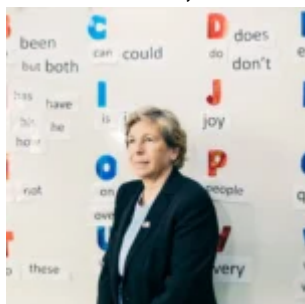


Liberals Look To Weingarten, Again, To Betray Teachers, Parents, and Students

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It's revealing the only idea Randi Weingarten, President of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), gets right in the NYT interview with Michelle Goldberg, is a fact that was apparent two years ago to activists: the Right has used the pandemic to undercut public education, fueling more privatization. What's most important about this interview is that it shows liberals are looking to Weingarten to repeat the same game plan that teachers and parents had to overturn to win a reprieve from the bipartisan drive to marketize education and control what students learn with standardized testing. Weingarten is once again doing the work of big money.

While teacher union activists were fighting against unsafe returns, in this interview Weingarten brags with faux modesty she "spent much of her energy, both in public and behind the scenes, trying to get schools open." What this means is that while activists were trying to expose to the public how the Right orchestrated demands to reopen schools to increase privatization, rev up the economy no matter what the cost, pit parents against teachers, and erode trust in public schools and teachers unions, Weingarten was using her political connections to undercut resistance to a movement funded by the biggest, darkest money. Weingarten is portrayed as a hero in this piece, as she was by liberal media when she defended use of scores of students on standardized tests to evaluate and fire teachers. Goldberg doesn't bother asking for a rebuttal from any of the local union presidents who fought against unsafe reopenings, including one who is quoted defending remote learning, the president of the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA), the second-largest teachers union in the U.S. In fact, Weingarten betrayed thousands of teachers who were struggling against in-person learning until it was truly safe and equitable, fighting a life and death struggle, for school workers, students, and families, and communities. In finagling to open schools - without permission of members who pay her salary - Weingarten not only violated union members' right to control policy, she carried out a strategy that worked against public education and workers in public schools.

Though Weingarten now points to how the pandemic was used to accelerate privatization and marketization of education with charter schools, she doesn't mention the most chilling inroads in privatizing public education and destroying democratic control of our schools: use of educational technology to control learning and profit from student data, the colonization of public education with "platform capitalism." The reason for this omission is that AFT and the National Education Association (NEA) are junior partners in the project, which is global.

Goldberg reports when "Weingarten became the A.F.T.'s president, [Diane] Ravitch told her it was her job to save public education in America." Though this idea of union leader as savior is liberalism's conventional knowledge, no statement could be farther from the truth or more dangerous for workers to believe. The fate of public education depends on teachers, mobilized as workers, along with activists in social justice movements, students, and parents using their collective power to force change. One lesson school workers pummeled by exhausting work demands and attacks on their professional integrity can learn from this interview is that we need to address the admittedly formidable task of transforming the national unions.

What Weingarten doesn't say even if she understands it is that capitalism has changed in the past fifteen years. Our opponents are more formidable than they were, and we cannot trust the national unions to lead. But we can resist successfully if we fight smart. In the first chapter of my new book, which New Politics will publish shortly, I delve into what that means. In the meantime, if you belong to an AFT local, it's your right and obligation to ask why you weren't consulted - to question why the Executive Council of the union allowed Weingarten to set national policy on a matter of life-and-death for so many people.