Education under Trump

written by Lois Weiner | January 30, 2026

"It's been hell.… It's just everything and all of it. Every time we turn around," one experienced education worker and activist wrote me in late fall.[1] Trump's stunningly comprehensive ideological, cultural, social, political, and economic offensive has made education workers reel.[2] Much work with students continues as before, while the world is turned upside down outside school walls and classrooms. Teachers worry about speaking truth in their classrooms; protecting their kids from deportations; predicting how federal cuts in funding will affect their schools, students, and jobs, as school districts cope with the financial turbulence of funding revoked, restored, or in limbo because of court orders and what seems Trump's whim. From his first days in office Trump showed his authoritarian aims, having won support from the mega-wealthy. They either admired or turned a blind eye to MAGA (Christian nationalist, White supremacist, nativist, patriarchal, homophobic, ableist) and to Trump, who used every governmental power he could to promulgate policies to expand his power and undercut human rights.

Though teachers and others who work in schools seem to be acquiring more confidence and energy, and some union locals have won important victories in contract campaigns, they have yet to organize a national movement, or with few exceptions, even state actions.[3] Education workers were well represented among the millions who engaged in and organized protest marches. Despite having little or no leadership from school officials in most places, activist teachers organized to defend their students from ICE raids. Both national teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), joined the coalition of liberal organizations protesting the attack on democracy, civil rights, and funding for education, as well as dismantling of the Department of Education. The unions urged members to lobby, filing lawsuits to try to stem Trump's advances. They publicized the "No Kings" marches and funded education-specific outreach through the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools (AROS), which also includes SEIU, the other large public employee union in the AFL-CIO that organizes education workers.[4] AFT and NEA were also persuaded to be signatories to #MayDayStrong, a group hosted by leaders of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU).

Stunned by earlier attacks on academic freedom in regard to Palestine, higher education faculty were awakened to the need for collective voice and interventions, encouraged by the AAUP (American Association of University Professors), now merged with AFT. On dozens of campuses full-time faculty followed the lead of graduate student workers and adjunct faculty, who long ago organized with unions eager to represent this new constituency as well as expand their membership numbers beyond their traditional (diminished) base in blue collar work. The vitality of AAUP organizing is a bright spot for many reasons, including the possibility of developing alliances on campuses between all workers, what K-12 teacher activists in West Virginia's 2018 "red state" walkouts called "wall-to-wall" organizing and strikes.

After winning office on a new agenda for education (Project 2025's program), and mostly carrying it out,[5] since the spring Trump has consolidated a new bipartisan project in education, one that

intensifies and expands harm done to education in the initial bipartisan neoliberal reforms.[6] While Trump remains moored to his far-Right, MAGA base he has also found common ground on education policy with neoconservatives, libertarians, and neoliberals through the money fueling these groups' objectives in both parties.

Under the Radar: Trump's Buy-In to a New Bipartisan Project in Education

Understanding what's changed in education policy since Trump's election requires noting how the 2024 election was "a historical turning point," when the tech ruling class "emerged as a shaper of national power and politics, intervening decisively at a time of destabilization and realignment in the U.S. party system."[7] Silicon Valley drives education policy now. The new bipartisan coalition share goals of privatizing education with charter schools, public/private partnerships, and intensified use of edtech, in software and platforms for standardized testing, as well as pushing AI and online learning. One business magazine predicted Trump's education policies will "unlock new opportunities for EdTech startups focused on AI-driven learning tools, particularly those tailored to literacy development and personalized instruction." And with federal grants "favoring tech-enabled solutions, early-stage companies in the education space could see a surge in demand from school districts seeking to modernize their classrooms. Industry analysts predict increased venture funding in education technology as public-private partnerships gain momentum under this new policy direction."[8] These policies share an ideological goal that is inseparable from capital's drive for profit, to control learning and teaching to synchronize education with work, creating a workforce suited to capitalism's current and future needs, as billionaires decide them.

The new coalition shares overlapping goals for privatization that can temporarily mediate but not erase the contestation about whether capital can dispense with democracy and liberal capitalism replaced with authoritarian rule, with Trump at the helm. This critical political difference is reflected in education policy by the wedding of authoritarianism and privatization, seen in the far-Right/libertarian plan to replace a system of public education, which it calls "government schools," with a wholly private system of schools that receives public money, one that is superficially managed by the states but controlled by the federal government's changes in school funding and regulations, as well as political campaigns to root out dissent. MAGA has shown itself both a willing partner and a wild card in the new bipartisan alliance on education, which rests on big money from big tech. Steve Bannon, formerly a harsh critic of AI, supported Trump's presidential order expanding AI's use and limiting regulation, reflecting Bannon's understanding Trump's power and in turn MAGA's own project rely (for now) on MAGA agreeing to the power of tech companies and policies previously scorned.

