



## Fighting for the Right to Rise

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I WRITE THESE WORDS after hearing oral arguments before the U.S. Supreme Court in *Janus v. AFSCME, Council 31*, but before any decision has been issued. The case is the latest attempt by a web of conservative donors—the National Right to Work Foundation, the Koch brothers, and others—to consolidate their economic and political power. Given the vitriol from two of the justices (*New York Times*' columnist Linda Greenhouse observed that Justices Samuel Alito and Anthony Kennedy acted not like jurists but anti-union “advocates and even ... close to bullies.”), it appears the court’s five Republican-appointed justices are poised to undercut the interests of millions of workers by depriving their unions of the funds they need to function. That’s not an unintended consequence—it’s the entire point of these assaults on unions. Indeed, Justice Sonia Sotomayor told the lawyer for the National Right to Work Foundation, “You’re basically arguing, ‘Do away with unions.’”

Unions help make possible what would be impossible for individuals acting alone. It’s how we were able to lift teachers’ salaries in New York City by double digits before the 2008 recession, so they were in line with surrounding suburbs, and how teachers in West Virginia are fighting for a living wage and to stop skyrocketing healthcare premiums. Unions advocate for good public schools for all our kids, affordable higher education and healthcare, and a voice at our jobs and in our democracy. After yet another school gun massacre, we are redoubling our efforts to make schools safe sanctuaries, not armed fortresses. And we are fighting with special urgency against arming teachers and for the school safety and mental health funds that President Trump’s new budget eliminates.

We have daily reminders of the voice and agency that public employee unions afford their members so they can do their jobs well and support them-

selves, their families, the people they serve, and their communities. There are numerous examples within the pages of this magazine.

If the Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT) had not researched the deficiencies of using value-added methods in teacher evaluations, and built political strength to elect a school board that was responsive to the evidence, students in Houston would still be losing good

teachers tarnished by this indecipherable test-based formula. Beyond teaching and learning conditions, after Hurricane Harvey, I saw firsthand how Zeph Capo and members of the HFT doubled down to care for union and community members who suffered terrible losses.

Also in this issue, Jon Shelton examines the powerful connections between teachers unions’ interests and the needs of the broader community. As he writes, the Chicago Teachers Union bargained for “the schools Chicago’s students deserve”—negotiating for smaller class sizes; wraparound services for students; relevant, high-quality professional development; and an end to institutional racism in Chicago schools. And Emily Gasoi and Deborah Meier write eloquently about how teachers uphold the vital importance of public education as a keystone of American democracy.

You don’t hear any of that from the billionaires backing the *Janus* case. They simply want the unions that public employees belong to out of the picture.

I am not prone to hyperbole, but we face a clear and present threat to American democracy by those who want to

further rig the system toward the already powerful. They’re going after unions, public education, and the right to vote. Why? Because those are the vehicles for regular folks to secure a better life.

*Janus* is just one part of this. The conservative State Policy Network has pledged to spend \$80 million to “defund and defang” unions. The Kochs, after receiving the Trump tax cut, upped the ante with \$400 million to undermine

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public education and “break” the teachers unions. Why? Because unions fight for a better life for working people, and the right-wing sees that as a threat to their political and economic power.

When Mother Jones, a schoolteacher turned labor and community organizer, began organizing workers during the so-called Gilded Age, employers’ power was virtually unchecked, the economic supremacy of the elite was entrenched, and the aspiration that Abraham Lincoln had advanced—“the right to rise”—was routinely denied to working people. The labor movement helped tilt the scales of oppression, and, by midcentury, American workers enjoyed safer workplaces and far better standards of living. That’s the movement the right-wing wants to “defund and defang.”

“Never again” has been the *cri de coeur* for many—those opposing genocide, of course, and, more recently, those decrying mass gun violence. It is also fitting for those who insist that our country must not revert to a time when workers were systematically denied even the most fundamental rights—a voice and a better life.