

Hope in darkness

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The very foundations of our country are being shaken. Divisiveness has poisoned many Americans' interactions with each other, and bullying has damaged America's standing in the world. It comes out in classrooms and on cable news, on social media and in government policies. But there is a path forward to a country that is safe, welcoming and sane, and that turns from cruelty to decency.

These challenges—and how to overcome them—are the thread running through the American Federation of Teachers' convention, which is underway as I write. Our members are considering matters crucial to them and to other Americans—adequate investment in public education and public universities, student debt, decent wages, quality healthcare, safe communities and schools, confronting hatred and bigotry, and translating the activism in the streets to votes at the ballot box.

All this is taking place just weeks after the conservative majority on the Supreme Court ruled against unions in *Janus v. AFSCME*. Despite their ruling and the predictions of some who tried to write labor's obituary, our union is demonstrating labor's strength, not weakness.

Thousands of nurses, social workers, public safety workers and school staff gathered at the AFT convention. Teachers from West Virginia, Oklahoma and other states shared success stories from their recent walkouts for the public schools their students deserve. The president of a union of college faculty shared that, just hours after the *Janus* decision, the union received 238 membership applications—and they just kept coming. Scores of local unions proudly announced that 100 percent of their members have recommitted to their union.

As Hillary Clinton told our delegates, as in *A Tale of Two Cities*, the country is experiencing not only the "best of times" and the "worst of times" but a "season of darkness" that, with this unprecedented outpouring of grass-roots activism and energy, will lead to a "spring of hope."

Working people see that, through their union, they can accomplish together what would be impossible on their own. That's why right-wing groups and their wealthy allies want us gone. It's part of their trifecta strategy: suppress the vote, privatize public education and eliminate unions—the three ways working folks have any agency, any real power, in America.

A web of right-wing billionaires has spent millions of dollars on lawsuits and campaigns to try to pick off union members. The Mackinac Center, for example, with funding from the Koch brothers and Betsy DeVos, is spamming educators in nearly a dozen states on their taxpayer-funded school email accounts. And dark-money groups are urging union members to "give yourself a raise" by going it alone. But the groups bankrolling these efforts, like the misnamed right-wing Freedom Foundation and the Walton Foundation, are the same groups that go after public employees' pensions and fight for huge tax cuts for the rich that end up decimating education funding.

Despite these bare-knuckle campaigns urging members to leave their unions, the AFT has seen just the opposite—members recommittting and new members joining. Indeed, the AFT has just reached our highest membership ever.

But we understand that our union cannot be an island. We know that engaging our members and involving community partners around issues that matter is the pathway to a better life for all Americans. And we know that we must defend democracy and democratic norms. That's what makes the 2018 elections so urgent.

We are a year and a half into the Trump presidency, and with the cruelty emanating from this White House, none of us can be silent. We have a president who attacks the press; refuses to

condemn white nationalism and calls neo-Nazis "very fine people"; uses the power of his office to bully and harass people; describes immigrants as "animals," "rapists" and "criminals"; preys on women; and rips children from their parents' arms. And now Trump has nominated a Supreme Court justice who believes that presidents should be neither subpoenaed nor indicted and favors eliminating protections for pre-existing conditions.

There is a path forward to turn from cruelty to decency.

The 2018 elections are not simply a fight for fairness or for the policies we champion for working folks and their families. These elections won't just determine whether Republicans or Democrats prevail, but whether cruelty or decency prevails. We must be a check and balance for our democracy and for a society that is safe, welcoming and sane.

We are in a battle for the soul of our nation. In the face of chaos, divisiveness and incivility, I wish everyone could see our members' spirit, unity and activism. AFT members will continue to care, fight, show up and vote—for their values, their aspirations for themselves and their students, and their love for their communities and their country. Together, we can make America a better place for all.



Weingarten addressing the AFT convention in Pittsburgh, July 13.

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