

# Hope in Dark Times

Resisting the Threat to Democracy with Union Activism



The photos here and on the following pages show protests that have occurred since the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency. Many labor union members have participated in these events, including the Women's March on Washington in January and the March for Science in April, as well as protests at various airports against Trump's proposed Muslim ban.

BY RICHARD D. KAHLBERG

**D**emocracy is in crisis across the globe. For years, polling in the United States and Europe has suggested an alarming rise in the number of young people who believe democracy is a bad way to run a society.<sup>1</sup> Democracy is in retreat in Russia, Hungary, India, Venezuela,

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and the Philippines. And in November, the unthinkable happened, as nearly half of American voters elected a president who has consistently disregarded democratic constitutional norms such as freedom of the press, freedom of religion, and the independence of the judiciary—norms that until now had been broadly accepted by members of both major political parties. That president, Donald J. Trump, is now seeking to weaken other pillars of our democracy, including public education and free trade unions.

Historically, teachers unions have played a special role in strengthening democratic cultures, and they are urgently called on to do so again. What is needed now more than ever is a "social justice unionism" that goes beyond the narrow self-interest of members in bargaining for better wages and benefits to also engage in critical fights for public schooling, trade unionism, and civil rights at home and abroad. This movement needs to not only fiercely resist bad ideas but also offer a new, vibrant, inclusive vision that can be a model for people who champion democratic values across the globe.

## The Crisis in American Democracy

While opposing parties have often chided presidential candidates for watering down constitutional norms, Trump's candidacy was different. Fellow Republicans repeatedly had to distance themselves from their own standard-bearer for flouting essential democratic values. Michael Gerson, a former speechwriter for President George W. Bush, said that, in Trump, "we have reached the culmination of the founders' fears: Democracy is producing a genuine threat to the American form of self-government."<sup>2</sup> Peter Wehner, another veteran Republican official, wrote of Trump's candidacy: "The founders, knowing history and human nature, took great care to devise a system that would prevent demagogues and those with authoritarian tendencies from rising up in America. That system has been extraordinarily successful. We have never before faced the prospect of a political strongman becoming president. Until now."<sup>3</sup> (To understand how tyranny in European history can inform our country's current political climate, see page 17.)

Consider how, once elected, Trump has continued to challenge democratic values with alarming frequency:

- **Freedom of religion.** The First Amendment provides for the free exercise of religion, yet during the campaign, Trump proposed a religious test on immigration, calling for "a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States." Once in office, Trump asked former New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani to craft a version of his Muslim ban, which itself has been challenged in the courts.
- **Freedom of the press and undermining facts.** The free press is essential for holding government officials accountable, which is why the U.S. Supreme Court, more than a half century ago, suggested special protection from libel suits brought by public figures.<sup>4</sup> During the campaign, however, Trump promised to "open up" the nation's libel laws.<sup>5</sup> Once elected, Trump described members of the press as "enemies of the people," a phrase used by Joseph Stalin and other dictators. He also sought to discredit the press by claiming that they engage in "fake news," a technique used by autocrats in other countries.
- **An independent judiciary.** During the campaign and the early months of his presidency, Trump repeatedly attacked the federal judiciary, which in the founders' vision represented a coequal and independent branch of government. He famously criticized a federal judge presiding over a lawsuit against Trump University, suggesting an Indiana-born jurist of Mexican heritage, Gonzalo Curiel, was incapable of being neutral in the suit because of Trump's position on illegal immigration. When Trump's travel ban on individuals from a number of Muslim-majority countries was successfully challenged in court, Trump demeaned the author of the ruling as a "so-called judge," which Trump's own Supreme Court nominee, Neil Gorsuch, disavowed.
- **Scapagoating minorities and women.** More generally, Trump has used the classic tactic of demagogues seeking to enhance their own power by whipping up animosity against society's minorities. He has focused mostly on Muslims and immigrants from Mexico, whom he broad-brushed as "rapists." He chose as vice president Indiana's governor, Mike Pence, who came to national fame for rolling back the rights of LGBTQ (lesbian, gay,

bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning) communities. The founders warned against a "tyranny of the majority" that overrode the rights of minorities. While some of the founders were particularly concerned about left-wing populism that targeted property owners, Trump's right-wing populism was even more insidious, fixating on elite liberals who allegedly "coddled minorities."<sup>6</sup> Trump has also objectified women throughout his life and held them in such low regard that he bragged of his ability to commit sexual assault with impunity.

- **Seeking to undermine respect for election results.** In the third presidential debate with Hillary Clinton, Trump astounded observers by refusing to say he would respect the results of the election, a hallmark of American democracy for centuries. After the election, he made a baseless claim about Clinton's victory in the popular vote, charging without evidence that millions of undocumented individuals had voted illegally.

