



# Summer of Woke III: The Empire Strikes Back

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## Introduction

Each summer, when school doors shut, the nation’s largest teacher unions remain at work charting their radical policy agenda for the next year. As a service to parents, students, and teachers who are the main subjects—and victims—of the unions’ extreme policies, DFI monitors the summer meetings of the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) to keep the public informed about the true priorities of these labor behemoths. If you aren’t alarmed about what the NEA and AFT have planned for your school system, then you aren’t paying close enough attention.

As we outline below, this year’s NEA and AFT summer meetings saw no shortage of policy demands and resolutions that have nothing to do with ensuring that children receive a quality education. Along with these extreme measures, faced with the imminent presidential election, the leadership of each union showed no hesitation in throwing its support—and millions upon millions of dollars in dues money—behind whichever candidate the Democratic Party puts forward, spurning the millions of their teacher members whose views don’t match those of the Biden-Harris administration.

But the wrinkle that made its mark on this year’s union meetings was clearly the NEA’s civil war with its own staff. This labor battle, a self-indulgent sideshow that ignores the interests of rank-and-file teachers, serves as an important reminder to many school districts and states that they can use similar tactics to deal with strikes encouraged and funded by the NEA and AFT.

## The NEA Teaches Schools How to Handle an NEA Strike

On July 4, the NEA convened its 2024 Representative Assembly in Philadelphia. At this annual event, thousands of delegates from NEA local and state affiliate unions vote on a series of “new business items” (NBIs) to set the union’s progressive priorities for the coming year.

A day later, members of the NEA’s staff [spoiled](#) the union’s plans for another “wokefest” by going on strike, citing, among other things, a denial of holiday pay over the Fourth of July and the outsourcing of their work to contractors. The NEA Staff Organization, the union that called the strike, [accused](#) the NEA of wage theft and filed additional claims with the National Labor Relations Board. The staff union’s president, Robin McLean, highlighted the obvious disconnect between the NEA’s supposed pro-worker values and its treatment of staff, [remarking](#) that “[f]or a public-service union that purports to oppose outsourcing members’ work, it is unconscionable that NEA would spend hundreds of millions of NEA member dues on contractors while union-busting and shrinking its staff unions.”

**Pringle’s hairdo is worth more than many cars teachers take to school, highlighting the shocking disparity between the benefits afforded NEA’s leadership versus those afforded to its membership.**

In a direct salvo against NEA President Becky Pringle, the NEA staff union [disclosed](#) that the NEA had spent \$8,500 of member dues on three days of hairstyling for Pringle. The fact that Pringle’s hairdo is worth more than many cars teachers take



to school underscores the [shocking disparity](#) between the benefits afforded NEA's leadership versus those afforded to its membership, including a salary for Pringle that is over eight times the salary of the average public school teacher.

Unwilling to cross the picket line of its staff union, the NEA canceled the remainder of its Representative Assembly and sent delegates to their hotels. Then, on July 7, it [locked](#) its staff out of work at its Washington, DC headquarters, cutting staff access to their work cell phones and accounts. Staff members even [accused](#) the NEA of canceling their return travel and hotel rooms, in essence stranding them on the streets of Philadelphia and forcing them to find their own way home.

Americans committed to responsible politics and student achievement owe the NEA's staff union a debt of gratitude for depriving the NEA the opportunity to vent its harmful agenda and demonize the education freedom and parental rights movement. But another important takeaway from this episode is that the NEA has offered state and local public education officials a valuable roadmap for dealing with teacher union strikes in their own districts. Such strikes, encouraged and financially underwritten by the NEA and AFT despite their illegality in many states, disrupt the lives of parents and, worse, block students from the opportunity to learn.<sup>1</sup>

In response to the NEA staff lockout, the staff union president characterized the NEA's moves as "clear union-busting techniques." Rather than indulge union strikes by allowing them to close schools, state and school district leaders facing strikes or similar moves by local NEA or AFT affiliates that threaten or block children's educational opportunities should take a page from the NEA's union-busting playbook in reopening school doors and putting students and teachers back in classrooms.

