

This is Not What Democracy Looks Like: The AFT Convention and the Future of the US Labor Movement

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(See the addendum, at the end of the article in this repost of Trevor's previous piece. We apologize the original was inadvertently deleted and is no longer in the archive.)

This week, thousands of delegates from American Federation of Teachers (AFT) local unions will convene in Washington, DC and serve as the supreme governing body of the third largest union in the United States. They will elect the union's [46 executive officers](#), amend the federation's constitution, and set policies to govern AFT between

conventions— including by voting on [whether to increase the dues paid by AFT's 1 million members](#).

Unfortunately, most union conventions, including AFT's, serve mainly to ratify consensus positions among the leaders of large unions in the labor federation.

There may be significant symbolic debates over various resolutions on policy. This year, for instance, AFT delegates will debate as many as [108 resolutions and constitutional amendments](#).

But for all intents and purposes, the re-election of the AFT's national leaders this year is a foregone conclusion. Reliance upon convention delegate voting instead of rank-and-file member voting, and a voting system that encourages voting for caucus slates rather than individual officers, both discourages election participation (by small union locals especially) and leaves national AFT leadership virtually uncontested by default.

This lack of democracy suppresses turnout to conventions, and demoralizes and demobilizes union leaders and members alike.

The Silent Boycott: More Than 85% of AFT Locals Do Not Send Delegates to Convention

The lack of union democracy has demoralizing and de-mobilizing effects on AFT unions, and on the labor movement more generally. Some combination of not wanting to pay the cost of sending delegates to conventions and not believing that delegates have a meaningful voice has led to what is in effect an informal and unorganized boycott of the convention by AFT locals: an incredible 85 percent of AFT locals do not even bother sending a single delegate to the national convention.

At the last [AFT convention in 2024](#), 431 union locals and statewide affiliates sent 2,000 delegates to Houston to represent about 767,000 AFT members from across the US. That sounds impressive until you consider that national AFT represents more than 1 million non-retired members in “[more than 3,000 local affiliates](#).” Roughly 38 percent

of all dues-paying AFT members had no representation at all at the national 2024 convention. If the same thing happens at this week’s convention, about 460,000 AFT members will have no voice in who is elected AFT President or whether their dues be increased, let alone participate in bigger conversations about how to rebuild the labor movement.

Category of Membership	Number	Voting Eligibility	Percent Memb
Full Per Capita Tax Payers	766,741	Yes	42.6%
One Half Per Capita Tax Payers	229,251	Yes	12.7%
One Quarter Per Capita Tax Payers	56,864	Yes	3.2%
One Eighth Per Capita Tax Payers	17,633	Yes	1.0%
Laid Off Members and Unpaid Leave Members	5,955	Yes	0.3%
Associate Members	34,879	No	1.9%
Merged Local and State Members	153,500	Yes	8.5%
Retiree Members	485,954	Yes	27.0%
Non Chartered Members	48,513	No	2.7%
Members (Total of all lines above)	1,799,290		
Agency Fee Payers*	2,669		
Total Members/Fee Payers	1,801,959		
Total Members	1,799,290		
Total Voting Members	1,229,944		
Source: https://olmsapps.dol.gov/query/orgReport.do?rptId=900159&rptForm=LM3Form			

AFT Union Membership in 2024

The Unbeatable Slate: Progressive Caucus Dominates AFT for More than 50 Year

The issue that shapes union leaders’ decisions to effectively boycott the convention the perception of a lack of democracy within AFT.

Financial barriers to sending delegates thousands of miles away for five days of convention deliberations are significant, and union leaders who express concerns

about the costs of convention attendance shouldn't be dismissed as simply lacking solidarity.

But leaders of AFT locals, including mine, would be more open to subsidizing convention delegate travel if they thought convention business was directly tied to the union members' needs, and if they thought their delegates' participation would make any difference whatsoever on decisions made at the convention.

The fact is, once delegates elected by their locals arrive at an AFT convention, they find themselves operating within a one-party state run by the Progressive Caucus, which in turn is run by the Unity Caucus of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) — the largest AFT local in the US.