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- **A preference for authoritarians.** During the campaign, Trump showered admiration on Vladimir Putin, at one point saying the Russian dictator was "a leader far more than our leader." Russian chess champion Garry Kasparov responded, "Vladimir Putin is a strong leader in the same way that arsenic is a strong drink."<sup>7</sup> Trump also expressed admiration for Iraq's dictator Saddam Hussein, Kim Jong Un of North Korea, and the Chinese leaders behind the Tiananmen Square massacre.<sup>8</sup> "There is no precedent for what Trump is saying," noted former Mitt Romney adviser Max Boot. "George McGovern was not running around saying 'what a wonderful guy Ho Chi Minh is!'"<sup>9</sup> In a stunning postelection interview with Bill O'Reilly, Trump answered a question about Putin's murders by asking, "What, you think our country's so innocent?" Republican Senator John McCain denounced the president for "flirting with authoritarianism and romanticizing it as our moral equivalent."<sup>10</sup>

Trump has exhibited a number of other traits typical of authoritarians: expressing impatience with the rule of law (advocating torture and the murder of families of suspected terrorists); celebrating the violence of the mob (suggesting protestors be "carried out in a stretcher"); endorsing the possibility of imprisoning his political opponent ("lock her up"); and generally suggesting that, like a Central American strongman, he was uniquely situated to rescue the nation ("I alone can fix it").



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These developments came on top of long-standing threats to our democracy from state voter suppression efforts that target low-income and minority communities and from the U.S. Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision to amplify the already outsized voice of wealthy corporations. Trump's presidency is likely to accelerate both disturbing trends.

In this context, President Trump's agenda to privatize public schools and attack labor unions—although staples of conservatism for a generation—takes on a more menacing character. Indeed, attacks on public education and trade unions, pillars of our democracy, need to be viewed as just as troubling as attacks on the independence of the judiciary, the free press, and religious freedom.

### The Privatization of Public Education

In the 2016 presidential campaign, Trump campaigned on a program to employ \$20 billion in federal funds for block grants to promote school choice, including private school vouchers.<sup>11</sup> Trump's education secretary, Betsy DeVos, has been an ardent champion of private school vouchers.<sup>12</sup> She "has spent decades—and many millions—lobbying to destabilize and defund public schools," notes Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers.<sup>13</sup> The administration's first budget pro-

posal included \$1.4 billion in new funds as a down payment on an ultimate plan for \$20 billion in annual spending.<sup>14</sup> Other press reports suggest the administration is considering a proposal to devote up to \$20 billion to create the nation's first federal tax credit program to support students attending private schools.<sup>15</sup>

Although a less transparent threat to public school funding than a direct voucher, the tax proposal, notes Sasha Pudelski of AASA, the School Superintendents Association, is "a backdoor voucher." She observes, "The end result is the same—federal tax dollars going to private schools."<sup>16</sup> Either form of privatization—a direct private school voucher or a private school tax credit—would weaken a central feature of American democracy.

Since the founding of public education in the United States, public schools have been charged not only with giving future workers skills for the private marketplace, but also with preparing students to be citizens in a democracy. The founders of our country were deeply concerned with finding ways to ensure that their new democracy, which provided ultimate sovereignty to the collective views of average citizens through voting, not fall prey to demagogues. The problem of the demagogue, the founders believed, was endemic to democracy.<sup>17</sup>

One answer to the threat of demagogues and rule by the "mob" in a democracy, the founders suggested, was America's elaborate constitutional system of checks and balances that distributes power among different branches of government. But education provided a second fundamental bulwark against demagogues. Thomas Jefferson argued that general education was necessary to "enable every man to judge for himself what will secure or endanger his freedom."<sup>18</sup> The founders wanted voters to be intelligent in order to discern serious leaders of high character from con men who do not have the nation's interests at heart.

Beyond that, public education in the United States was also meant to instill a love of liberal democracy: a respect for the separation of powers, for a free press and free religious exercise, and for the rights of political minorities. The founder of American public schooling, 19th-century Massachusetts educator Horace Mann, saw public education as fundamental to democracy. "A republican form of government, without intelligence in the people, must be, on a vast scale, what a mad-house, without superintendent or keepers, would be on a small one."<sup>19</sup>

The centrality of public education to American democracy was not just the quaint belief of 18th- and 19th-century leaders. In 1938, when dangerous demagogues were erecting totalitarian regimes in many parts of the world, President Franklin D. Roosevelt noted: "Democracy cannot succeed unless those who express their choice are prepared to choose wisely. The real safeguard of democracy, therefore, is education."<sup>20</sup>

And in a 1952 Supreme Court case, Justice Felix Frankfurter, noting the central role of public schools in our system of self-governance, said teachers should be regarded "as the priests of our democracy."<sup>21</sup> All nations, the late historian Paul Gagnon noted, provide an excellent education to "those who are expected to run the country," and the quality of that education "cannot be far from what everyone in a democracy needs to know."<sup>22</sup>

A system of private school vouchers and tax credits jeopardizes this whole vision on several levels: private school voucher programs have in some cases reduced academic achievement (which could produce less-discerning voters); they are not democratically con-

trolled (and therefore don't model democracy for students); private schools receiving vouchers aren't open to all students in the way that public schools are and could further segregate students (undercutting the democratic message that we are all equal); and, worst of all, they are not even designed to promote democratic values.