In contrast to Trump and his far-Right/libertarian backers, neoliberals defend liberal capitalism insofar as profit is guaranteed, trying to sustain the regulatory framework of a public system of education under a federal umbrella, but one that will be privatized with charters, public/private partnerships, and edtech, including AI. The neoliberal alternative to Trump retains the rhetoric of schooling's meritocratic purposes as well as legal protections that address inequality, while intensifying elements of privatization that contradict its professed aim of advancing educational equality because they produce greater economic and social inequality.[9]

The overlap and divergence in these two agendas reflect shifting infusions of big money to the Democrats and GOP, as well as rivalries about tech "solutions," including AI. The deals and interlocks between Microsoft, OpenAI, Google, Amazon, and private equity, especially BlackRock, which change weekly, in turn influence their coalition's education policy.[10] Currently the neoliberal core, led by Jorge Elorza who is rebuilding Democrats for Education Reform (DFER), overlaps in its positions, as was true under Obama, with the American Enterprise Institute (AEI), the largest neoconservative think tank.[11] Yet Elorza and his supporters in the Democratic Party are pivoting to

Trump's backers and policies in ways AEI has not (yet). As one longtime analyst of big money noted, the new "end game" of Elorza Democrats is identical to a 2017 memorandum to Trump and DeVos from the secret Council for National Policy: "Abandon public education in favor of 'free-market private schools, church schools and home schools'."[12] Like Trump and MAGA they fuse explicit anti-"identity politics" with arguments against reforms that reduce unequal outcome in schools, supporting programs that deepen privatization and business control of schools.[13]

Protecting standardized testing is a mainstay of the coalition. Though the tests are based on the Common Core, which was opposed by the Right and progressives because the standards usurped parent, teacher, and school district authority to establish curriculum, the far Right has left that fight, accepting the tests (and the profits they bring). This old struggle is reflected in a new tension, which is how testing undercuts the far-Right's campaign to destroy "woke" curricula. Standardized testing that supposedly measures a nation's ability to compete economically can't assess students' understanding of the Christian bible as a literacy text. Though Department of Education funding was slashed, money for the Institute of Education Science (IES), which decides what kinds of teaching methods and materials are acceptable, was restored. Since its creation IES has made standardized tests scores virtually the only acceptable marker of academic success.

The ideological glue holding this new coalition together is agreement about boosting capital's profits and control over what students learn, which is intended to synchronize education to the actual and intended transformation of work. This goal, apparent in the wholehearted embrace of Career and Technical Education (CTE), is a key element of the new bipartisan project, across the political spectrum. It is endorsed by the Democratic Party's center, neocons, the GOP, Bernie Sanders, longtime liberal foe of charter schools, Diane Ravitch, and AFT president Randi Weingarten, who placed op/ed pieces in news outlets throughout the country, insisting we must "Stop trying to make everyone go to college."[14] NEA supports CTE with arguments about career readiness and helping students to thrive in school while also noting that federal funding for these programs is one of the largest sources of money for high schools and community colleges. CTE was an early cornerstone of Trump's agenda in education, explained on Linda McMahon's bio on the Department of Education website: "WWE created thousands of American jobs and sparked McMahon's passion for Career and Technical Education (CTE)" the "skills-based career preparation [that] is the backbone of the American economy and the path to the American Dream for every citizen…."[15] Liberal support for CTE recapitulates their acceptance of neoliberalism's case that its privatization reforms were the best way to increase educational opportunity.

CTE was emphasized in Trump's first term, in an initiative headed by Scott Stump, the only Trump DOE appointee whom every Democrat (and Sanders) voted to appoint. Both parties have long shared a vision of business defining students' "workforce readiness" to make workers and the economy competitive.[16] Unlike the old vocational education which occurred in (tracked) comprehensive high schools, where districts controlled curriculum and teachers and parents might have some voice, CTE in its present form outsources student learning to employers, often via tech companies that serve as employment agencies. One of the many flaws in CTE, which its supporters don't mention, is how the jobs for which students are being trained as early as middle school may be affected by technological changes employers are making to work already, with robots and AI.[17] Neoliberal influence is seen in requirements grant recipients "report disaggregated data on the performance of students by gender, race/ethnicity, special population categories, and career clusters."[18] This new alliance mutes Trump's vengeful purges of DEI influence in government agencies, including the military because what counts most is capital's control over how workers are educated.