UFT delegates have dominated AFT conventions through slate elections at the local and national level for over half a century. Every AFT President for the last 62 years emerged out of UFT leadership, except for four years from 2004-8 when Edward McElroy served two terms as a [“transitional president”](#) following Sandra Feldman's diagnosis with breast cancer.

Today, the three top officers of AFT and every one of the 43 national Vice Presidents are all members of the Progressive Caucus. They run as a single slate that depends upon bloc voting. The leader of the caucus is the President of the union, who is also the top of the slate. A recent google form to join the Progressive Caucus even called the slate “Randi Weingarten's slate.”

One can't simply declare one's intention to join the caucus as a candidate for elected office, as candidates for elected office do in the US. You have to be invited. And most of the people invited are representatives of the largest labor unions in the federation. Inclusion on the slate provides direct personal access to the President, who can provide favors in the form of spending and staff support for causes that officers care about. But inclusion also requires supporting every candidate on the slate. Failure to

do so will get you kicked off the slate and effectively lock your union local out of national power.

Once most of the leaders of large unions pledge to turn out their delegates to support the union President, the election is all-but-over. Support has been traded for access before the votes have even been cast. Slate voting— which allows a delegate to simply check one box for an entire slate instead of voting separately for 46 different officers— tilts the scales even more by creating a disincentive for even thinking about the merits of individual officers.

Anyone in AFT who dares even exercise their right to participate in union elections outside the Progressive Caucus has to position themselves against the entire power structure of the union— including the President— whether they want to or not. Under the Caucus splits, which so far it never has, such challenges (recently by small groups like [By Any Means Necessary, or BAMN](#)) are dead on arrival.

This system gives power to representatives of the largest labor unions in AFT at the expense of everyone else. If organized collectively, which many but not all of them are, delegates from the top 90 largest union locals can control an organization of over 3,000 locals even if every AFT local sends a delegate to the convention.

Because most union locals don't send delegates to the convention, however, majority control over the convention doesn't even require support from a majority of AFT members. In 2024, the top 18 largest AFT locals (5 % of those present) commanded more than 50 percent of the voting strength of the 2024 convention. The top 30 largest AFT locals, which represented only 35 percent of all non-retired AFT members nationally, controlled 60 percent of the convention's voting strength.

That's game over before it's begun. Most of the large locals have representation on the Progressive Caucus slate, and their leaders will therefore encourage their delegates to vote for the Progressive Caucus. The bottom 95% of locals that sent delegates to the

convention couldn't have won the election even if it had been contested, so long as largest unions stayed united.

Union Name	AFT Local	Voting Strength	Delegates	State	Percent Voting	Percent Delegates	Percent Mer
United Federation of Teachers	2	119,376	734	New York	15.6%	27.3%	9.7%
United University Professions	2190	37,229	30	New York	4.9%	1.1%	3.0%
United Teachers Los Angeles	1021	32,631	20	California	4.3%	0.7%	2.7%
Chicago Teachers Union	1	26,049	68	Illinois	3.4%	2.5%	2.1%
Public Employees Federation	4053	24,794	13	New York	3.2%	0.5%	2.0%
Professional Staff Congress	2334	15,210	11	New York	2.0%	0.4%	1.2%
Washington State Nurses Association	5901	14,693	12	Washington	1.9%	0.4%	1.2%
AMPR-Local Sindical	6582	12,785	9	Puerto Rico	1.7%	0.3%	1.0%
Oregon Nurses Association	5905	12,677	3	Oregon	1.7%	0.1%	1.0%
Philadelphia Federation of Teachers	3	12,511	68	Pennsylvania	1.6%	2.5%	1.0%
Oregon School Employees Association	6732	12,116	3	Oregon	1.6%	0.1%	1.0%
United Teachers of Dade	1974	11,432	32	Florida	1.5%	1.2%	0.9%
AAUP-Advocacy	6741	10,423	10	District of Columbia	1.4%	0.4%	0.8%
AFT Local 604	604	10,370	30	Illinois	1.4%	1.1%	0.8%
Broward Teachers Union	1975	9,625	16	Florida	1.3%	0.6%	0.8%
United Faculty of Florida	7463	9,292	28	Florida	1.2%	1.0%	0.8%
Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association	7432	8,677	10	Florida	1.1%	0.4%	0.7%
Boston Teachers Union	66	7,954	57	Massachusetts	1.0%	2.1%	0.6%
Orange County Classroom Teachers Association	7448	7,502	15	Florida	1.0%	0.6%	0.6%
Baltimore Teachers Union	340	7,300	50	Maryland	1.0%	1.9%	0.6%
TOTAL		402,646	1,219		52.5%	45.3%	32.7%

Top 20 largest union locals that sent delegates to AFT 2024 Convention.