Private school vouchers are sold as a way for parents to handpick schools that reinforce the values taught at home, but a democracy requires critical thinkers who are exposed to new ideas and think creatively about competing points of view. As an empirical matter, moreover, vouchers have failed to raise academic achievement, and student performance sometimes slides backward. In a nation where large proportions of students already have trouble distinguishing "fake news" from the real thing, we can hardly afford to reduce academic skills.<sup>23</sup>

Martin Carnoy of Stanford University recently published a report summarizing the evidence of voucher programs from Milwaukee, Cleveland, New York City, Washington, D.C., Florida, Chile, and India and concluded that "research does not show that vouchers significantly improve student achievement."<sup>24</sup> The most recent studies are the most damning. As Kevin Carey of New America notes, the newest research on voucher programs in Indiana, Louisiana, and Ohio shows negative results for students.<sup>25</sup> Tulane University's Douglas Harris points out that in Louisiana, for example, "students who participated in the voucher program had declines in achievement test scores of 8 to 16 percentile points."<sup>26</sup>

Private schools also fail to model for students the democratic decision making that public schools do. Conservatives in recent years have tried to redefine "public" education as any form of education, including private schools, that receives taxpayer funds.<sup>27</sup> But unlike public schools, private schools are not democratically controlled and so do not model for students the give and take of democracy.<sup>28</sup> As journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones notes, for the ancient Athenians and Romans, "'Public' stood not just for how something was financed—with the tax dollars of citizens—but for a communal ownership of institutions and for a society that privileged the common good over individual advancement."<sup>29</sup>

Another part of being public is providing democratic access. Public schools take all comers and cannot discriminate based on a student's religion or other factors. By contrast, in North Carolina, as Century Foundation policy associate Kimberly Quick has documented, publicly funded vouchers have been used to support schools that openly discriminate based on religion and sexual orientation.<sup>30</sup>

For example, Fayetteville Christian School received more than \$285,000 in taxpayer funding in 2015–2016 even though the school declares in its student handbook that it "will not admit families that belong to or express faith in non-Christian religions such as, but not limited to: Mormons (LDS Church), Jehovah's Witnesses, Muslims (Islam), non-Messianic Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, etc." The school also says it "will not admit families that engage in illegal drug use,

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sexual promiscuity, homosexuality (LGBT) or other behaviors that Scripture defines as deviate and perverted."<sup>31</sup> Using public funds to educate students in religiously segregated institutions, as political theorist Amy Gutmann has noted, may undercut one of the central lessons of democracy: that in America, students of very different backgrounds can learn in a common space how to navigate and negotiate difference, as we do in the democratic process.<sup>32</sup>

### The Assault on Labor Unions

Trump's attacks on labor unions are also deeply troubling for democracy. Although Trump promoted himself as the candidate of the forgotten American worker, and he won white union households without college-degree holders by a 12-point margin, he has embraced a consistently anti-labor agenda.<sup>33</sup> As my Century Foundation colleague Moshe Marvit notes, Trump's early labor record suggests that "he may be worse than any president in recent memory."<sup>34</sup>

Trump has filled his Cabinet with billionaires "who have spent their careers attacking workers and government," Marvit notes. Trump's initial nominee to head the Labor Department, Andrew Puzder, told a reporter he liked replacing employees with robots because: "They're always polite, they always upsell, they never take a vacation, they never show up late, there's never a slip-and-fall, or an age, sex or race discrimination case."<sup>35</sup> Trump has appointed an individual to the U.S. Supreme Court, Neil Gorsuch, who has generally sided with corporations against workers and





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may well provide the deciding vote to strip public sector unions of their ability to collect dues from “free riders”—employees who benefit from collective bargaining but do not wish to pay for it. Doing so would deal a crippling blow to public sector unions, a vibrant sector of America’s declining labor movement.<sup>36</sup> Public sector unions dodged a bullet when the Supreme Court, after the death of Justice Antonin Scalia, deadlocked on *Friedrichs v. California Teachers Association* in 2016. But conservatives are hoping a new case, *Janus v. AFSCME*, will provide a second bite at the apple with Gorsuch on board.

The assault on organized labor is deeply troubling in part because labor unions, along with the civil rights movement, can be “architects of democracy,” in the words of Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>37</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the thriving civic associations that keep American democracy vitalized, and for the past century, unions have been a critical part of that framework. Recognizing the important role of unions in liberal democracies, the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights provides in Article 23 that “Everyone has the right to form and join trade unions for the protection of his interests.”

In 1980, President Ronald Reagan championed the role of Polish unions in challenging dictatorial rule by the Communist Party. Reagan declared in a Labor Day speech that year, “Where free

unions and collective bargaining are forbidden, freedom is lost.” The late AFT President Albert Shanker saw a pattern in authoritarian regimes. “There is no freedom or democracy without trade unions,” he noted. “The first thing a dictator does is to get rid of the trade unions.”<sup>38</sup> Indeed, when the United States attempts to plant the seeds of democracy in other countries, free trade unions are critical elements of what we advocate.

