

Vocational Instructor

Local 4200A ~ AFT, AFTCT, & AFL-CIO



"It Pays
To Be Taught
By a Vo-Tech
Teacher"

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Two Elephants Make a Crowded Room

By Ed Leavy, SVFT President

In a district of our size and complexity, there are always scores of issues going on. There is, however, always one issue that dominates the year. This year has of course been COVID, and it has been a challenge to make sure that we are not all-COVID, all the time. With the vaccines being rolled out now, after a full year (the system went all-remote on March 16, 2020) the return to something like normal may be in sight. While the vaccination process and all its related concerns are beginning, so too are negotiations. Balancing the demand of two issues is a challenge, so it is important for everyone to know where we are with both.

Covid and the vaccine: As infection rates fall to the lowest rates in months, many schools are increasing the number of students in the classrooms while remaining in hybrid. The action is understandable, but to many teachers seems like the worst of both worlds – much of the risk of having full inclusion combined with all the problems of hybrid teaching. This week we hit the one-year anniversary of the schools going to all-remote, and that grim anniversary – with the sobering realization half a million people have died from the disease since we were last all in school – has arrived as we are finally being vaccinated. When we left last year, we could not have imagined that a full year later we would be facing uncertainty about what the rest of the school year will look like.

The CDC guidelines indicate that once teachers have been offered the vaccination, schools should reopen if they can provide proper mitigation. This guidance brings us right back to where we were in September: no classrooms, certainly no classrooms in our district, are built for 6' of separation with 24 students in the room. What the appropriate distance is when teachers have had the opportunity to be vaccinated is not clear; there seems to be different ideas among the experts, so who know? Obviously, students have not been vaccinated, but that seems to be less of a concern to people who have studied infection rates among students in school. In a year of uncertainty, we face more uncertainty.

The vaccine rollout has gone as well as can be expected. The process at each school is the responsibility of the local DPH, not the principal or the Superintendent. We have received many questions about privacy and HIPAA violations. Clearly, there is a stress between an individual's right to privacy on medical issues and the school's operational need to perform and react to contact tracing. We have been assured by multiple attorneys that asking teachers whether they plan to be vaccinated is not a violation of law. Conversely, I talked to a president of another AFT CT teacher local who had the secretary ask each teacher during the middle of class when and if he or she was going to be vaccinated, then put the chart up in the main office. During an AFT CT meeting with the Administration, we asked if they would publish best practices for how to handle this information. Like everything that has to do with COVID, there are no good answers, so we try to settle for the least bad.

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Negotiations. We have signed ground rules that we will not publicize proposals made unless and until we go to arbitration. We will of course follow the ground rules. The Governor's budget, however, is a public document, and the budget specifically calls for two hard zeroes (no GWI, no increment, no pools of money) during the next two years. It is a public contract that the State has hired the law firm Jackson Lewis, known widely for their union-busting work, to negotiate several of the 31 contracts. It has also been publicly reported that the State has proposed numerous language changes across multiple bargaining units that expand management rights and shrink labor rights. All of that is known about the 31 contracts the State is currently negotiating.

Of course, we are in the beginning stages of negotiations, and what the parties want to start and what they end up with are very different things. To date, the unions have not decided to work together under SE-BAC to negotiate salary, as has been the case for over 12 years. It seems crazy to have 31 different bargaining units try to negotiate 31 separate wage patterns, but so far the administration has not requested we do so. If anyone tells you that the negotiating team "has decided to" or "has already" done anything, they are mistaken. We are not just at the beginning of the process, we are at the start of the beginning.

Labor History: The Simpsons

By Ed Leavy

Popular culture rarely acknowledges organized labor. There is the occasional movie that is specifically about labor, such as *Matewan*, *Norma Rae*, and *Hoffa*. Rarely, though, is being in a union part of a person's life; characters may be community organizers, but not labor organizers. Television is even worse: people have jobs, but their union is irrelevant. Carl Winslow in *Family Matters* is a police officer, but that is never mentioned. In fact, there are thousands of police officers on TV and police unions are highly controversial, but it escapes any consideration. Doug Heffernan from *King of Queens* and Cliff from *Cheers* are in unions – and Cliff seems like he would need union representation often – but I don't

remember any episodes of that being mentioned. It's ironic, because everyone associated with the making of the show, from the writers and actors to the set designers and the dolly grips, are in unions. The Screen Actors' Guild plays a major role in actors' lives since they get health insurance through their union. But for anyone who wants to see a portrayal of unions on television, Thank God for *The Simpsons*.