## Hypocrisy about Democracy

Both the NEA and the AFT pride themselves on being passionate defenders of democracy. The NEA proudly [claims](#) its Representative Assembly, with its 6,000 delegates, is "the world's largest democratic deliberative assembly." Both unions used their summer events to conflate democracy, which nearly all Americans recognize as a hallmark of civic virtue, with their own radical policy goals.

<sup>1</sup> As a resource to anyone concerned about the impact of teacher union strikes on student learning, DFI recently launched a Teacher Union Strike Tracker, available on our website at <https://dfipolicy.org/teacher-strikeracker/>, that maps strikes conducted across the country since 2010 by the NEA and AFT.



AFT and NEA heads Randi Weingarten and Becky Pringle deliver keynote addresses to their respective union conventions each year. This year’s speeches illuminate their priorities.

Rather than discuss how to improve education for America’s students, Pringle used her union’s largest stage to [bash](#) the Trump administration as “tyrannical, deceitful, and corrupt.” She railed against “the poisonous spores of a stacked Supreme Court” and condemned the former president for fulfilling his constitutional duty to nominate Supreme Court justices. Mistaking constitutional interpretation for partisanship, she claimed the Court would ensure Trump faces no consequences for what she called his “crimes against Americans and America.”

Not to be outdone, Weingarten stood before her union members and [said](#), “[T]he extremist, activist majority on the Supreme Court has rewritten the Constitution. . . . They have laid the legal foundation for American autocracy.”

Eager to jettison any discussion of teacher concerns, the union bosses instead embraced the left’s ongoing campaign to delegitimize the Supreme Court and its decisions rendered in accordance with limitations imposed by the Constitution and the rule of law. Apparently

now well-versed in the intricacies of constitutional and administrative law, Pringle criticized the Court’s ruling in *Loper Bright v. Raimondo*, which reversed decades of judicial deference to interpretations by federal agencies, and [railed](#) against the “MAGA Supreme Court.” Weingarten asked Congress essentially to undo the Court’s decision by passing a law assigning new powers to the federal agencies. Rather than respect the decisions of the Court, she later [claimed](#) that the ruling in *Trump v. United States*, which upheld presidential immunity for official acts, “tears at the fabric of our democracy.”

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Amid all the political rhetoric, these highly partisan speeches skipped the topics most important to rank-and-file union members and most essential to the future of education. Weingarten and Pringle neglected to mention test scores, which [show](#) American public-school students are failing to learn even basic reading, grammar, and math. Evidence of the failure of union-controlled government schooling is simply too inconvenient for the union bosses to admit. Weingarten lamented “high-stakes testing,” claiming that “projects, portfolios, and presentations”—all assignments graded subjectively and prone to teacher biases—“tell us so much more.”

Neither speech mentioned chronic absenteeism nor school discipline, both of which worsened severely in the wake of union-led school pandemic closures. Students fell out of the routine of going to school and behaving there. Now, missing students and misbehaving students are making it harder for teachers to teach and students to learn. Student behavior issues, including in-class violence, have become so prevalent that they are [driving](#) teachers to quit. Chronic absenteeism—when a student misses 10 percent or more of the days in a school year—remains at a post-pandemic high. An



estimate from the American Enterprise Institute, based on data from 39 states, [suggests](#) that more than one in four students were chronically absent from school in 2023. These serious problems took a backseat to politics in speeches from the union bosses.

Four times in her speech, and just weeks after an attempted assassination of former President Trump, Weingarten called school choice supporters “extremists.” She [claimed](#) that school choice advocates, and opponents of her broader political agenda, want to “dismantle our democracy” because they “oppose democracy itself.” Pringle brazenly [identified](#) her union with democracy during her keynote speech when she shouted to a cheering crowd, “To preserve our democracy, *we must win all the things!*” (emphasis added). There is no democracy in which one organization wins all the things. To believe the unions is to believe that anyone who disagrees with their anti-student, anti-parent, anti-education freedom agenda is a threat to the future of the country.