For one thing, democracies need a strong middle class, and unions help create shared prosperity. In America after the Great Depression, strong unions helped build the middle class, and they continue to have a positive effect on ameliorating extreme inequalities of wealth. Research finds, for example, that unions compress wage differences between management and labor. According to one study, “controlling for variation in human resource practices, unionized establishments have on average a 23.2 percentage point lower manager-to-worker pay ratio relative to non-union workplaces.”<sup>39</sup> By the same token, as the Center for American Progress’s David Madland has vividly illustrated, the decline in union density in the United States between 1969 and 2009 has been accompanied by a strikingly similar decline in the share of income going to the middle class (the middle three-fifths of the income distribution).

Civic organizations that are run democratically can also be an important mechanism for acculturating citizens to the inner workings of democracy. Unions are among the most important of these organizations, bringing together rank-and-file workers from a variety of ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds, and serving as what Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam calls “schools for democracy.” Union members learn skills that are essential to a well-functioning democracy: how to run meetings, debate one another, and organize for political action.<sup>40</sup> Labor unions can also help create a culture of participation among workers. Being involved in workplace decisions and the give-and-take of collective bargaining, voting on union contracts, and voting for union leadership have all been called important drivers of “democratic acculturation.”<sup>41</sup>

In addition, union members routinely engage in civic activities, such as staffing phone banks and canvassing voters door to door. This involvement can boost civic participation among union members and nonmembers alike. One study found that for every 1-percentage-point increase in a state’s union density, voter turnout increased between 0.2 and 2.5 percentage points. In a presidential election, a 10-percentage-point increase in union density could translate into 3 million more voters.<sup>42</sup> Likewise, research shows that unions played an important role in countering “an authoritarian streak” among working-class voters. Sociologist and political scientist Seymour Martin Lipset found that organized labor made workers more inclined to embrace democratic norms by inculcating “civic virtues in its members.”<sup>43</sup>

### Social Justice Unionism and the AFT

Given the extraordinary threats facing our democracy, unions must not limit themselves to their traditional bread-and-butter work of negotiating better wages and benefits for members. The times demand a social justice unionism that resists the Trump agenda on an array of fronts: privatization of schools, union bashing, and cutbacks on civil rights at home and human rights abroad. But in this difficult era, social justice unionism also needs to promote a forward-looking agenda that includes making public

schools more democratic, fighting to expand union organizing rights at the state and local levels, and adopting an approach on civil rights and diversity that is more inclusive.

The resistance to Trump’s anti-democratic agenda has already begun, and the AFT has been a central player—joining the 2017 Women’s March the day after the inauguration, where the crowd was so big that people couldn’t move, and supporting the large numbers who flocked to airports in response to Trump’s travel ban. We have seen judges stand up to Trump’s unconstitutional restriction on travel, and the press stand up to the administration’s attempt to intimidate them. We’ve seen Muslims raise money to rebuild Jewish cemeteries that were vandalized, and Jews, such as AFT President Randi Weingarten, committing to register as Muslims if Trump moves forward on his pernicious proposal for a registry. But these early promising developments must be sustained over the long haul.

The AFT has a special history upon which it can draw at this moment of democratic crisis. There are other labor unions that represent workers, and there are other organizations that represent teachers. But only the AFT stands directly at the intersection of public education and the trade union movement, both of which are so essential to the survival of democracy.

Throughout its 100-year history, the AFT has epitomized social justice unionism. That was true when early AFT members created the union’s motto: “Democracy in education; education for democracy.” It was true in the 1950s, when the AFT was the only education organization that filed an amicus brief to overturn segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. And it is true today, under Weingarten’s fight for “solution-driven unionism” that emphasizes the importance of teachers connecting with the communities they serve.<sup>44</sup>

Through a third of the AFT’s history—the 33 years from 1964–1997—Al Shanker lived and breathed social justice unionism as president of the AFT and United Federation of Teachers (UFT) in New York City. As I explain in my 2007 biography, *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles Over Unions, Schools, Race, and Democracy*,<sup>45</sup> Shanker believed that teachers unions could be at

the forefront of promoting a more democratic society in three distinct ways: by not only fighting for better wages and benefits for members, but also getting involved in politics and leading coalitions of educators to defend public education; by representing teachers, but also being part of the larger trade union movement that represents sheet metal workers, farm workers, and nurses; and by participating in larger progressive movements for civil rights at home and human rights abroad.\*

Today, social justice unionism could update and expand on this proud history in three key areas. Simultaneously playing defense and offense, unions should be (1) fighting privatization and making sure public schools are more democratic; (2) defending unions from federal attack and championing state and local efforts to strengthen organized labor; and (3) supporting civil rights at home

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and human rights internationally, and extending notions of diversity to be more inclusive of disadvantaged people of all races.

