

For liberals, inconvenient truths about Democrats and unions



What makes [Nikhil Goyal's analysis](#) of the dangers in Trump's selection of Betsy DeVos for Secretary of Education so useful, beyond its incisive discussion of education reform, is that it captures the essence of the conundrum liberals face about fighting Trump on his Achilles heel: the grip the wealthy and powerful have on government which he will tighten.

Liberals can't go after Trump without exposing their complicity with kinder, gentler versions of the policies Trump wants. To attack Trump head-on, liberals must go after the ruling clique of the Democratic Party and its pro-business politics. Goyal's article captures this perfectly by noting how DeVos, ultra-right privateer, will reach across the aisle to Democrat Cory Booker for renewed collaboration on the core education policy they have both advanced: privatization of public education in myriad ways, especially charter schools.

The other reason Goyal's article is so valuable is his pinpointing the need to transform teachers unions to harness their full power in the fight against DeVos' plans to destroy public education as a social good. (Disclosure: My book is cited.) Progressives, liberals and radicals have long been wary of criticizing labor, fearful that pointing out unions' weaknesses will give aid and comfort to their enemies. However, Trump's successful appeal to union members, [clearly exposed during the campaign for the Democratic nomination](#), has

shown the vast gulf between labor's ranks and its "leaders," who selected and pushed a candidate for whom many union members would not vote. Though Trump didn't win a majority of votes of union households, [CNN exit polls](#) gave him 48%. And this omits registered union members who didn't vote rather than choosing between two candidates they abhorred.

Bernie Sanders argues for [taking over the Democratic Party](#), winning to it Trump's working class base. But [Nancy Pelosi's lopsided victory](#) as House Minority Leader and Ryan's quick move to make her election unanimous shows that wresting control of the party is, at best, a very long-term struggle. As Arizona Rep. Kyrsten Sinema noted, the House Democratic Caucus "decided to double down on its failed strategy of recent years...This should be a time of critical reflection and clear-eyed change, not a time to rubber stamp the failed strategy of the past." The [AFT's amazing defense of Clinton and the strategy of pushing her endorsement](#) indicate that the AFT will fight hard to align labor to ideas and individuals who engineered the Democrats' stunning defeat. It seems clear Trump's victory and the horrifying ascension of toxic bigotry have not shaken the Democrats or labor to change course.

My question to Sanders Democrats and the [few unions that endorsed his program](#) is whether the struggle to gain control of these institutions is right without a plan to exit, with a base, if the internal struggle subsumes energy we need for organizing external resistance. If you do have a plan, can you share it with the millions of people in this country who are fearful but want to fight and are looking for leadership but don't think it can come from labor or the Democrats?

Lois Weiner, a professor of education at New Jersey City University, is a member of the New Politics editorial board. You can follow her on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and read her blog here on [New Politics](#).