A report from the National Governors Association, "Let's Get Ready!" provides alarming detail about what can occur when education aligns more closely with workforce needs, (determined by CEOs), for

example having “future earnings and employer value” determine what is taught. Tightening the link between education and students’ anticipated future earnings has already been operationalized in many colleges and universities with elimination of entire departments. “Outcomes-based funding,” aligning education outcomes in higher education with the promise of stable funding was already tried in K-12 education in the first neoliberal push. It was justified with rhetoric of increasing educational opportunity though the carrot was “merit pay” for K-12 teachers, based on their students’ test scores.[19] Advocating for education to be “powering the economy,” as AAUP and AFT have done in a joint publicity campaign, undercuts this otherwise valuable campaign’s other aims, “saving lives” and “building futures” if we understand the future business/capital wants for us.[20] Intensifying the connection between education and the economy means vocationalizing all of it, bringing deeper corporatization of higher education, diminished faculty voice, reduced democratic control of schools through school districts, and the subordination of children’s well-being to employers’ desires.[21]

Working with Allies and Opposing Our Foes

An inescapable reality of capitalism is that unions must function within its contradictions. However, this is different from accepting capitalism’s rules of the game, imposed on us with capital’s superior power. Capital, the bosses, and the politicians they control are not our allies when they undercut our economic and political rights, on the job and in society. They are our allies when they join us in defending democratic rights, including academic freedom, protecting teachers and students from victimization when they exercise their rights to speak and think critically. Anyone who wants to join this “big tent” is welcomed. Our “big tent” can include organizations and movements that support politicians we don’t if they are criticizing Trump’s destruction of civil liberties and erasure of an independent judiciary. Let’s join their demonstrations, bringing our ideas, banners, and slogans that critique how policies pursued by both parties are harming schools and children. In contrast, we need to combat the politicians, organizations, and moneyed interests that aim to use public education as a profit center, destroying the environment with data centers, and changing our work in ways over which we have no say.

While NEA and AFT are “on the money” in having named the threat of authoritarianism, they have, literally, taken the money of our opponents, inviting control of our schools. Randi Weingarten, who heads the machine that determines AFT policy, has assembled a “partnership” with the most powerful tech companies to train teachers to use AI, accepting at least $23 million. Microsoft, Anthropic, OpenAI, and the World Economic Forum are now creating lesson plans for what Weingarten, with no empirical evidence, promises will be “a curriculum that will lead to good jobs and solid careers in U.S. manufacturing.”[22] The NEA also accepted an “initial” $325,000 donation from Microsoft. As occurred before with the AFT welcoming standardized testing’s stranglehold over teaching and schools, resulting in teachers being fired and schools being closed, NEA has followed AFT’s lead.

At least one prominent social justice teachers union has adopted a strategy, never debated or approved by its representative assembly, to oppose public criticism of the AFT and NEA.[23] Their reasoning, explained in a private conversation, is defeating MAGA, which is fascist, is foremost and separate from fighting capital. Toward this end we need a “united front” that precludes criticism of the national unions and leadership and organizing against their policies, no matter how dangerous. This behavior and motivation for it duplicate the mistake AFT and NEA officers make in assuming they know more than members and have the right to decide strategy behind closed doors. The strategy also relies on the assumption that a savvy local leadership can protect its members and schools from the terrible harm done by the AFT and NEA welcoming the most powerful segment of capital to change what we teach. Finally, the empirical evidence of shifting interlocks in capital, how

tech companies now fund and support Trump, means the AFT's "partnership" with Silicon Valley puts our union—and their local—one step away from MAGA and Trump's desire to build a global far-Right movement, which he will lead. Though Microsoft may contribute to the Democrats rather than to Trump, its partner in infrastructure projects, BlackRock, supports Trump and the GOP with huge sums and is racing to profit from Trump's authoritarian and imperial aims.[24]

Union members have a right to know—and decide—strategy, which is exactly what occurred in the California Federation of Teachers (CFT), the AFT's California affiliate, in response to AFT's deal with tech moguls to train teachers to use AI. The two largest K-12 locals in the state, representing Los Angeles and San Francisco, collaborated with AFT Higher Ed members to pass a resolution challenging the AFT's deal with the tech companies. The resolution's presentation of reasoned argument and its specificity of CFT's actions, as well as the collaboration of higher ed and K-12 locals model how union locals can democratize their state affiliates. Another example of the political education and organizing we need is shown in a strike wave of education workers in Massachusetts, encouraged by a democratized NEA affiliate that's led by reformers.[25] The tactic local leaders have used, playing nice with the national or state union, to protect one's members and gain access to power, has clearly failed to make NEA and AFT the vehicles we need to defeat the Right. NEA's rhetoric has become more militant and the union adopts resolutions in support of social justice, but its leaders show no desire or capacity to mobilize members or support officers and staff in state affiliates to do the same. Power in the AFT is even more concentrated in Randi Weingarten's hands than it was a decade ago. Its conventions, described to me by one member as being like an infomercial for dystopia, and the unwillingness of a single president of a "progressive" or "social justice" teachers union on the AFT Executive Council to challenge Weingarten's policies shows her power and the fear even of the presidents of locals accustomed to making fiery speeches, but only at home.