### 1. Strengthening Public Schools to Promote Democracy

Although public schools do a much better job of promoting democratic values than do private schools under a system of vouchers, social justice unionism should do more than just fight against privatization. In “Putting Democracy Back into Public Education,” former schools superintendent Clifford Janey and I outline a four-part strategy for making public schools more democratic: improving our civics curriculum, promoting school integration,<sup>†</sup> supporting community schools,<sup>‡</sup> and enhancing teacher voice.

The first of these approaches addresses the “explicit curriculum” students are taught, while the last three influence the “implicit curriculum” of what students observe about their school environments. Do students have access to economically and racially integrated schools where they are treated equally, or are they segregated into separate and unequal schools or tracks



\*For more on Shanker, see “Albert Shanker’s Tough Liberalism” in the Summer 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/summer2008/kahlenberg](http://www.aft.org/ae/summer2008/kahlenberg).

†For more on school integration, see “From All Walks of Life” in the Winter 2012–2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/winter2012-2013/kahlenberg](http://www.aft.org/ae/winter2012-2013/kahlenberg).

‡For more on community schools, see “Where It All Comes Together” in the Fall 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/blank\\_villarreal](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2015/blank_villarreal).



## Civics classes must not only emphasize an understanding of history and government but also be a venue for learning the skills of citizenship.

within schools? Are the voices of parents and community members heard as a part of decision making, or do state takeovers and billionaire philanthropists who bankroll reform efforts call the shots? Are teachers involved in determining how schools are run, or do autocratic principals boss them around? These are all critical questions, because no matter what the explicit curriculum says about democracy, as union leader Adam Urbanski has noted, “You cannot teach what you do not model.”

### Strengthening History and Civics

To begin with, schools must do a much better job of directly enhancing students’ appreciation for liberal democratic values through the curriculum. Exposure to existing civics classes is not enough. Ninety-seven percent of 12th-grade students already report taking a civics or government class in high school.<sup>46</sup> State policies on civics have not been found to be associated with greater informed political participation by young adults.<sup>47</sup>

But quality of instruction does matter. Research finds that “done right, school-based civic education can have a significant impact on civic knowledge,” notes William Galston of the Brookings Institution’s Governance Studies Program, and that such knowledge, in

turn, “enhances support for democratic principles and virtues, promotes political participation, helps citizens better understand the impact of public policy on their concerns, gives citizens the framework they need to absorb and understand new civic information, and reduces generalized mistrust and fear of public life.”<sup>48</sup>

In 2003, the Albert Shanker Institute outlined a strategy for civics education that remains compelling today. The blueprint was endorsed by a wide variety of civil rights advocates, business and labor leaders, and public officials from various ideological backgrounds, who were all committed to supporting democratic values. Signatories included progressives such as Bill Clinton, Henry Cisneros, Wade Henderson, John Lewis, and Richard Riley, but also conservatives such as Frederick Hess, Harvey Mansfield, and Norman Podhoretz.<sup>49</sup>

The group eschewed relativism by declaring their conviction “that democracy is the worthiest form of human governance ever conceived.” They went on to suggest that because we are not born democrats, “we cannot take its survival or its spread—or its perfection in practice—for granted. We must transmit to each generation the political vision of liberty and equality that unites us as Americans, and a deep loyalty to the political institutions put together to fulfill that vision.”

The group outlined a strategy that called for a robust history/social studies curriculum, starting in the elementary years and continuing through every year of schooling; a full and honest teaching of the American story; an unvarnished account of what life has been and is like in nondemocratic societies; and a cultivation of the virtues essential to a healthy democracy.

Critically, civics classes must not only emphasize an understanding of history and government but also be a venue for learning the skills of citizenship, sometimes referred to as action civics. A 2014 report of the Education Commission of the States and the National Center for Learning and Civic Engagement provides important guidelines on practices that can make for effective civics learning.<sup>50</sup> The groups suggest incorporating discussions of current issues—such as global warming, gun control, racial profiling, and immigration—into the classroom to make civics feel relevant to the lives of young people. According to the report, service projects and extracurricular activities, such as speech and debate clubs and school newspapers, should be encouraged. Most importantly, students should be given the opportunity to participate in school governance. In New York, for example, students took on a project to reverse budget cuts to programs they deemed important—and won.

### School Integration

Social justice unionism should also renew the fight for school integration by class and race, rather than accepting segregation as given, as much of the education reform movement does. As the *New York Times’s* Hannah-Jones has noted, segregation undercuts the public nature of public schools, and undercuts the claim that public schools are “open to all comers.”<sup>51</sup> By contrast, efforts to promote socioeconomic and racial integration of schools strengthen the health of our democracy because integrated schools: underline the democratic message that, in America, we are all political equals; promote tolerance and acceptance and make demagogic appeals that scapegoat minorities less likely to be effective; and raise educational attainment, which, in turn, is directly correlated with democratic participation rates.