Who is the only character in television history who was a union president? Homer Simpson, in "Last Exit to Springfield." Homer become president of his union, The International Brotherhood of Jazz Dancers, Pastry Chefs, and Nuclear Technicians – a job at unions' tendency to organize workers who have little to do with their original mission (the United Auto Workers has Foxwood casino workers and the UConn graduate assistants in Connecticut; the American Federation of Teachers has healthcare workers, accountants, and attorneys). The show makes fun of the mob-related violence that nearly destroyed some unions in the 1970s; Homer becomes president because the previous president went "missing" after vowing to clean up corruption (The Sopranos obviously mined union-Mafia relations as well). The episode alludes to the rumor that Jimmy Hoffa is buried in the stadium where the Jets and Giants play when a player trips over an obvious grave during a game. The reason for the strike, however, is unfortunately not far-fetched at all: Mr. Burns wants to reduce health insurance benefits.

This clip is hardly pro-union – Homer cares about the dental plan for purely selfish reasons, union corruption is a given, and the members are completely content to swap a dental plan for a monthly keg of beer. But *The Simpsons* is rarely pro-anything (except Marge). The descriptions of unions beginning as necessary but then becoming "shiftless and corrupt" is a disproven cliché, though admittedly funny in this context. What does ring true is that Mr. Burns wants to break the union not because he needs to survive financially, but simply because he wants to. His decision to take away the dental plan is simply a whim because he hates the idea of sharing anything with the workers. He believes he deserves everything from the company because it is his company, even though he inherited it rather than built it himself.

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The only thing that keeps that from happening is the union, and the workers' willingness to rally around Homer. Anyone who wonders if management seeks to take back rights simply because they want to has never been in negotiations.

The show is probably best known for Lisa's strike song, though it is often listed as the best Simpson's episode. In 2017 when Argentina was beset by strikes, including a large strike by the Clarin Group, the song was translated and adapted to the picket line. Mr. Burns concedes the issue only after he turn off the power and the strikers, rather than quitting, continue to sing the strike song. Anyone who has ever been on a picket line knows both the importance of singing and chanting to keep energy up, but that the most important thing to do is not give up. Mr. Burns call Homer into his office with a deal: he will restore the dental plan if Homer agrees to quit as union president. When Homer triumphantly exclaim "Whoo Hoo" and begins spinning on the floor like Curly from the Three Stooges, Burns admits that he is "beginning to think Simpson was not the brilliant tactician I thought he was." In reality, though, Homer is better at being union president than he is at almost anything else, because he is passionate, persistent, and people are willing to follow him. It is an important, if humbling, reminder of what it takes to be a union leader.

My love for The Simpsons makes me completely biased, but I cannot recommend "Last Exit to Springfield" enough. It is very funny and smart about labor-management relations. They also have an episode about a teacher strike which may well find its way to the newsletter. Every Simpson episode is available for streaming on Disney+.



Letter to The Editor: We Need to Reopen

By Julio Pena

The Vocational Instructor is the newsletter of the members, not the leadership -- even though the leadership inevitably writes the vast amount of the articles. We welcome and encourage members to send in articles or letters to publish, which we preface with this message. Publishing a letter does not indicate the leadership agrees or disagrees with the sentiments expressed. We thank Julio for his letter.

It is well documented at this point that children and teens are among the least affected by Covid-19. In Connecticut, the under 19 age group represents the lowest case rate per 100,000 people and, by far, the fewest number of deaths. The truth of the matter is that children and teens are almost completely unharmed or are minimally affected by the virus and do not spread it nearly as much as adults do. Yet, to varying degrees, we have kept teenagers out of our school buildings for various lengths of time. We are seeing clearly now how detrimental it is for teenagers to be heavily involved in virtual learning or hybrid learning. It does not work. Children across the country are failing at far higher rates than in the past and our own district is drastically altering grading policies to account for this. Doctors and therapists across the nation are reporting staggering increases in violent abuse at home, mental illness including depression, and suicide attempts among children. Do not take my word for it, just Google it. You will find plenty of evidence. Just one month ago NPR published a report about the effect that the pandemic is having on teen suicide. Please tell me again why we are keeping the schools closed?