Nowhere are the public-sector unions’ anti-democratic methods better exemplified than Chicago, where the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU), an AFT affiliate, spent the summer negotiating for a \$50 billion contract. Among the CTU’s [demands](#) were taxpayer-funded gender transition treatments for CPS employees and their families, cash payments to illegal immigrants, eliminating police from schools, and conversion of school facilities to migrant shelters. Still ongoing at the time of publication, the negotiation process has been profoundly anti-democratic. The union hand-picked Mayor Brandon Johnson, a former AFT organizer, and [funded](#) his run for office. Mayor Johnson [appointed](#) all but one of the school board members, and he is now [attempting](#) to force out CPS CEO Pedro Martinez, since Martinez did not cave to the union’s demands. Under mounting pressure, the entire Chicago Board of Education [announced plans](#) to resign, after which Johnson could appoint new board members likely to oust the CEO and rubber-stamp the contract. This is a sign of things to come if the teacher unions “win all the things” and obtain complete power on a national scale.

At the national level, both unions have strongly supported policies that overreach federal authority and ignore their teacher members. When President Biden proposed term limits and a code of ethics for the Supreme Court, the plan was rejected as a brazen attempt to change the Supreme Court because the



president and his allies did not like its recent decisions. President Biden’s proposed constitutional amendment to end presidential immunity, which no member of Congress has yet introduced, would overturn the Supreme Court’s decision in *Trump v. United States*. The teacher unions did not hesitate to support a policy authored by a sitting president that would harm his challenger’s chances at winning an election. Both fell in line behind the idea, issuing supportive statements, just as they fell behind Vice President Kamala Harris in her presidential campaign. Pringle [hailed](#) the proposal as “a step toward that future” in which the Court “serve[s] the people, not corporations.” Not to be outdone, Weingarten [cheered](#) the reforms as a way to “reclaim the foundation stones of our democracy and constitutional republic.” She must have forgotten Article III of the Constitution, which requires life tenure for judges nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate.

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The unions are working to warp the tenets of American government to serve their own political ends. These efforts extend through the policy sphere and the classroom. Before Independence Day, the AFT promoted a [high school lesson plan](#) that encouraged students to write an essay declaring their personal independence from “anything that you wish to be free of,” with a recommended list of theoretical oppressors, including parents, siblings, school, and even clothes.

## Union Events as Campaign Stops

Although desperate to “win all the things,” the one thing unions want most is the White House. These self-proclaimed champions of democracy were quick to throw their support behind Vice President Harris, a candidate for whom no one had voted during the primaries. During her AFT Convention address, Weingarten touted the vice president’s record on consumer prices, gun control, and reproductive healthcare, but not education; she could only point to increased federal education spending, hardly an accomplishment. The AFT formally [endorsed](#) Harris one day after Biden dropped out of the race. Two days later, the NEA [followed suit](#).

Their reward: prime speaking opportunities on the main stage of the Democratic National Convention on the final night of the event. In front of an adoring crowd, Pringle [slammed](#) the Republican ticket as “not just wrong, but dangerous.” The union bosses lavished praise on Vice President Harris and Minnesota Governor Tim Walz, with no mention of what the ticket would do for students or parents.

Before the Democratic ticket shake-up and the ensuing new endorsements from the unions, President Biden had been scheduled to appear at the NEA’s Representative Assembly on Sunday, July 7. Two days before, in the midst of the staff union strike, he [cancelled](#) his speech on the grounds— one cannot make this up—that “he is a fierce supporter of unions and won’t cross a picket line,” according to a campaign spokesperson. The NEA’s staff union either caused President Biden to skip



the event or gave cover for him to drop out of a media-heavy event so soon after his now-infamous presidential debate appearance. Either way, the NEA lost its highest-profile speaker at the same time it lost control of its own convention.