One key principle undergirding American democracy is that we all have not only an equal vote in elections but also an equal right to feel a part of the nation's democratic heritage. Because Americans are bound not by blood but by a set of democratic ideals, everyone—no matter what race or national origin or religion or length of time in this country—can lay equal claim to the ideas of Jefferson and Madison and Washington, as Ta-Nehisi Coates and others have noted.<sup>52</sup> When American schoolchildren are educated in what are effectively apartheid schools—divided by race and class—the democratic message of equal political rights and heritage is severely undermined.

Likewise, demagogues can better inflame passions against those they deem as “others”—Muslims, Mexican immigrants, or African Americans, for example—when there are large audiences who do not personally know many members of these groups, partly because they were raised in communities and schools that were almost exclusively white and Christian. The profound lesson of the gay rights movement, for example, is that only when gay Americans openly came out as neighbors, coworkers, and classmates did efforts to demonize homosexuals lose their potency. So too, a large body of research finds that integrated schools can reduce prejudice and racism that stem from ignorance and lack of personal contact.<sup>53</sup> As Justice Thurgood Marshall noted in a 1974 case, “Unless our children begin to learn together, then there is little hope that our people will ever learn to live together.”<sup>54</sup>

Providing an excellent, integrated education also promotes democracy by improving educational attainment, which increases political participation. Controlling for family socioeconomic status and academic achievement, a 2013 longitudinal study found that students attending socioeconomically integrated schools are as much as 70 percent more likely to graduate from high school and enroll in a four-year college than those attending high-poverty schools.<sup>55</sup> Political philosopher Danielle Allen has suggested that denying an adequate education to low-income and minority students, as we routinely do, is another form of “voter suppression,” given the strong correlation between educational attainment and

voter participation. In 2012, Census data show that 72 percent of adults with a bachelor's degree or more voted, compared with less than 32 percent of those with less than a high school diploma.<sup>56</sup>

Although school integration may seem a lost cause in the era of Trump, most plans are locally driven. In fact, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg (North Carolina) school board unanimously adopted a school diversity plan for its magnet schools the day after Trump's election. Today, 100 school districts and charter schools consciously consider socioeconomic status as a factor in student assignment, up from two in 1996.<sup>57</sup> In 2001, for example, Cambridge, Massachusetts, adopted a plan to produce economic diversity through public school choice. The schools have also proven remarkably integrated

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by race. Graduation rates in Cambridge for low-income, African American, and Latino students are as much as 20 percentage points higher than in nearby Boston.

### Community Schools and Community Input

Where it is not possible to integrate schools, social justice unionism should fight for the wraparound services that can make community schools effective. Doing so will provide students the supports they need to succeed, and it will also promote our democracy. As David Kirp of the University of California, Berkeley, has noted, well-fed and healthy students are more likely to be active participants in our democracy.<sup>58</sup>

Likewise, in both integrated and nonintegrated environments, social justice unionism should fight for greater parental and community input into how schools are run. While some market-oriented education reformers have advocated for state takeovers of struggling school districts, those efforts are rarely effective and they undercut democratic norms, as the Schott Foundation's John Jackson has observed.<sup>59</sup> It is important to ask: Do students see that parents and community members have input on key issues such as where new schools are built, or does a remote state actor or outside consultant make these decisions unilaterally?

In the years before District of Columbia schools Chancellor Michelle Rhee implemented her motto that “collaboration is overrated,” for example, district schools took a more democratic approach. In 2004, Clifford Janey created the D.C. Education Compact (DCED), made up of government leaders, community activists, foundation officials, business leaders, teachers, unions, and concerned citizens, to be part of a dialogue for improving





## Social justice unionism can make schools more democratic by enhancing teacher voice and modeling workplace democracy.

education and informing the district’s strategic plan. The group was given major responsibility for adopting a version of the highly rated Massachusetts standards and accountability system in D.C. Rhee subsequently disbanded the DCED.

Meanwhile, in Saint Paul, Minnesota, teachers have worked with parents to be more inclusive in decision making.\* Parents often felt excluded from important decisions made in collective bargaining agreements between teachers and management, and in preparation for 2011 negotiations, the Saint Paul teachers union sought to remedy that concern. The union met with parents to find out what sort of provisions they would like to see in the union-district contract and incorporated community goals into the bargaining process. In the negotiations, teachers sought smaller class sizes, less standardized testing, and the hiring of librarians, nurses, social workers, and counselors to better serve students. Although management initially rebuffed these concerns, calling them a matter of management prerogative, community support of a threatened teachers strike allowed the community and educators to prevail on the key issues at stake.

\*For more on the story of Saint Paul, see “All Hands on Deck” and “Connecting with Students and Families through Home Visits” in the Fall 2015 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2015](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2015).

### Modeling Democracy through Teacher Voice and Democratic Control

Finally, social justice unionism can make schools more democratic by enhancing teacher voice and modeling workplace democracy. In our schools, do students see that teachers are part of democratic decision making, or is power concentrated in a single person—the principal? Are democratically elected teacher union leaders key players, or are they publicly denigrated? What do students observe?

