AFT CONVENTION PITTSBURGH, July 12-16, 2018

AFT 2121 was represented at the Pittsburgh convention by Kate Frei (E Bd outgoing), Jessica Buchsbaum (secretary) and Yvonne Web (treasurer) and retirees Joe Berry (E Bd) and Ann Killebrew (Retiree Chapter Chair) and Doug Orr (Bargaining team). This section of the report is by Joe Berry.

For us, the convention began with the retiree’s meeting the day before and the meeting of retirement pension trustees. The trustees’ meeting will be more fully reported by Doug Orr who attended all of it. But one of the high points was the attendance and presentation of Rev Al Sharpton of New York talking about cooperation among community groups, churches and AFT reps on retirement plan boards, regarding decisions by retirement funds on investments and affirmative action in staffing, including consultants to staff.

The afternoon session include a report by David Weber, author of The Rise of Working Class Shareholder: Labor’s Best Weapon, 2018 Harvard U Press. Books were given out. Our copy will be available for loan from the AFT office. Doug will report more.

In the retirees meeting, which our Retiree Chapter Chair Anne Killebrew will report on more fully, the highlight for me was the spontaneous re-telling of the 1960 strike for bargaining rights in New York City, which was the action that won collective bargaining rights for teachers in NYC, and sparked the tremendous growth of the AFT and the spread of collective bargaining across the nation. It was a great example and reminder of what a union can do even without a majority or a bargaining law or a large staff. In the context of another discussion, two veterans of that strike played tag team in telling that story for 20 to 30 minutes. It was a very engrossing and informative presentation.

I, along with Kate, attended two meetings of the AFT Adjunct and Contingent Faculty Caucus which between them had over 40 people. They selected new officers for the coming period, including Jeff Johnson as President, Linda Chan as secretary, and Arnie Schoenberg as Chief Organizing Officer, all from the California Community Colleges. There seemed to be more energy in the Caucus than before and Johnson presented what seemed to be a rational and thought-through program for the caucus for the coming period. Thanks were especially due to outgoing President Jennie Shankar of Philadelphia who really kept the caucus going for the last two years and facilitated the phone hookup that allowed three more caucus members to participate via video. Re the Caucus website page, Facebook page: All part-timers are urged to check these out and are urged to participate in the discussion with is open to all. See the caucus website and Facebook page for more information and to join. http://www.aftacc.org/about.php

Another highlight for this participant was the reception sponsored by the Rank and File Educators which included the leadership of the locals of Chicago (CTU), Los
Angeles (UTLA) and the Saint Paul local, as well as others, and some caucuses. See their website at <http://www.ucore.org> It was a great time to network among the most active and thoughtful leadership in the AFT and given the almost complete lack of critical discussion on the floor of the convention, this was place where the future strategy of the AFT could be discussed freely.

I also attended the inaugural meeting of a group (over 30 in attendance) to form a socialist educators group in the AFT. Look for more from them later.

Besides merely attending, AFT 2121 delegates made two interventions on the floor of the Convention. Both of these were very successful and very well received.

First, Doug Orr gave a remarkably clear speech in support of a resolution on hedge funds, that actually did explain to the delegates what a hedge fund does and why it is bad, within the two-minute limit. It was an example of the political economy professor at his best and makes clear why his work was so influential in the latest bargaining.

Second, Jessica Buchsbaum, AFT 2121 Secretary, spoke to the resolution outlining what the AFT should use as criteria in the future should use for candidate endorsement. It listed such things as

RESOLVED, that the American Federation of Teachers will support a public investment strategy for healthcare and education infrastructure that includes the following aspirations:

Universal healthcare, whether single-payer healthcare or Medicare for All;
Free tuition at all public colleges and universities, starting with a focus on addressing student debt for all who are now being crushed by it;

Universal, full-day and cost-free child care;
Doubled per-pupil expenditures for low-income K-12 districts;
Full public funding of public colleges and universities, including funding for wage justice for adjuncts; and

Taxation of the rich to fully fund IDEA, Title I and state allocations to public colleges and universities; and

RESOLVED, that we call on our endorsed candidates to support these priorities, and toward that end we will embed these aspirations in our questionnaires to potential candidates seeking our support.

See resolution #59 at <https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/conv18_cmte_politicalaction.pdf>
This resolution was the result of some compromise between the original writers from UTLA, Chicago CTU and the PSC in City University of New York and the national AFT leadership caucus (PC). Therefore it was successfully brought to the floor and was voted up without dissent.

What was most important, besides the fact that it was written and passed, was that Jessica’s speech was the only speech in the entire convention that directly criticized a past practice of the current leadership. She stated that in the past election cycle’s premature AFT endorsement of Hilary Clinton over Bernie Sanders in the primary, the leadership, led by President Randy Weingarten, had “gotten it wrong.” This delegate has seldom been so proud of my own union at a convention. That speech made Jessica a bit of a celebrity for the rest of the gathering. I have no doubt that she expressed the will of the vast majority of AFT 2121 and of the CFT for that matter, and very likely the AFT membership as a whole.

I am very grateful to the local for economic support to attend the convention and am glad that 2121 has adopted a policy of regularly sending multiple delegates to the AFT convention, unlike that the practice of some years ago. Even if we don’t completely agree with what is done or how it is done at conventions, it is important that we be there, if for no other reason than that since our ACCJC fight, we occupy a very high national profile among higher education faculty and the union as a whole.

My only other general comment about the convention is that the AFT nationally desperately needs a strong injection of union democracy and union transparency. This was apparent in the convention proceedings. They could well take a lesson from the CFT and especially AFT 2121, as our open COPE endorsement meetings demonstrate.