The AFT Convention kicked off weeks later, after President Biden had dropped out of the presidential race. On cue, the AFT seamlessly swapped the vice president for the president. He had been slated to speak at its convention in Houston on July 25, but Vice President Harris stepped in and delivered one of her first major campaign speeches at the event. This was a major opportunity for the AFT, which must have known the speech would attract considerable media attention. But woke ideology threatened to derail the speech even before it started.

Weingarten knew that some AFT members were displeased with the Biden-Harris administration's actions related to the ongoing conflict in Gaza, but she could not take the political risk of protests or other disruptions interfering with the vice president's speech during the live, televised event. Weingarten thus took to the main stage the day prior to the speech and begged convention attendees not to protest in view of Harris or the media. "I'm asking all of us to use our moral obligation to each other," she said, "to not protest inside the hall." She noted that space would be available outside for protesting and argued that avoiding the optics of a protest against Harris at the AFT event was more important than the disagreement over foreign policy.

Weingarten appealed to delegates' own woke priorities in her plea for a protest-free event, highlighting Harris's sex and race as reason for disgruntled union members to set aside their complaints. "This is the first female African American AAPI candidate for the presidency of the United States," Weingarten said, to applause from the crowd. "Even if we disagree with something that she says, let's remember the press in the United States, that they will zero in on the disagreement instead of the broad swath of agreement there is."

The union's equity agenda runs so deep that it conflicted with the basic logistical requirements of hosting a high-level government official. Weingarten cautioned attendees about the Secret Service's need to check bags at the event entrance, saying, "We will try to have two lines, but that, on some levels, is also discriminatory, the line without bags and the line with bags, because you know disproportionately who's in the line without bags and the line with bags." Rather than concern herself with the safety of a high-ranking government official, just weeks after an assassination attempt on former President Trump, Weingarten feared that two security lines would create the appearance of discrimination.

Fortunately for Weingarten, the dissenters dutifully complied, and the speech went off without a peep. The vice president thanked Weingarten for being "an incredible friend and advisor," confirming the political intimacy between the White House and the AFT. Even AFT4Palestine, the union's pro-Palestine faction, wound up with something to celebrate from the Convention: Earlier in the week, AFT4Palestine [announced](#) it was "delighted to report" that "AFT has divested from all Israel bonds!" It is unclear how this move improves educational opportunities and outcomes for students.



Ted Eytan from Washington, DC, USA, CC BY-SA 2.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>, via Wikimedia Commons

## Condemning Israel, Promoting Strikes, and More

### THE NEA

As described above, foremost on the minds of delegates to the NEA and AFT summer meetings was using these events as platforms to attack Israel, particularly over its military response in Gaza to Hamas's October 7, 2023, slaughter of 1,200 people in Israel and its kidnapping of over 250 hostages. Several anti-Israel NBIs cleared the 50-delegate threshold for consideration on the floor of the NEA Representative Assembly, [including](#) NBIs on the following:

- requiring the NEA to use its resources to distinguish between “anti-Zionism” and anti-Semitism, downplaying the overlap between bias against and hatred of the Jewish people and opposition to the existence of the nation of Israel;
- extolling the virtues of the anti-Israel boycott, divestment, and sanctions (BDS) movement and its connections to the NEA and organized labor;
- pressuring companies to end any activities “involved in implementing Israel’s brutal and illegal siege” in Gaza and pushing governments “to stop all military trade with Israel”;
- calling on the NEA to compare the total amount the United States spends in support of “military actions of nations that are known to have bombed innocent people” versus the amount received by local education agencies or states to implement education programs for children with disabilities, as well as decrying how “[o]ur two-party system supports imperialism and capitalism”;
- pushing the NEA to oppose U.S. spending “to send weapons to the Israeli military that are used in genocide in Gaza”; and
- creating an NEA list of shame consisting of members of Congress who have accepted



donations from or been endorsed by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) or the Democratic Majority for Israel (DMFI), noting that the list would aid NEA members in opposing “political representation that harms communities of color.”