There is no science or logic that supports the idea that students should be learning from home. It has been reported for months by the CDC, the WHO, and the New England Journal of Medicine (as far back as September!) that schools can fully reopen safely. It pains me to watch my students fail at alarming rates and to only have a connection with my students that is mostly virtual. I have spent more hours than in any other year calling home to speak with the parents of children who are struggling. Almost every parent that I speak with says the same thing, "Distance learning doesn't work for my kid."

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Most of them are yearning for the schools to open fully and have an opportunity to send their children to school every day. Once again, tell me why we are keeping schools closed?

I understand there are adults who have legitimate concerns about catching and/or spreading the virus. I do not want to take away from that. However, let us not forget that we became educators for students first. If a teacher has health concerns, he or she has options and can speak with the superintendent, human resources, and the building principal to develop a plan. Please, let us work together and get our students back to school, now.

Some Principle of Being

By Ed Leavy

This article will not be for everyone, which will become clearer when I quote poetry later in the paragraph. I have a great friend who as I approach 60 is helping me try to negotiate these next stages of life with more grace than I have shown in my previous stages. Recently, she shared some lines of poetry with me from Stanley Kunitz's "The Layers":

I have walked through many lives,
some of them my own,
and I am not who I once was,
though some principle of being
abides, from which I struggle
not to stray.

One aspect I loved about teaching high school is that we walk through so many lives for four of the most tumultuous years for kids. Though we are the role models and guides, those lives affect us too. I think of Shaheera, whom I met as an incoming freshman looking uncertainly at her future after her father passed away and said goodbye to as a graduating senior looking uncertainly at her future as a new single mom. I think of Larry, who was one of the smartest people I knew even though he was 19 and a sixth-year senior, trying to find a place in a world that made little sense to him. I think of Kendra, who through her anger and humor taught me – a person in his early 20s, born and raised in then all-white Shelton –

some of my earliest lessons about race. They, and so many others, have helped mold me from the clay that is intrinsic to me into whom I am. Teaching is so much about our relationships with our students that they leave us not who we once were.

Covid has changed that. Relationships over Google Meets are not really relationships at all; they are a two-dimensional illusion of a relationship. Seeing student in a two square inch box on a computer screen is not being in a room with them, watching them interact with others, sensing their struggles or their joys. There is no keeping an eye on them in the hall or at the end of the day, seeing if something is different. We talk of its effect on students, as we should. We argue that when we move post-vaccine to helping students recover "learning loss," we cannot simply measure literacy and numeracy because they are testable; many students have had far fewer personal interactions at a time when those abilities are developing, and we need to address that too. Yet teachers have lost that time as well – lost it a stage when we are more fully developed emotionally and intellectually than the students, but lost it nevertheless. We are walking through fewer lives, so many of us retreat to our "principle of being."

My work experience has been affected less than it would have been in the classroom. I visit schools less often, I sit and talk less with people after meetings, I don't grab a beer with some of the reps after our Executive Council meetings. That is far different to going from 18 students in a shop or 26 in a classroom to five in the room, ten online, and the rest God knows where. I can feel the difference in my life, though. It is at times difficult for me to assess what is the principle of being that must abide within me, and what is mere stubbornness because I now spend so little time in rooms with other people. It is something I sense in so many communications with so many people: there is an increased sense of how we feel, because we have less chance to experience what other people feel. It's not clear that will just disappear as we slowly transition back to full classrooms, in-person meetings, and sitting together for lunch. This last year may change.

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People who choose to get in education also choose to walk through other lives. We are used to spending more time with more people, forming more relationships than almost any other profession. Who we are as people becomes the tension between walking through other lives and our principle of being. For a full year, that tension has been distorted. As the end of the pandemic comes into sight, our challenge is to restore that tension. It is not only necessary for our students. It's necessary for us.

