



# THE UNION SOUND

THE VOICE OF A SOUND UNION



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### The Union Sound

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## President's Message

by Robert McDonough

Our third president Thomas Jefferson once said, "We in America do not have government by the majority. We have government by the majority who participate." I've been thinking a lot about these words recently. Indeed, it is true that we are ruled by only the *majority of those who participate*. This upcoming election is the most important election in American history. Directly at stake in this election are political norms and our republic itself; the fight against the worst pandemic in four generations; a viable economy; a scientifically-based national response to wildfires, hurricanes, and other evidence of climate change; civil harmony and the condemnation of white supremacy; and, most importantly, our own public schools. The vacancy on the Supreme Court for the beloved Ruth Bader Ginsburg has added many more layers to this election: *Roe v. Wade*, labor unions, the Affordable Care Act, marriage equality, and this very election itself are also all at stake.

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has endorsed Joe Biden and Kamala Harris, and that is exactly who I intend on voting for. I truly believe that, as Joe Biden has said, "We are in a battle for the soul of this nation." Our schools desperately need a national plan for this pandemic and getting kids back to school safely. The White House has said that this is up to the states to deal with. This is not only impossible but also untrue. Whether you are conservative or liberal or whether you think that the government should be small or large, something we should all be able to agree upon is that the federal government is there to protect us from invasion. Well, we have been invaded. We have been attacked by this virus and it is the federal government's job to protect us. Only a coordinated national plan can save us. States are under enormous strain to find monetary resources to do the much needed testing and contact tracing. Schools need money for ventilation systems, staff, and PPE to keep the schools safe. All of this requires a national plan and

coordinated response. And, simply put, the federal government has failed.

It is time to replace this president with one who has the empathy to see our suffering and the courage to do something about it. We need a president who will protect the rights of workers, unions, and women and look to the future of climate change and all the new green jobs that can be created by cleaning up our planet. We need a president with the ability to reach across the aisle with civility and grace to fight for the American people. We need a president who will stand up to our dictatorial adversaries and protect the health care of twenty million Americans, as well as those with pre-existing conditions. We need a president who will restore some of the political norms that have been destroyed over the past four years. We need a president who will denounce white supremacy in all its forms. We need a president who will fight for public education and the resources we need to reopen safely. And, yes, we need a president who will tell us the truth.

But it isn't the White House alone that can change our destiny. We need to also flip the U.S. Senate and send a loud and clear message to the majority leader that we will not stand for this any longer. We will not stand for them refusing to bring a vote to the floor. We will not stand for exercises of raw political power and replacing a Supreme Court seat literally in the midst of a presidential election, just because they can.

Please help make this happen any way you can. If you can make phone calls, please contact Kim McEvoy. If you can't, at the very least, make sure you vote. Bring a friend or family member who wouldn't otherwise go. We can all do our part to fight for our profession, and, most importantly, our country to get back on the right side of history. As Thomas Jefferson alluded to, only those who actually go to the polls get to have their voices heard. We cannot fix our schools until we first heal our nation. Let's all make the commitment to each other to be a part of that majority that actually *participates* in restoring our republic this November 3.

## Guest Column

by Rich Gohl

### WE HAVE YOUR SIX

This year in support of those that have served our country, the RVF is taking up a collection for the organization We Have Your Six. This organization consists of volunteers who help veterans and first responders battle suicide and

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD).

Please consider making a donation that goes directly to veterans and first responders for things like housing, counseling, community functions, meals, and clothing. Each RVF Building Representative will have a donation bucket available for collections, or you can interoffice Rich Gohl at the HS with your donation. Cash or checks (payable to "We Have Your Six") will be accepted through Tuesday, November 10.

## History Corner

by Jennifer Slauson

### WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

The past seven months have brought unimaginable changes to our lives. Our daily work and play routines have been upheaved and our seasonal rhythms are missing some of our cherished traditions. Recently, while reminiscing with my children about the Dutchess County Fair, an end-of-summer marker for us, I remembered one of my favorite parts: the one-room schoolhouse. If you haven't been to see it, imagine a Laura Ingalls Wilder-style building complete with chalkboards, wooden desks and inkwells, and a pot-bellied stove in the back. There are wonderful old photos and other artifacts from the period, including my favorite, an example of a teacher's contract from the late nineteenth century. Okay, it's more a list of rules than a formal contract, but it does describe some of the working conditions and hours, how teachers should conduct themselves, and BOE-approved salary increases. Gems like these collected from 1872 Illinois one-room schoolhouses state: "Make your pens carefully. You may whittle nibs to the individual taste of the pupils," and "After 10 hours in school, teachers may spend the remaining time reading the Bible or other good books"

help give a sense of how intensely teachers' lives were controlled. Many of the "rules" are really just codifying gender norms of the day, like, "Not riding in a carriage with any man unless he is your father or brother." This made me wonder, if most teachers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were women, and women did not yet have the full rights of citizenship (the 19th Amendment wasn't until 1920), how did the first teachers' unions start? What I found diving into this question is a fascinating history with early teachers' unions at the crossroads of unionism, social activism, and feminism.