Toledo, Ohio, for example, has pioneered peer assistance and review programs for teachers. In Toledo, expert teachers from other schools work with struggling teachers in the same fields, seeking to provide assistance where possible but ultimately recommending termination of employment in certain circumstances.† This system enhances the role of teachers and also provides a credible answer to the charge that unions protect incompetent teachers. In practice, teachers have been even tougher on colleagues than administrators have been in several jurisdictions, from Cincinnati, Ohio, to Montgomery County, Maryland.<sup>60</sup> And in places that have peer review—where teachers, like professors, doctors, and lawyers, have a strong say in how their profession is regulated—students see workplace democracy in action.

In Newark, New Jersey; Henderson, Minnesota; and elsewhere, teachers extend the democratic principle of peer review in the area of dismissals to virtually every realm of school affairs. Teachers make decisions about hiring, curriculum, scheduling, and many other facets of schooling that are left to principals in most schools. At teacher cooperatives such as Minnesota New Country School in Henderson and Avalon School in Saint Paul, for example, teachers are given unparalleled say in running their schools. “Twenty-four brains are undoubtedly more powerful and smarter than one,” said one teacher at Avalon. The schools perform well academically, and the emphasis on democracy and collaboration filters through to students.<sup>61</sup>

## 2. Strengthening Labor Unions

As with public education, social justice unionism needs to fight rear-guard actions against right-wing federal and state efforts to weaken organized labor, and simultaneously promote a forward-looking agenda to advance labor rights in progressive states and localities where such action is possible.

Given federal resistance to labor law reform, journalist Harold Meyerson notes, state and local efforts have grown more popular among progressives over the past several years. In 2010, activist Ai-jen Poo worked in New York to pass a state-level Domestic Workers’ Bill of Rights that protects them from harassment and guarantees paid sick days, and in 2013, union leader David Rolf and others helped set off a series of victories for a \$15 minimum wage beginning in SeaTac, the working-class suburb of Seattle that is home to the airport.<sup>62</sup> These efforts represent important innovations that should be replicated, but they need to be supplemented by efforts to improve the ability of labor to organize. It is a big step forward to increase the minimum wage to bring the working poor into the working class, for example, but we also need organized labor to move working-class Americans

†For more on peer assistance and review, see “Taking the Lead” in the Fall 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at [www.aft.org/ae/fall2008/goldstein](http://www.aft.org/ae/fall2008/goldstein).

into the middle class. Likewise, winning legislation for domestic workers produces important gains but does not create a financially self-sustaining model akin to that provided by dues-paying union members.

A number of progressives, including David Madland and Andrew Stern, are arguing that in the era of Trump, labor should take its fight for labor law reform to friendly states and localities.<sup>63</sup> One idea is to amend state and local laws that protect individuals from discrimination to include those who are fired for trying to organize a union—thereby discouraging employers from using a tactic that has effectively killed countless unionizing drives.<sup>64</sup> Conservative opponents of labor unions have long understood the way in which “rights” resonate with American voters, which is why they have cloaked state-level anti-worker legislation in the duplicitous language of “right to work.” The great advances in liberal legislation over the past half century have repeatedly invoked individual rights: women’s rights, civil rights, and gay rights. As each of these movements has demonstrated, the rhetoric of individual rights can be harnessed to promote the collective good of groups.

State-level efforts to promote civil rights for labor face an important impediment: courts have held that the Wagner Act preempts state and local labor legislation for employees covered by the National Labor Relations Act. But more than 25 million employees are not covered by the act, and they could benefit from making labor organizing a civil right. These noncovered employees include 19.2 million state and local employees, 2.8 million civilian federal workers, 2.7 million agricultural laborers, and more than 700,000 domestic workers. Though many states have statutes that protect public employees’ rights to organize and bargain collectively, we have seen broad attempts to erode these rights over recent years. Furthermore, public employees in many states do not have the legal right to organize and bargain collectively.<sup>65</sup>

Making labor organizing a civil right at the state and local levels for these groups could build momentum for eventual federal civil rights legislation for all workers, once a friendlier Congress comes to power. Moreover, building a movement around “labor rights as

civil rights” could galvanize millennials to add worker rights to the great triumphs of “Seneca Falls and Selma and Stonewall,” as President Obama memorably put it. Young people may have missed the chance to be part of the great civil rights protests of the 1950s and 1960s, but they may have the chance to be part of a new civil rights movement to rebuild organized labor and revive the American middle class.

### 3. Fighting for Civil and Human Rights at Home and Abroad

Finally, social justice unionism needs to strenuously oppose efforts that would roll back civil rights protections for women, people of color, immigrants, and LGBTQ communities at home, and human rights abroad. At the same time, social justice union-

**The rhetoric of individual rights can be harnessed to promote the collective good of groups.**

ism needs to think creatively about efforts to expand civil rights remedies to be inclusive of working-class white people, including some of those who were so desperate that they voted for Trump.