Social Justice Teachers Unions Need Union Democracy

Building and sustaining a culture and practice of union democracy is more difficult and more essential than ever, because union members feel pulled in so many different ways, and yet an informed, mobilized membership is our best protection against Trump and the vast resources he has, for reasons I describe fully, elsewhere. A new generation of activists needs to be educated about the principles that guided the growth of the first movement for social justice teachers unions, and we have no time to waste. I don't underestimate the enormity of the challenge education workers face in this moment. For many, maybe most teachers, the past school year has been like none other, understandably because the society has been altered from what it was before Trump's election. Still, the penalty we will pay for failing to live up to this historic responsibility to re-form our movement is almost unimaginable.

Over the past twenty years the Right has orchestrated extraordinarily effective campaigns to make people think teachers are selfish, the schools are failing, and the solution is privatization—and weakening and/or destroying real unions. The first neoliberal push to undercut teachers unions with frontal attacks on teachers' moral and professional judgment, controlling schools and learning with standardized testing, now stands beside a Christian-nationalist project of the far Right to destroy teachers unions. A new organization that has formed, the Teacher Freedom Alliance, an appendage of the Koch-funded Freedom Foundation, has hired Ryan Walters, disgraced former head of Oklahoma schools, as its CEO. The far Right is baring its teeth, fusing anti-union and pro-Israel politics to attacks on teachers unions and public education.

These new attacks on teachers and our unions come after huge amounts of money have flowed to organizations and "independent" media promoting ideas central to the new bipartisan project in education. In research for this article I was stunned at the overlap in ideas and funding of

organizations and foundations previously considered bastions of liberal thought and tech money that supports Trump. We are truly in for the fight of our lives. NEA and AFT are well known, notorious, and villainized on the Right, for their political clout. Now is the time to use and build that power. That means going beyond the strategies the national and state affiliates have put forward, confining our actions to lobbying and participating in large mobilizations, organized by liberals tied to venture capital and private equity in the Democratic Party. We need to consider mass civil disobedience, including walkouts, which are often started by a minority of workers and then grow to become a mass movement. This is how we won rights that are being washed away with breathtaking speed. Whether education workers can rise to this challenge, no one can predict. But so much depends on our doing so.

Are the ideas I've proposed realistic? Many might have said "no" had they read this article in June, when we started the Future of Our Schools Collective newsletter on Substack. However, might readers feel differently now? Zohran Mumdani's campaign and victory in New York City's mayoral election have sparked energy and hope that will encourage education workers to think, feel, and maybe act in ways they had not thought possible even four months ago. Mamdani's victory has opened possibilities and created contradictions no one anticipated when Trump was elected and began his assault. New York City, the seat of global capitalism and the Zionist lobby's U.S. base, has elected a Muslim, socialist mayor, who was supported in the election by what is both the largest teachers union local in the world and probably the most conservative teachers union in this country, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which represents more than 200,000 NYC education workers.

No one can predict what will come now, except we are in for a wild ride.

notes

1. This article draws on my previously published work in the Future of Our Schools (FOS) collective Substack about this moment in education and the relationship education workers should have with our unions to make them stand up for social justice, protect democracy, and our dignity as workers. Readers will find supporting references in these other pieces. When a citation has not appeared in that work, I include it here.

2. This article draws on information and analysis of other FOS members, tracing how teachers responded and rebounded to Trump's attacks. Leah Z. Owens, "Somatic Abolitionism as Possibility for Rethinking Teachers' Labor Activism," June 26, 2025; Keith Eric Benson, "What Is Enough (to achieve lasting change)?" July 3, 2025; Erin Dyke, "Protecting Our Greenhouses: Sustaining the Struggle for Social Justice in Education," July 24, 2025; Chloe Asselin, "Be Prepared! A call to action for educators in progressive states," Oct. 10, 2025.

