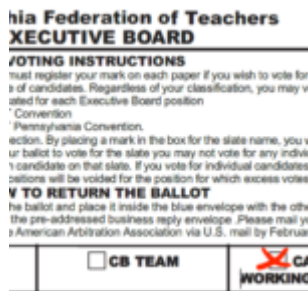
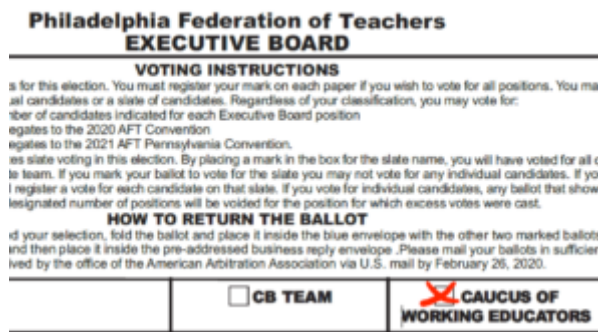


Philly Educators Have a Chance to Make History

February 5, 2020



Members of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) have a chance to improve lives of Philly school educators and students, challenging control of schools by corporate elites, as did Chicago teachers when they elected a new generation of leaders from the Caucus of Rank and File Educators



(CORE) to head their union a decade ago.

The choice is stark: Continue with policies and personalities that have allowed the city and state to neglect Philly schools, teachers and kids or bring in the Caucus of Working Educators (CWE), better known as the Caucus of WE, or Working Educators, or WE, a hardworking, savvy group of union members committed to union democracy who understand kids and teachers need teachers unions that will organize and fight to reverse the attacks on public education.

PFT's longtime officers say they deserve to be re-elected because they know how to negotiate contracts and have the expertise to deliver the goods to members. They argue it would be foolish to change negotiating teams before they've clinched the deal for a new contract. These claims ring false if you've followed how the best union contracts are won these days. Negotiating a union contract is a lot like selling real estate: You can always make the sale if you don't ask for much and settle for less, which is what the PFT machine and Jerry Jordan do. They won't face their strategy has failed to win real improvements because they're overlooking the resources the union has to tap to win significant improvements: an informed, mobilized membership and grassroots alliances with parent and advocacy groups challenging powerful money interests in the city.

In contrast to the way the old guard thinks and acts, Working Educators has organized for change in the PFT essential to maximize the union's clout. Caucus activists know education back and forth because they live it - unlike PFT officials who've been out of schools for ages. Though the current PFT officials claim they are the experts, Working Educators has been educating them through example about how to organize and win. The caucus has helped members and parents on countless issues when the union wouldn't step up, pushing to remove asbestos in buildings, defend teachers whom the district tried to punish for advising parents of their right to "opt" their children out of standardized tests. Working Educators has taken the lead in exposing paraprofessionals' need for

livable wages and demanding good contracts when the leadership said it wasn't possible. The activists know the union needs community support to reverse losses in funding and political power and has shown up for social justice struggles, like working with community organizations in Black Lives Matter, going beyond the lip service and token contributions union officials consider meaningful support.

When a union has been irrelevant and remote from workers' lives, as has the PFT for many years, some members don't realize they can vote in an election for union leaders or a contract. Others are resigned to the status quo, however dissatisfied they are with it. When the leadership's control hasn't been contested by reform groups, some members may not realize challenges from a caucus are not only quite normal but important to help members know and use their rights. Another reason members ignore union elections is they're buried and overwhelmed in their work, like young teachers struggling to do their jobs well with little or no support from administrators or the union.

Paraprofessionals, overwhelmingly women of color, struggle for economic survival because the union has ignored them in its contract negotiations, allowing the district to pay them shamefully low wages, below the poverty level if they're raising a family.

When a union wants members to vote and uses the American Arbitration Association (AAA), the union has AAA use all options for voting - mail, phone, and online. The PFT leadership has shown (again) its resistance to change and (dis)regard for members' participation by restricting voting to a ballot mailed to members' homes. The ballot comes in a large white envelope it's easy to mistake for junk mail and discard. (I know because I've done it and had to phone AAA for a replacement.) Though this is a union election, it has ramifications for the city, its schools and kids, the national teachers unions, and the labor movement because there's a reform movement sweeping teachers unions that's fueling huge changes in local and national politics. CWE joins education activists throughout the country in pushing for real improvements in schools.

What PFT Members Can Do

Even if you've never been to a union meeting, never read the contract, and feel you don't have a moment for yourself because work and life are too demanding, take five minutes in the next two weeks to vote in this election. *Ballots are being mailed out on Thursday, February 6.* Look for that big white envelope from the AAA, open it, check off the CWE (Caucus of WE) slate, put it back in the return envelope and mail it.

If you feel like you have five minutes more to invest in your future, when you're at work, tell two co-workers you voted and ask them if they have. Encourage them to look out for that white envelope, check the box for CWE, and mail it.

Philly educators can elect new union officers ready to lead, organizing to win. PFT members along with kids and families that depend on public schools deserve more and better, and this election can make that happen. Seize the moment - and that white envelope.