Outside of anti-Semitic and anti-Israel condemnations, other NBIs introduced for debate at the NEA Representative Assembly [included those](#):

- committing the NEA to help local affiliates prepare for strikes, though strikes by school staff harm students and are even illegal in many states;
- requiring the NEA to include on its website information about “State Anti-Trans Laws,” a label that activists derisively use to identify state laws protecting women’s and girls’ sports and prohibiting the teaching of gender ideology to young children;
- creating a task force to commit the NEA to policies furthering “Climate and Ecology Justice”;
- advancing “racial and social justice” in schools (read: critical race theory and DEI policies in every classroom);
- opposing state laws criminalizing the act of entering the United States illegally;
- informing the public regarding “the history and purpose of the Supreme Court in our system of constitutional government,” with the consistent opposition of NEA leadership to recent Supreme Court decisions, including one recent press release [referring](#) to the court’s “MAGA supermajority that helped suppress the vote, restricted the rights of workers, and made it harder to keep our communities safe from gun violence,” leaving little doubt as to the extreme ideological slant of such activities; and
- pushing to “integrate” school curricula “to facilitate comprehensive energy reduction, decarbonization, sustainability, and indoor air quality projects,” thus indoctrinating public school students in the left’s radical climate agenda.

In spite of the strike that shut down the NEA’s assembly early, union delegates still managed to [adopt](#) the first two NBIs listed above, preparing local affiliates for strikes and attacking state laws that reject public-school indoctrination in gender ideology. It is an alarming sign of the NEA’s harmful goals that, in addition to promoting sexualized lesson plans in elementary school classrooms, one of the NEA’s top priorities at this year’s gathering was to provide resources to help local affiliates shut down schools in the coming year and put the burden of these closures on students and their families.

The NEA staff strike’s disruption of the meeting caused the NEA to refer the remainder of the measures to its Board of Directors for consideration. This development adds to the NEA’s [considerable effort](#) to conceal the business of its “democratic” deliberations behind closed doors and may prevent us from ever knowing the outcome of these radical resolutions—a situation that is inexcusable for an organization that [holds](#) a congressionally granted charter and, more importantly,



heavily influences if not controls education policy in many school districts.

Due to the diligence of certain journalists and education advocates who [made](#) these NBIs public, we know this with certainty: a group of at least 50 delegates from local union affiliates across the country was responsible for these resolutions going to the floor and that, before and after its embarrassing staff strike, the NEA, in conducting “the world’s largest democratic deliberative assembly,” wanted to hide these measures from the public.

## THE AFT

As a group more traditionally associated with organized labor (*i.e.*, the AFL-CIO), the AFT does less to hide its activist aims and publishes the resolutions it adopts at its summer meetings on its website. Although this relative openness is refreshing—at least compared to the NEA—the aims of its resolutions adopted at its 2024 Convention are decidedly the opposite.

In contrast with the raft of anti-Israel resolutions introduced at the NEA’s assembly, the AFT [adopted](#) a single resolution calling for a bilateral ceasefire in Gaza. As part of the resolution, the organization attacks Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as “a major obstacle to achieving lasting peace, freedom and security,” and inappropriately meddles with Israeli electoral politics by calling for its voters to remove him from office in a new election.

Regardless of one’s views on Israel’s leadership, the main takeaway of this resolution is that the AFT is throwing its financial and political heft behind a foreign-affairs matter to appease portions of its membership that is more concerned with attacking Israel than with fixing the problems of America’s schools. The silver lining of this resolution is that the AFT’s fixation on the Gaza war means it has less time to push for disastrous education policies.

Other resolutions<sup>2</sup> adopted at the AFT’s convention include those:

- [blaming](#) state laws that support women’s and girls’ privacy in school bathrooms, ban the genital mutilation of minors, and restrict the teaching of gender ideology to elementary school students for “physical and psychological” attacks on LGBTQIA+ people;

<sup>2</sup> For a complete listing of constitutional amendments and resolutions proposed at AFT’s convention, see its 160-page booklet here: [https://www.iwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/proposed\\_book\\_final\\_for\\_posting-1.pdf](https://www.iwf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/proposed_book_final_for_posting-1.pdf).