Unions' archaic, manual voting systems make elections even more undemocratic. Though technically delegate counts are supposed to be weighted based on how many members delegates' unions represent, it takes multiple hours to manually conduct a "roll call" vote of thousands of delegates and then adjust the vote as required by the constitution to reflect the different "strength" of different delegates. The failure of unions to create a secure electronic voting system for delegate voting is inexplicable unless the intent is to prevent roll call voting by making it too time consuming.

This is why union federations, including AFT and the AFL-CIO, often do proxy voting by delegate headcount, without adjusting votes for delegate strength: it reduces the time to manually collect an approximate vote of those present. Unfortunately, proxy voting gives an advantage to unions willing to spend the most resources to send the most delegates to convention. And no AFT local sends more delegates to attend an expenses paid 5-day convention than UFT.

In 2024, UFT sent an incredible 734 delegates to the national convention in Houston even though its voting strength is not dependent on how many delegates it sends. UFT delegates to the convention had a voting strength of 16% of all delegates, but sent 20% of all convention delegates. This was an overwhelming show of force. No other AFL-CIO local even sent 70 delegates. Meanwhile, the bottom 90% of union locals and state federations represented at the 2024 convention sent less than 10 delegates each.

How much did UFT spend to send 734 delegates from New York City to Houston for 4 days and 5 nights in 2024? A probably too modest \$2,000 per delegate would come to at least \$1.5 million. And the bill was likely much higher than that.

Needless to say, most union locals don't have that kind of money. And even if they could, their leaders would have to justify to their members why they would spend their dues for this kind of expense. If the national AFT election is already locked up, why bother? And so the de-mobilizing, demoralizing cycle of rule by political machine repeats itself every two years.

For More Democratic Unions, We Need More Democratic Union Federations

Based on my experience at the local level in AFT, I encourage all unions, including AFT, to embrace a few basic changes in order to increase union participation in governance, reduce costs, and reduce the carbon footprint of hosting conventions:

- Make election of *at least* the top 3 officers of the union something that is done remotely by rank-and-file members via secret ballot, not via convention delegates
- Experiment with virtual governance: either via all-remote meetings or via in-person regional meetings that are easier to travel to and are digitally networked together
- For delegate voting, enact an electronic system that assigns voting strength to delegates to more efficiently comply with the union constitution, so that union conventions can stop using delegate headcount as a time-saving proxy that rewards union locals who send the most delegates to conventions

- Have the national labor federation administer the election of delegates to the national convention, to reduce union local costs and avoid redundancy
- End bloc voting as a ballot option so that members and delegates must vote for (and therefore consider) officers individually

If such a platform requires challenging the Progressive Caucus, so be it.

As Chris Bohner recently wrote in Labor Notes, “[Direct Elections for Labor Leaders Make for More Militant Unions](#).” The inverse is also true: indirect elections can increase barriers and reduce incentives to participate in union governance. It’s hard to have a militant labor movement committed to economic democracy if even union local leaders—the people most likely to serve as delegates—don’t believe that they have a meaningful voice in their own organization.

ADDENDUM

AFT National Convention Turnout in 2026

Turnout to the AFT Convention in 2026 was roughly similar to convention turnout in 2024.

AFT Convention Attendance Contrast	2024	2026	
Number of union locals and state federations	431	438	
Rough % of locals attended	14.4%	14.6%	
Members represented/ voting strength	767,150	798,616*	
Percent total members represented	62.4%	64.2%	
Delegates	2,690	2,895	

* Based on 2025 membership data because 2026 data is unavailable in July 2025

Sources:

- [2024 AFT Convention Roll Call](#)
- [2026 AFT Convention Roll Call](#)

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