

# 'Kitchen Table' Democracy

**Randi Weingarten**, President  
American Federation of Teachers

Not since the Great Depression has the connection between “kitchen table” issues and democracy been more pronounced. For most Americans today, the current economic policies have led to declining wages; skyrocketing healthcare, college and living costs; and a fear that our children will be worse off than we are. Forty percent of adults say they aren't able to cover an unexpected \$400 expense. Meanwhile, the 400 richest Americans—the top 0.00025 percent of the population—now own more of the country's wealth than the bottom 60 percent of Americans—America's working class. And these wealthiest Americans now pay a lower total tax rate than any other income group. Such extreme inequality is anathema to our values and incompatible with democracy.

This inequity shows up in our classrooms big-time, which is why Chicago teachers and support personnel (members of the Chicago Teachers Union and the Service Employees International Union, Local 73) are striking to secure the personnel, resources and conditions their students need to flourish as individuals and as citizens. No teacher wants to go on strike, but the signs on the picket line make it clear why educators there are taking this action. One student's homemade sign said that his class of 40 students is just too big. Teachers held signs saying that their school hasn't had a counselor for 600 days or a librarian for more than 1,000 days.

Majority rule is foundational to democracy, but that principle has been upended in the United States. We have a president who received 3 million fewer votes than his opponent and who stonewalls any attempts by Congress—a coequal partner in government—to play the role the Constitution envisioned. Many state and local officials try to maintain minority rule by rigging elections through voter suppression and extreme partisan and racial gerrymandering. Since 2010, 25 states have put new voting restrictions in place. And, as journalist Dylan Matthews notes, the Supreme Court is “dismantling one party's political economic base and helping preserve, even strengthen, the other party's anti-majoritarian hold on power.”

With a diminishing middle class and a smaller labor movement, the political preferences of the economic elite take precedence over those of other Americans. Revitalizing America's middle class requires restoring that basic social compact that if you work hard, you and your family will be OK. That means, in this period of globalization, increasing inequity, divisiveness and great technological change, we do things that level the playing field—like investing in public education and postsecondary opportunities that don't require crushing student debt; protecting the freedom to

form and join unions and the right to vote; lifting the minimum wage; and ensuring that paying for healthcare and child care, or retiring, are not pauperizing decisions.

How do we achieve this, with a ruling minority that resists it? While many of these issues are now front and center as we approach the 2020 election, the fact remains that only “we the people” can save our democracy. And that requires

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us to be engaged and not sit on the sidelines. None of us can do this alone, which is why it is so hopeful that today's grass-roots movements are thriving and mobilizing—movements like the March for Our Lives, Black Lives Matter, Me Too, Indivisible, United We Dream, and If Not Now, as well as the activism seen from teachers and other workers.

We saw this on the picket lines last week in Chicago. Educators want what their students need, and students and parents are supporting them. They are asking Mayor Lori Lightfoot to make her campaign promises for equity real by translating them into schools with nurses, school counselors and social workers; class size caps; and the pathways and time needed to recruit, retain, prepare, diversify and support the educators Chicago's students need and deserve. Striking educators are fighting to make schools safe and welcoming in a world that is increasingly full of trauma. They're asking for wraparound services that focus on social and emotional learning, and

for nurses in schools every day—because kids don't decide what day they may get hurt or have an asthma attack.

What's happening in Chicago is just one example of why it's so important for educators and others to have a voice at work and in our democracy. Individuals need the means to achieve a better life and a better future. In a democracy, that happens through our economic and political systems. And

because most Americans have so little individual voice now, our economy has become inequitable and our political system so toxic that we are perilously close to losing the checks and balances and rights embedded in our Constitution.

I'll return to where I started, with the Great Depression. Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal served dual vital purposes: It lifted the country out of an economic abyss. And, just as important, it prevented a nation riven by economic anxiety and resentments from looking toward authoritarian rule. “True individual freedom cannot exist without economic security and independence,” Roosevelt said. “People who are hungry and out of a job are the stuff of which dictatorships are made.”

Today we have a far different president in the White House than Roosevelt, one who shows more and more signs of maintaining power by any means. But as we are increasingly absorbed by the focus on impeachment and on the 2020 election, let's remember that it falls to us to defend democracy and to demand that its benefits extend to all.



Weingarten (bottom, center) with the members of the Chicago Teachers Union bargaining team, Oct. 17, Chicago.

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