



## Worth Fighting For

RANDI WEINGARTEN, AFT President

FROM CONNECTICUT TO ALASKA, Florida to Pennsylvania, our union engaged in the midterm elections big-time. I was proud to stand with our members as we knocked on doors, made calls, talked to our friends and neighbors, and cast our ballots on behalf of our schools, our kids, our families, and our communities.

As the results came in on Nov. 4, we watched as many of the candidates we worked for lost. It was hard to see but, upon reflection, not hard to understand.

National elections inevitably turn on the choices voters make between the economy and national security, between hope and fear. This one turned on the economy, particularly people's fear and uncertainty about their future. Despite the fact there's been 54 months of private sector job growth, median family income has fallen during the Obama presidency, just as it did during both Bush presidencies and the Carter presidency. As *New York Times* columnist David Leonhardt said: "When incomes, the most tangible manifestation of the economy for most families, aren't rising ... Americans don't feel good about the state of the country. When they don't feel good about the country, they don't feel good about the president, and they tend to punish his party."

According to exit polls, 63 percent of voters believe that our economic system generally favors the wealthy, yet virtually the same percentage voted with the party that is known to represent the interests of the wealthy. Those exit polls also showed that people want more public school funding and a higher minimum wage, yet they voted for candidates that oppose those things—out of frustration or a desire for change, or because they felt the Democrats didn't have a compelling economic message or solutions.

While voters want an economy that works for everyone and not just the wealthy few, in many of the highly contested races they didn't believe that those

we endorsed would get them there. They didn't see that the candidates we supported were the ones who are in it "for the nurse on her second shift, for the worker on the line, for the waitress on her feet, for the small-business owner, the farmer, the teacher, the coal miner, the trucker, the soldier, the veteran," as Hillary Clinton famously said in 2008.

It's critical to remember that, in these elections, not everything was washed away. In fact, in places where voters were given the chance to weigh in directly on their values, they resoundingly sent a message that they are on the side of working families and public education. Alaska, Arkansas, Illinois, Nebraska, and South Dakota increased the minimum wage. Massachusetts granted workers paid sick leave. Missouri rejected an initiative that would have abolished due process for teachers.

In California, voters re-elected State Superintendent of Public Instruction Tom Torlakson over a candidate backed heavily by Wall Street interests intent on gutting teachers' union rights and worker protections. In Pennsylvania, anti-education and union-busting Gov. Tom Corbett lost badly after battling a multiyear community groundswell resisting his attempts to destroy the state's public schools.

Poll after poll has shown us that people actually want public schools. People actually love their teachers. People believe that a strong public education system fills an essential role as an anchor of democracy, a propeller of our economy, and the vehicle through which we help all children achieve their dreams.

But we face a new reality where right-wing, anti-worker interests won big, and their No. 1 target will be unions. We know their playbook. We know that even though the labor movement doesn't have the density or power by ourselves to change the trajectory of our economy, we are still the firewall that thwarts complete control of our economy and democracy by the

anti-union, free-market ideologues and oligarchs. And they will do everything in their power to take us out, dismantle our infrastructure, divide us from the community, and consolidate their power.

We are going to face some real attacks and challenges, but we can't just go into defensive mode. We faced a lot of these attacks in 2010, but we didn't hunker

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down; instead, we were solution-driven and community-engaged, and we became a stronger union.

We need to think about everything we do through the lens of whether it's good for kids, schools, working families, and our communities. And our job is to keep communities and voters with us on the values, issues, and solutions we share.

We must be solution-driven, by being willing to solve problems, to innovate to make things better, to find common ground when possible, and to engage in conflict when necessary. We must connect with our community and make community our new density. And we must engage more of our members—because our members are the union.

The next few years won't be easy. If there's one thing we know, it's that power never yields without a fight. To change the balance of power, we must fight harder and smarter, and stand together.

We will never stop fighting to reclaim the promise of an America where, if you work hard and play by the rules, you can support your family and ensure that your children will do better. I think we can all agree that is a promise worth fighting for.