While it might seem antithetical to civil rights principles to reach out to those who threw women and minorities under the bus to elect an anti-civil rights candidate, commentator Van Jones notes people voted for Trump for complex reasons, and that the idea “that if you voted for a bigot, you are a bigot” is an oversimplification. The fact that Trump won the votes of working-class white women by 28 percentage points and garnered the votes of many former Obama voters suggests that many supporters probably voted for Trump despite his bragging about grabbing women by the genitals and his decision to question the citizenship of America’s first black president, not because of them.

“Resistance must be accompanied by persuasion,” as commentator E. J. Dionne has noted.<sup>66</sup> There is no other alternative. Democrats’ representation in state legislatures is down 23 percent, and in governors’ mansions, nearly 45 percent, since 2008.<sup>67</sup> When a candidate as reckless as Trump manages to win, one has to ask, why did so many white working-class voters feel so forgotten? And can significant numbers of this group be reached through appeals to common interests with people of color?

Today, when Americans talk about diversity—in colleges and in the workforce—they usually are referring to race and gender rather than economic class. Indeed, sometimes the term diversity is used awkwardly, as a synonym for people of color, as when the Academy





## One of the most attractive features of American liberalism, its hallmark, is its commitment to inclusion.

of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences passed a plan “doubling the membership of women and diverse members.”<sup>68</sup> Adding working-class whites from rural Pennsylvania would surely diversify the membership of the academy, but that is not what is meant by “diverse members.” Working-class whites are also left out of college affirmative action programs. Being an underrepresented minority, researchers find, increases one’s chance of admission by 28 percentage points, while being low income provides no boost whatsoever.<sup>69</sup>

The irony here is that one of the most attractive features of American liberalism, its hallmark, is its commitment to inclusion—inclusion of racial minorities, women, gays and lesbians, religious minorities, and immigrants. Yet policies too often leave working-class whites out of the agenda.

Liberalism once had a bigger heart, both as a matter of political necessity and moral sensibility. Years ago, civil rights leader Bayard Rustin noted that lower middle-class whites were neither liberal nor conservative; they were both, and they would vote depending on how issues were presented to them. Martin Luther King Jr. also took an inclusive approach on affirmative action. King said we owed black people a debt to remedy an egregious history of discrimination, but that economically disadvantaged whites

should be part of the program. King wrote: “It is a simple matter of justice that America, in dealing creatively with the task of raising the Negro from backwardness, should also be rescuing a large stratum of the forgotten white poor.”<sup>70</sup> In 1968, at a time of great racial tensions, Robert F. Kennedy won the hearts of working-class blacks and Latinos alongside working-class whites who had voted for George Wallace four years earlier. Almost a half century later, Trump won with an astonishing 41-point edge among white working-class supporters who once formed the backbone of the Democratic Party.<sup>71</sup> Like Kennedy and King and Rustin, advocates of social justice unionism must broaden the civil rights tent to include working-class people of all races.

Social justice unionism must also confront the worldwide threat to democracy. Freedom House reported this year that overall freedom has declined for the 11th year in a row.<sup>72</sup> Hungary, Kenya, Poland, Russia, Thailand, Turkey, and Venezuela have all seen democratic rights erode in recent years. The threat involves right-wing ethno-nationalism and left-wing ideologies, all purporting to speak on behalf of “the people” but eschewing basic human rights.

For some on the left, it will be tempting, in reaction to the ill-advised Iraq War, to join Trump’s call for withdrawal from the world, weakening ties to NATO, and putting America first. But that would represent a profound mistake. As Eric Chenoweth of the Institute for Democracy in Eastern Europe notes, it is time to “build alliances and coalitions (even unlikely ones) in order to restore a policy of support for democracy, democratic alliances, and human rights in the world.”<sup>73</sup>

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who as CEO of ExxonMobil made business deals with some of the world’s most brutal dictators, is unlikely to provide strong moral leadership on the world stage. But just as American trade unions, in contrast to business interests, provided consistent support for anti-Communist forces during the Cold War, so today, social justice unions should fight the rhetoric of moral equivalence espoused by Trump and Tillerson. When Trump adopts the talking points of leftists like Noam Chomsky (“What, you think our country’s so innocent?”), social justice unionists should be the first to say that while not innocent, the United States stands for something better than raw self-interest. We “hold ourselves to higher standards” than killers like Vladimir Putin, as foreign policy analyst Anne-Marie Slaughter has argued. “Striving to attain those ideals, and holding ourselves to account when we fail, is a central part of what holds us together as a people.”<sup>74</sup>

**T**ump rode to power with the support of struggling white workers, on the promise of making America great again. In office, Trump has thus far engaged in one un-American idea after another—attempting to strip 24 million Americans of health insurance, imposing a religiously loaded immigration ban, proposing to move toward a system of privatized education, and siding with billionaires over organized labor.

Social justice unionism can offer Americans something better: an unabashed patriotism rooted not in blood-and-soil nationalism but in democratic ideals that are nourished by vibrant trade unions, public education open to all, civil rights for everyone, and world leadership that puts democracy at its core. □

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# Hope in Dark Times

(Continued from page 16)

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