

Which side are you on?

Randi Weingarten, President
American Federation of Teachers

“Which side are you on?” That old union ballad has been running through my head as I have been traveling on the #AFTvotes bus to get out the vote in the November elections. Elections are always inflection points, but—given the divisions roiling our country, and the complex economic, political and human challenges confronting us—the choices we make in these elections are especially consequential.

On the one side, who is tackling the concerns that keep people up at night? Who is on the side of families struggling to afford life’s necessities? Who is helping children recover and thrive? Who is fighting to protect our democracy?

On the other, who is stoking resentment, anger and fear? Who is siding with oil companies and others exploiting this moment of rising costs? Who is using children as political pawns in their culture wars by banning books and marginalizing vulnerable students? Who is enabling autocracy, at this vulnerable time for our democracy? As Pete Seeger sang, “there are no neutrals” here.

Economies in the U.S. and throughout the world have been battered by the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia’s war on Ukraine. President Joe Biden—with the slimmest of majorities and, sometimes, with bipartisan support—has acted to strengthen the economy for all Americans. Biden’s American Rescue Plan provided direct relief to Americans and helped create millions of jobs when the economy was at risk of free fall. Yet millions of Americans still are on the edge financially, with real wages falling and prices spiking.

So in August, congressional Democrats passed the Inflation Reduction Act, without a single Republican vote. The sweeping law will cap out-of-pocket costs for prescription drugs, make seniors’ insulin just \$35 per month, save families \$2,400 on healthcare premiums, and lower energy costs an average of \$1,800 a year for households. And it’s paid for by making the biggest corporations pay what they owe. It doesn’t fix everything, but it will save families money.

Biden and congressional Democrats are fighting to reduce gun violence and trying to get assault weapons off our streets. They are supporting public schools and educators’ work to focus on fundamentals like reading, math and critical thinking, and to foster students’ social and emotional well-being. They’re bringing good jobs back—jobs in manufacturing and jobs to boost our resilience to climate change and to rebuild our roads and crucial infrastructure—and they’re

working with educators to train students in the skills needed for these jobs. And Democrats are defending the right to safe and legal abortion.

On the other side, Republicans voted against lowering healthcare and drug costs, including capping the cost of insulin. They voted against raising taxes on big corporations and billionaires. And they have a plan to cut Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security, even threatening a crisis over the debt ceiling as leverage to force those cuts. It’s the same plan that brought Liz Truss down: Cut taxes for the rich and then, when markets plummet, attack working people’s economic security.

Who is tackling the concerns that keep people up at night?

While Republicans claim to be the party of “freedom,” they are going after Americans’ freedom to vote and have their votes counted, our freedom from fear of gun violence, and our freedom to make our own healthcare choices, including the right to safe abortion.

Speaking of freedoms and democracy, days before I got on the #AFTvotes bus, I visited Ukraine at the invitation of the teachers union there. Listening to the heart-rending stories of

teachers who were forced to flee their homes to escape Russia’s barbarism yet have continued teaching—in hiding, in bunkers and online—it struck me that many of the things Ukrainians are fighting for in the war, many Americans are fighting for in these elections.

American democracy is under the gravest threat since the Civil War. According to the Public Religion Research Institute, an alarming 30 percent of Republicans believe that “true American patriots may have to resort to violence” to save the country. The Jan. 6 committee continues to uncover communication among insurrectionists who stormed the Capitol, Republican members of Congress and Trump White House staff. Six-in-10 Republicans continue to believe the lie that Biden didn’t win the 2020 election legitimately, a new Monmouth University poll shows. And election deniers are seeking control over future elections, putting our free and fair elections at risk. That is why we must counter the factions that threaten our freedoms with an even more powerful coalition that transcends politics and parties.

We hear a lot about the divisions polarizing our country, but Americans are united by a powerful bond: We all want a better life for ourselves and our families. That will come from growing the economy and creating good jobs; protecting the right to join a union; and ensuring people have great public schools, affordable healthcare and a voice in our democracy. Voting is key to achieving all that. Vote—and get others to vote. In this election, “which side are you on?” seems a more important question than ever.



Weingarten, foreground, at the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay on Oct. 19, on the #AFTvotes bus tour.

Photo: AFT

FOLLOW RANDI WEINGARTEN: twitter.com/rweingarten