The first teacher organization was the National Education Association (NEA), founded in Philadelphia in 1857, and interestingly did not include many teachers. Their aim was to influence legislation that would help professionalize the occupation of teaching. The mostly male-staffed NEA worked to make teaching more prestigious, lobbied policymakers for strict academic and entry requirements, and argued for higher teacher pay. Their work was important but left out the voice of the many, mostly female, people working in education: the teachers.

The end of the nineteenth century, known as the Progressive Era, saw reformers working to fix many of the problems caused by unregulated industrialization and urbanization. Fueled by surges in immigrant populations,

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## Guest Column

by Kevin Storrs

### OBSERVATIONS FROM THE "RETIRED WING"

Greetings to my friends and past colleagues in the Happy Valley, although perhaps I am a little too cavalier with my humor. First, thank you for your service—it appears teachers have now moved into the same category as those in the military, police forces, fire departments, and other dangerous professions where people willingly signed up for hazardous duty. It infuriates this retired educator to hear people say that teachers need to "suck it up" and do their jobs. When I retired in June, my awareness was that our jobs involved teaching, mentoring, parenting, crisis counseling, and whatever other things spring from the needs of our students and their families. Teaching: one stop social service. As if those jobs weren't enough, now it appears you are healthcare workers sent into a hot zone without the tools you need to stay safe. Oh, well— seems that you are deemed acceptable collateral damage like the

others. Just keep in mind the following:

1) Covid-19 is not your fault. The financial hemorrhaging the district is experiencing is also not your fault. Don't allow yourself to be guilted into being the proverbial canaries in the coal mine. You have a right to a safe work environment, and, if that cannot be provided, then as imperfect and flawed the model is, all instruction should be remote. It saddens me to hear how this has become a dividing point amongst many of you. This is not politics. Safety in the workplace is safety in the workplace. Period.

2) There will be an unfortunate fall in grade-level achievement during the Covid-19 Era. This also is not your fault. No matter how hard you work, no matter how diligent and self-sacrificing you are, there is not enough time in the day, week, or school year to make up for the decreased student/teacher "real" face time and interactions Covid-19 has taken from you. Anyone who suggests that all you need to do is rethink how you do things and become more technologically savvy is selling you a line of horse manure. Effective teaching is and always will be about relationships. The work you assign can never make

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## History Corner, cont.

tenement housing mushroomed, cheap labor became increasingly exploited, and the emergence of political machines allied to business interests made Americans feel as if their democratic traditions and economic-opportunity-for-all were endangered. Social reformers, many of whom were women, sought to help the impoverished through education, settlement houses, and access to health and family services.

Within this framework of social activism, teachers increasingly demanded their voices be heard and began to form local organizations. One of the first that was organized by and for female elementary teachers was the Chicago Teachers Federation (CTF). Founded in 1897, the CTF worked for better pay for its members who, as women, were paid significantly less than their male counterparts, often compensated only in room and board. What is interesting is that in addition to salaries and improved working conditions, expected bread-and-butter issues for a union, the CTF and other early teacher organizations played prominent roles in neighborhood improvements and political reforms targeting corruption. Just as we today constantly have our students' and communities' best interests in mind, teachers of this time felt the same way.

By the turn of the century, America's urban centers were places of opulent wealth, corruption, and abject poverty. One of the great names to emerge from this period was Margaret Haley. She was an elementary teacher turned CTF vice president and business representative. Haley spent 16 years teaching in the meatpacking district of Chicago, a place described by Haley's biographer Kate Rousmaniere as "the world of industrial poverty that Upton Sinclair wrote about... a dreary urban community... marked by devastating squalor and the ubiquitous odors of the packing houses... crisscrossed by forty-three train lines and bordered by city garbage dumps." Haley was very concerned about the "factoryizing" of education, fearing that teachers would become like machines or "automatons." And just as there was no humanity to be found in the industrial-factory model, Haley was witnessing an erosion of humanistic ideals in the classroom. Her first-hand experiences and her varied studies in progressive pedagogy, as well as labor and political theory, cemented her beliefs in the importance of academic freedom, teachers' rights to shape and control their own workplace, and about the responsibility of the state to support public education.

