex marriage is less controversial than ever. We are making our voices and our values heard.

It would be a mistake to simply discount any of the culture wars as unserious or not a threat. While they are, in themselves, all representative of extremists trying to impose a minority view on the majority, many of these groups are well financed and committed to the longer-term goal of reshaping America. Democracy is most definitely a verb when it comes to fighting the culture wars; we must stand up for the freedom this country promises, in all the ways we can, and reject the fundamental premise of the people and groups pushing for such radical, regressive change. All of us have a role to play in refusing this vision, and the ways you find to act are the ways to make democracy a verb.

Walla Walla Professional Staff Have A Tentative Agreement

By Enrie Marusya, Union Organizing Representative



The Union and Management Bargaining Teams at Walla Walla Community College after reaching their tentative agreement.

Photo credit: Karl Christiansen

AFT- Walla Walla Professional Staff (AFT-WWPS) is proud to announce that they have reached a Tentative Agreement with Walla Walla Community College on a new contract. AFT-WWPS is the newest local union of AFTWA.

“This is a game changer for our professional staff at Walla Walla Community College. I’d like to thank all of the members who took action to support the cause and our team at the bargaining table, from signing petitions to button-up and AFT Blue days, to attending board meetings. It really made a difference,” said Joshua Slepín, co-chair of the negotiations team.

Highlights of the contract include placing all professional staff on a salary scale. For the lowest paid workers, this represented a raise of up to \$5,000 in the first year of the contract. All workers will now also enjoy annual step increases—which they didn’t have before. Some workers will also receive premium pay for working in a second language.

“One of the main issues some of our

staff faced was ongoing job creep. We are fortunate to now have a process for reviewing workloads and either adjusting pay or reassigning work when this happens,” said Melissa Holecek, also a co-chair of the negotiations team.

Last but not least, AFT-WWPS-represented staff will now have better job security, with an end to annualized contracts, just cause discipline and an established RIF process.

Slepín notes that they didn’t win everything they wanted. “There’s still a ways to go. In the next contract, we’re going to want to focus on severance pay and recall rights, among other things. But overall, we are very grateful to management’s negotiations team for responding to our needs.”

“And we bargained in record time, just five months from the start of bargaining, we reached a TA!” Holecek added.

“We’re looking forward joining classified staff and faculty on our campus as unionized employees.”

Presidents Column

(from pg. 3)

Finally, I would be remiss if I didn’t raise the importance of money in full participation in our democracy. I have yet to hear working people rave about how much they enjoy contributing to a candidate. Fed up with the flood of texts and emails leading up to the 2022 election, I wrote a poem made up of subject lines for campaign pleas. It included such phrases as “devastating defeat,” “IN TEARS,” “Epic comeback,” “Plz plz plz,” “have you written me off?” It’s tiresome.

Nonetheless, business outspends organized labor by 16:1. Our Committee on Political Education (COPE) evaluates all candidates who complete our questionnaire to determine who will best represent our interests and then we engage you to support them. If we want our endorsed candidates to win, we need to help fund their campaigns.

There are so many more ways to make democracy into a verb. Have you ever considered running for office? You can make a real difference in a school board or local government role. Do you talk to friends and family about what you believe and what’s important to you, or do you avoid talking about policy because it can be uncomfortable when others don’t share your view? If ever there was one, this is the year to stand up for the people you want to see in the Legislature and the federal government.

Democracy isn’t static – it’s a dynamic force that thrives with our action, our engagement, our advocacy. It can be as quiet as a whisper or shouted out loud, but it is a verb, and that means action. AFT’s slogan says it all: We Care, We Show Up, We Fight, and We Vote. Let’s get to it!

It's In The Books: The 2024 Legislative Session

By AFT Washington Staff

The 2024 Legislative Session has ended, and we have progress to celebrate and policies to resurrect in a future session. This session, a non-budget short session, saw a lot of progressive policies brought to the legislature, and saw challenges to those policies as well. Some of the sweeping investments we and partner organizations called for failed simply on the basis that the budget being debated wasn't large enough for ambitious goals, but every session lays the groundwork for the next, and we did a lot of building in this one.