3. "Can we talk honestly? Where's the resistance we need to defeat this onslaught?" Oct. 2, 2025. For analysis of how local bargaining can build resistance to the new and revised bipartisan agenda, see "The contract fight in education unions. Seeing possibilities, limits, and dangers under Trump and his alliance," Aug. 21, 2025.

4. Space does not permit discussion AROS deserves, but scrutiny of partners, for example, The Advancement Project, shows how racial justice organizations are now funded by neoliberal money, often through foundations that were previously considered liberal: the Alliance to Reclaim Our Schools.

5. Project 2025 Tracker. A comprehensive, community-driven initiative to track the implementation of Project 2025's policy proposals.

6. “This moment for education workers,” June 12, 2025.

7. Derek Seidman, “Billionaire Ideologues and the 2024 Presidential Election,” Public Accountability Project, Feb. 5, 2025.

8. “Linda McMahon Revamps Education Policy, Shifting Federal Focus to Literacy, AI, and School Choice,” *The Education Magazine*, May 2025.

9. Full discussion of why the neoliberal project has resonated with elements of the public, including education researchers, is important in understanding the limitations of the liberal response to Trump. Unfortunately, it takes me well beyond what I can address in this article. Addressing arguments advanced by liberal researchers, Kristen Buras critiques neoliberal myth-making about its success in New Orleans: Kristen Buras, “Did a Hurricane Trigger Educational Improvement?,” National Education Policy Center, August 28, 2025.

10. Readers can use littlesis.org to trace the interlocks that explain shifts on education, edtech, and school privatization. Reed Hastings? See here. Microsoft? See here. Reid Hoffman? See here. The “center” of the Democratic Party is part of this shell game as well. New America?—Can we call it “left leaning” given its new interlocks? See here.

11. “Frederick” M. (“Rick”) Hess, “What Did You Expect to Happen? How DEI Wound Up in Trump’s Crosshairs,” *The American Enterprise*, April 9, 2025. AEI’s interlocks and funders show the overlap with the Democratic Party center on foreign policy and education: see here.

12. Maurice Cunningham, “Declining Dems for Education Reform (DFER) Seeks Salvation in MAGA Regime,” June 2025.

13. Jorge Elorza, “Zohran Mamdani Pushes to Defund the Gifted. As with boys in girls’ sports and antipolice activism, identity politics trump common sense**.”** *Wall Street Journal*/ Opinion, Oct. 22, 2025.

14. Guest essay, *New York Times*, May 6, 2025.

15. “Linda E. McMahon**,** Sec’y of Education.” U.S. Dept. of Education, Office of Communications and Outreach (OCO). Page last reviewed: March 28, 2025.

16. Lois Weiner, “Schools should serve human needs, not ‘the economy,” *Jacobin*, June 6, 2019.

17. “Building a Future-Ready Workforce: Insights for Employability Skills Framework 2.0,” July 2025.

18. Department of Education, Office of Career, Technical and Adult Education: Perkins Collaborative Resource Network, Indicators of Performance.

19. Annie Bowers, *The Foundation for Research on Educational Opportunity, White Paper*, (n.d.) “Aligning state higher education funding with student outcomes.”

20. Press release issued jointly by AFT and AAUP, Sept. 18, 2025, “AFT, AAUP Launch Nationwide Campaign, ‘Higher Education: Saving Lives, Building Futures, Powering the Economy’.”

21. Ryan Pfleger, “NEPC Review: Let’s Get Ready! Educating All Americans for Success” (National Governors Assoc., July 2025). Oct. 2025.

22. Trevor Griffey, “American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Partnerships with Ed Tech Companies, 2022–25: What We Know So Far,” Aug. 6, 2025. “A Moment Like Never Before,” Keynote Address by AFT President Randi Weingarten, AFT TEACH Conference, Washington, D.C., July 25, 2025.

23. To verify whether this is the de facto policy of the union and whether this policy had been discussed or voted on by the local’s representative assembly, I contacted an officer. He referred me to the union’s office of information, which I queried. No answer has been provided. Two union members confirmed no vote or discussion has taken place about this policy, though they say it is evident in how the local relates to the AFT.

24. Peter Eavis and Maureen Farrell, “Trump Applies Pressure, Wall Street Giant Moves into Panama,” *New York Times*, March 4, 2025.

25. Peter Allen-Lamphere and Matt Bach, “Strike lessons from Massachusetts teachers. An interview with Matt Bach of Educators for a Democratic Union,” *Tempest*, Aug. 19, 2025. The CFT resolution contains documentation about money AFT received from its “partners” as well as how the CFT is instructed to respond now. “Education Technology Companies and AFT/CFT.” It was adopted by the State Council of CFT on Oct. 4, 2025.