

AFT Convention 2012: Detroit

By Ruth Cion, Goodwin Tech

AFT delegates from throughout the nation met in the Motor City last month to update resolutions on important union matters including human and women rights, health care, organizing and educational issues. Teachers from Detroit expressed gratitude for the national convention being held where the loss of jobs and the erosion of collective bargaining rights have been ongoing problems. Along the city's river walk stands the nation's largest work honoring working men and women. However, streets appeared deserted and many buildings were empty. As we walked past the Michigan Labor Legacy Landmark—Transcending—the soaring arches frame many monuments. Sadly, few folks explored the statues of Solidarity, quotes from Samuel Gompers and Mother Jones and tributes to Labor's dedication to social justice. Detroit is not the city it used to be since hundreds of thousands of former residents have fled looking for jobs elsewhere. The streets were often eerily silent.

At a preconference workshop, teachers from Michigan shared lesson plans with objectives such as "How does the study of Labor History enrich the development of Civil Rights." We have tried to include Labor History in Connecticut History in the last year. The hope for such inclusion of Labor History will continue to be a cause of AFT-Connecticut activism. In Michigan, Wisconsin, and other states, the loss of collective bargaining and jobs has called our brothers and sisters to action over the pain of reduced benefits, loss of jobs and greater class sizes. Hundreds of AFT members demonstrated solidarity in the public square in front of the Detroit Teachers Headquarters gathering with Detroit students, families, teachers and convention attendees as numerous local area TV stations broadcast the issues of contractual negotiation needed before the next elections.

The next solidarity event would prove a powerful activist afternoon. Over 600 AFT members from around the country hit the streets of Detroit's suburbs to educate voters concerning the importance of amending the Michigan constitution to again allow for collective bargaining. We were awarded a letter and a pin for volunteering to help our Michigan colleagues. In the past few years, more than 80 anti-union bills were pushed through the Michigan statehouse. Each of us spoke to about 100 voters. Community activists knocked on doors to build support for November's ballot initiative, yet many Michigan voters did not know about the amendment proposing reinstatement for collective bargaining. Many couldn't believe it was ever taken away.

Following the literature drop concerning the change of the Michigan constitution to allow collective bargaining, the buses brought us to the Detroit Institute of Arts where an incredible reception was held in the room where Diego Rivera had painted his tribute to labor, "Detroit Industry." The frescos reflect Rivera's impressions of the vast automobile assembly lines at the Ford Motor Co. River Rouge plant, and modern technology's impact on society—both positive and negative-- such as hope for advancement and the threat of war and poison gas. Additionally, the rooms of this grand museum were open with art from impressionism, African American artists, Ancient Egypt, American painting and furniture, and other galleries. Rivera's art speaks to the dignity of workers and groups of laborers on the assembly line had a power beyond Ford's United Auto Workers for higher pay and improvement in working conditions.

At the Public Employees Breakfast, newspaper reporter David Cay Johnston, set the stage concerning the 99% and the Occupy movement by noting the gap of those who pay taxes, and those who pay no taxes on incomes over 1 million dollars. Johnston reminded attendees that the United States ranks No. 1 in child poverty among modern nations.

Students known as “the Dreamers” described their struggle to access education in America. Often undocumented students are deported or their families are broken up. These students have now been allowed to continue to study here and remain in the United States. Under options described by the Dream Act, students who came to this country as young students in families will no longer be deported or detained. Speakers explained the immigration system that is so complex with multiple questions related to this policy to direct student and parent resources to allow students to remain in this country to complete college. “Dreamers” spoke of marches and gathering to maintain rights to be allowed to remain in the U.S.

United Auto Workers President, Bob King, addressed the body with powerful words concerning the glory days of trade unionism. The changes in Detroit and the recent rebound in the Motor City again bear the promise of union labor. Those of us from Connecticut were grateful for our participation in our contracts, even though they are not perfect. SVFT reached out to our brothers and sisters to help in the mid-west and other states. Other resolutions on human and women’s rights allowed us to participate in the Women’s Rights celebration. Sandra Fluke, who was insulted by a rightwing radio commentator, spoke about her concerns for women to have access to contraception.

Diane Ravitch, educational historian, spoke about the fallacy of high stakes testing. She also noted how teachers must now learn the Common Core curricula. Ravitch noted that firing teachers creates turmoil and instability. She emphasized that poverty is the greatest factor in school failures. Further, teachers must help keep open neighborhood schools. Her hope to keep unionized groups strong leads to causes that are just and student centered.

The election of AFT officers was held with our own Sharon Palmer, president of AFT-CT reelected as one of approximately 43 AFT vice presidents. We congratulate Sharon on her re-election.

A convention highlight was the Sunday general session. Vice President Joe Biden and his wife, Dr. Jill Biden, a college professor, addressed the convention concerning the role of teachers in education reform. “We don’t see you as the problem, we see you as the solution,” the vice president said. Many convention delegates were dressed in Obama/Biden blue t-shirts. Amid shouts of “Four more years,” Obama/Biden signs were held on high. Joe Biden praised his wife as a teacher. Dr. Jill Biden stated “Being a teacher is not what I do, it’s who I am!” At the end of his speech, Biden waded into the crowd and then remained backstage as the delegates passed a resolution reaffirming endorsement of President Obama and Vice President Biden as AFT’s candidates in November 2012.

It was a powerful and moving visit to Detroit, a city that is trying to recapture its greatness. With the help of AFT and its members, it just might.