Our legislative agenda as of the start of the session can be found on our website at <https://aftwa.org/legislation>. We were focused on several priorities this session, including a school-related personnel wage increase campaign, contingent faculty benefits eligibility, gun safety, professional licensure for undocumented graduates, and cost-free college, the latter two in coalition with Communities For Our Colleges. We also sought to remind legislators that the pay equity plan they requested from the State Board for Community and Technical Colleges that establishes the pathway to getting contingent faculty to 85% of tenured faculty compensation is due July 1st, necessitating substantial investments in the higher education workforce in the next session.

With those priorities in mind, here's where we stand.

School-Related Personnel Wage Increases

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) recognized the wage issue facing Washington's school-related personnel and requested that the Governor include a significant wage increase for paraeducators in his

proposed budget. We joined WEA, SEIU, and other labor allies that represent school-related personnel to launch the Respect campaign, calling for strong investment in school-related personnel salaries. While all SRPs need wage improvements, in a supplemental year, there is usually not room for such broad-based budgetary changes, so we opted to work within the parameters OSPI and the governor had set and come back next year for even better.

The Legislature made changes to special education funding and the prototypical school staffing model. The former increases the funding for supporting special education student. The prototypical school staffing model increases the number of paraeducators and office support staff at every level of K-12 education in Washington.

We have begun building power for next session, and are circulating a petition launched at Classified Conference this month.

Contingent Faculty Benefits Eligibility

Our bill, HB 2125, addressed an issue facing some contingent faculty by including non-instructional work in eligibility for benefits. Increasingly, contingent faculty take on non-instructional work in addition to teaching. This work does not count toward benefits eligibility; only the teaching load counts. We know that all compensated work should count towards eligibility for healthcare, retirement and other benefits. We're not aware of any other job where only some of the employee's work counts.

The bill was introduced in this session and moved quickly through the House Committee on Postsecondary Education & Workforce. When the bill went to Appropriations, however, the

fiscal note was alarmingly and artificially high, resulting in it not making it through committee. In conversation with the relevant state officials, we clarified the impact of the legislation, and we intend to bring this bill back in the next session with a more accurate fiscal note.

Gun Safety

This session, we joined with the Alliance for Gun Responsibility, in recognition of the fact that our members are directly affected by gun violence, and uniquely placed to address the need for change. SB 5444 (Valdez, LD 46), which extends the definition of sensitive spaces to include more spaces such as libraries that children are commonly present, passed and has been signed by the Governor.

Communities For Our Colleges

Our priorities were to build support for a push for cost-free college next year and pass a bill striking the citizenship requirement for most professional licensures. That bill has passed the legislature and been signed by the Governor, allowing Washington's undocumented graduates to seek jobs in the career fields they have trained for!

Several bills were dropped that would expand Washington's college grants, but they did not do as much as we seek with truly cost-free college. They also had very large fiscal notes and were slightly confusing in what they did; those bills failed to advance, but did provide an opportunity to raise the issue of cost-free college and prepare for a push next year.

Setting The Stage For Next Session

Overall, we laid the groundwork for a strong session next year, when the full budget will be in play. The wins we had



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It's In The Books

(from pg. 7)

this year were fiscally modest, even if they represented a significant shift for Washingtonians, and we knew going in that there would be a significant constraint around spending. One of the most important things we can do is remind legislators that they've heard from us on these issues, and they'll be hearing from us again next year.

To get involved in AFT Washington's legislative advocacy work – there are many opportunities! – contact Richard Burton at rburton@aftwa.org.

It's Time To Get On Your Bike And Ride!

Please join us in raising money for the
AFT Washington/Barnard Iglitzen and Lavitt Scholarship.

There are two ways to participate:

1. Seek pledges from your union siblings, friends and family, and then ride your bike.
2. Pledge \$\$ to support one of your union siblings as they ride.

We'll be riding all of April, and you are invited to join in!

Contact Tammy Fouts at tfouts@aftwa.org

for more information on signing up.