- [opposing](#) public financial support to assist children in accessing any educational option other than a traditional, one-size-fits-all public school model;
- [attacking](#) private equity funds and committing the AFT to developing standards aimed at divesting public pension funds from these entities;
- [committing](#) the AFT to develop “culturally appropriate practices” and to lobby the U.S. Department of Education to develop “guidelines” regarding school discussions of Native Americans (ignoring that the Department is prohibited from prescribing curricula for schools on any subject);
- [criticizing](#) the Supreme Court’s recognition in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard* that the U.S. Constitution and Title VI prohibit race-based college admissions processes, despite [agreement](#) with the principle of colorblind admissions by a substantial majority of Americans, and supporting federal legislation to overturn the decision;
- [attacking](#) the legitimacy of the Supreme Court by accusing it of pushing a “conservative political agenda” and “undermining and eliminating” fundamental rights and [affirming](#) that “we know from recent decisions that the judiciary no longer operates independently of the executive branch offering no guarantee of impartiality”;
- [requiring](#) the AFT to help local affiliates prepare for strikes that bar students and teachers from the classroom;
- [committing](#) the AFT to “continue to advocate for equitable school environments that affirm student identities and include culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy and curriculum that is inclusive of multidiverse groups’ history, contributions and insights by providing local affiliates with regular opportunities for educators to support their cultural proficiency and professional growth” (which, decoded, means pushing teachers to include CRT in their lesson plans);
- [recognizing](#) that the proposed Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is in force even though the time limit for ratification passed over 40 years ago;
- [opposing](#) standardized tests used to determine whether learning is actually occurring in schools without proposing any reasonable alternatives;
- [supporting](#) the weaponization of public pension funds in support of the environmental, social, and governance (ESG) agenda, thus putting at risk the retirement of millions of teachers and other public workers;
- [aimed](#) at indoctrinating young people in leftist environmental ideology using “robust,

meaningful, interdisciplinary climate-change and climate-justice curricula with the goal of preparing students to participate productively and responsibly in a rapidly changing world, and in emerging green, sustainable professions”; and

- [calling](#) for local union affiliates to coordinate their contract expirations for May 1, 2028, for the purpose of orchestrating a devastating mass strike on that date and holding students (and many others) hostage to advance a radical cause of “racial, economic and social justice,” a strategy and ultimate goal emanating directly from Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto*.

The troubling disconnect between these resolutions and the classroom highlights that the AFT [is not](#) merely a K–12 teacher union, as its name misleadingly implies, but rather a conglomerate of unions, including healthcare workers, Planned Parenthood staff, college and university employees, and many other government bureaucrats who have nothing to do with schools. In fact, the AFT’s Public Education unit is only [one of its six divisions](#). This explains why the focus of the AFT and its summer meetings goes far beyond any interests of its teacher members—to the extent it addresses those interests at all—and instead focuses on growing and consolidating union power and using its political heft and dues-funded financial resources to influence policy at the highest levels of government. Specifically, the AFT’s alarming resolution in favor of a mass strike in 2028 should serve as a wakeup call for every reasonable American to come together to try to curb the influence of this harmful organization.

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## Conclusion

Yet again, the NEA’s and AFT’s summer meetings have shown that their interests are not in helping America’s skilled, dedicated teachers maximize their potential and contribute to student achievement, but rather in growing their political power at the expense of their chosen enemies, including the Supreme Court, parents who wish to take an active role in their children’s schooling, and anyone who supports education freedom for students and families. The NEA’s civil wars between its leadership and staff and between those who support Israel’s right to defend itself and those who do not, and both unions’ calls for strikes that harm children, lay bare the fact that the union bosses are not on the same page as their rank-and-file membership, most of which is politically moderate and much of which is center-right or even conservative.

It is past time for teachers to recognize that the AFT and NEA do not represent their interests and to stop allowing these unions to access a portion of their hard-earned paychecks to pursue their radical agendas. And it is past time for those who care about the future of America’s public schools to awaken to the existential danger these unions pose to America’s children and our country’s future.

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