Haley's individual politics and work took her across a wide

gamut of American Progressivism. She supported women's suffrage, child labor laws, direct primaries, and tax reform, and she was a member of the Women's Trade Union League. In 1904, Haley was the first woman to speak at the annual NEA meeting (only after 3,000 classroom teachers demanded she be accepted). The meeting occurred in the midst of a fight to defend the democratic purpose of education against the growing power of corporations and political corruption—forces that ultimately undermined public education efforts. Her speech, "Why Teachers Should Organize," claimed that the classroom should be a microcosm of our democratic ideals and suggested that "for both the child and the teacher freedom is the condition of development." Haley described the main purpose of our education system as "the deliberate effort of the whole people to free intelligence at its source—and through freed intelligence to secure freedom of action." These ideas—trusting teachers over school administrators and NEA officials and giving teachers agency over their classrooms—shocked the conservative, male, administrator-dominated organization. She called for teachers to unionize, insisting that "there is no possible conflict between the interest of the child and the interest of the teacher." Later, in 1916 Haley would be a founding member of the American Federation of Teachers. She worked tirelessly to support our profession and our communities until her death in 1939. Today, we follow in Margaret Haley's footsteps and echo her voice every time we advocate for ourselves and our students.

"Only through the freedom of their teachers could the children remain free."

—Margaret Haley, ca. 1899

For more information about the history of unions and Margaret Haley, check out some of these sources that were used to write this article:

[A Century of Teacher Organizing](#)

[Rules for One-Room Schoolhouse Teachers](#)

[The Rise of Teacher Unions](#)

[The 19th-Century Activist Who Tried to Transform Teaching](#)

[Margaret Haley \(1861-1939\)](#)

[Citizen Teacher: The Life And Leadership Of Margaret Haley](#)



## Guest Column by Kevin Storrs, cont.

up for your in-person guidance and mentoring. Please do not internalize your inability to get your curriculum covered as a function of your incompetence or not working hard enough. My observation from home (my wife is still in the trenches with you) is that you all are working harder than ever and are stressed to the max.

3) Do not roll over and accept unsafe workplace conditions. Spraying disinfectant is not cleaning—it is spraying disinfectant. If the district cannot afford to adequately clean and provide a sanitary educational environment, then it should admit this and go entirely remote until such time it is safe for all to return. Remember, school is a place for education and is not meant to be the triage tent of a battlefield. Air quality is important. Proof of filtration and testing (another familiar Covid-19 Era theme) is the only way to know what buildings are safe to be in. I'm sorry, but just because an authority says it's so, without documentation it's just another ploy to make you go away and do your job... like a canary.

4) Finally, please take care of yourself and your family. Far too often, educators put the needs of the job and their students in front of their own. While many in the community and country find this self-sacrifice noble and seem to expect or even demand it, often it appears that no matter what, you can never do enough. Don't listen to the crowd of know-it-alls. Learn when to step back. Pay attention to your needs and your family's needs. Try to balance your physical, mental, and emotional selves so that you survive the Covid-19 Era and do not become collateral damage. Protection of yourself and family starts with you. A lesson I learned many years ago doing a dangerous job on a fishing boat in Alaska was to not expect someone else to be looking out for me. There is no mega authority poised to sweep in and do the job of protecting you. You must be vigilant and aware of your rights as teachers to have safety in the workplace. Teachers must fight like everyone else for these rights. Don't be guilted into noble sacrifice. Teaching is a noble calling. Teaching should not be warfare dangerous.

## Guest Column

by Colleen Vitti

### YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Teachers and school-related professionals are a proud bunch. We know the impact we have on the lives of children, and it fuels us. But this pandemic has changed our game. In conversations again and again with colleagues, it has been shared that none of us feel that we are doing anything well. We sort of half-do our jobs—not for lack of trying but because of the constraints placed upon us. Many of us feel scared about contracting the virus, and mistrust abounds between “us” and the administration and the Board of Education and even among our own members—largely because we feel so out of control. Furthermore, the district has not provided us with the tools to excel while we teach both in-person and remote students at the exact same time. Yes, there is a “hybrid model” on paper, but those of us in the trenches know this isn't adequate—and it's

extremely frustrating. So, as a result, going to work is not really fun this year.

While at school, I have listened and I have cried and I have expressed my concerns—but I feel completely powerless. I typically am not a negative person, but I feel beaten down. And I just want to affirm that if you feel similarly, you are not alone right now. To combat the negativity, I don't know what else to do but to find solace in the small moments with the few students I see. None of these moments really has anything to do with teaching or learning but rather just making human connections. Today's highlight included rescuing a dead bug from the window for a student to bring home to her pet praying mantis. Hey, it's not much, but it's something, and it's just enough fuel to make me want to return to work tomorrow. For others, it may be a funny Zoom moment, a brisk lunchtime walk, or a productive conversation with a colleague. It is critical that we do what we can to preserve ourselves because this pandemic will end, and we will return to be the educators we once were—and I like to think we'll be even better. Thank you, RVF, for keeping us united during this time.



Free professional workshops are now being offered to all members through NYSUT's Mid-Hudson Regional Office. For more information and a complete list of seminars that are being offered through February 2021, please click [here](#). Sign up early, as enrollment is limited.

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