Paid Family Medical Leave FAQs

Last year, Connecticut passed the Paid Family Medical Leave Bill which provides paid time off for employees taking care of family members whether they be grandparents or infants. The bill itself reads like it has been translated from Sanskrit; it is confusing even by legislative standards. We had a Zoom call recently about the bill, and I promised some clarification. Much thanks to Sara Roller for her research and help on understanding the bill.

ARE WE CURRENTLY COVERED BY PFLMA?

No. The bill excludes any workers who have already negotiated paid family leave. The SEBAC 2017 agreement allowed the use of sick time accruals for anything covered by FMLA. While we are limited to five family sick days for non-FMLA issues, that restriction no longer applies to issues covered by FMLA. As an example, a woman having a child used to be eligible to use sick time for 6-8 weeks; anything beyond that was unpaid even if the person still had sick time left. Since 2017, she can now use her sick time for child-rearing.

HOW LONG IS PAID LEAVE?

If you are an employee who is eligible for the CTPL program and you are experiencing one of the qualifying reasons for leave, you are entitled to up to twelve (12) weeks of paid leave benefits. In the event you experience a serious health condition resulting in incapacitation that occurs during a pregnancy, you may qualify for an additional two (2) weeks of paid leave benefits under the CTPL program. Paid leave benefits may be received for time off days and weeks but may also be received for time off taken intermittently in certain circumstances.

HOW MUCH WILL I GET PAID?

As a covered employee, your benefit rate will be calculated in the following ways:

- If your wages are less than or equal to the Connecticut minimum wage multiplied by 40, your weekly benefit rate under the PFMLA will be 95% of your average weekly wage.
 - Note: 40 times the minimum wage will be equal to \$520 weekly in January 2022, increasing to \$560 on July 1, 2022, and \$600 on June 1, 2023.
 - If your wages exceed the Connecticut minimum wage multiplied by 40, your weekly benefit rate will be 95% of the Connecticut minimum wage multiplied by 40 plus 60% of the amount your average weekly wage exceeds the Connecticut minimum wage multiplied by 40. The benefit rate is capped at 60 times the Connecticut minimum wage.
 - Note: 60 times the minimum wage will be equal to \$780 weekly in January 2022, increasing to \$840 on July 1, 2022, and \$900 on June 1, 2023.
- The PFMLA stipulates benefit rates may be reduced if revenue is insufficient.

HOW IS PFMLA PAID FOR?

The funding to support the CTPL program will come in the form of employee payroll deductions beginning January 1, 2021. These payroll deductions are capped at 0.5% of the employee's wages up to the Social Security contribution base.

WHEN DOES THE PROGRAM START?

Employee contributions were supposed to start on January 1, but that has been delayed. The "catch up" will require 1% payments until the missed payments are covered. The program itself is scheduled to start January 1, 2022.

IF WE CHOSE TO PARTICIPATE, CAN WE?

We would need to negotiate it into the contract. The language that was recommended is, "Upon 30 days notification from the Union, the bargaining unit will participate in the Paid Family Medical Leave Act." It is 100% of the bargaining unit or 0%; individuals cannot participate in the program on their own.

IS THE SVFT GOING TO PARTICIPATE?

There is a survey in the email for the newsletter, which the negotiating team will consider when making a final decision. It is not currently a proposal.

Labor-Management Meeting Planned

Our third Labor-Management meeting of the year will be held March 16th over Zoom. We plan to discuss the following topics:

- The vaccine rollout: how will the needs of the schools for contact tracing be balance with the members' rights to privacy on medical issues?
- Return to full in-school learning: As more school districts return to full inclusion now that vaccines are available, what is the plan for the CTECS? How will CDC-recommended safety protocols be implemented?
- Grading Policy: Is there a plan to address teachers' concerns over the new grading policy? Should we expect further revisions to it?
- Credentials: The district pushes high-level trade credentials for students, but even when it promises students that we will pay for those credentials, the payment can be a problem.
- CDLs: How does the new federal database for people with CDLs affect those members who live out of state but want to carry a CDL in CT?
- Sports: What's the plan for the spring, and how will the disparate impact on different winter sports be addressed.

Anyone who would like to see an additional item on the agenda should either email one of the officers or call 203-793-7996 with your ideas.



Vocational Instructor

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SVFT Mission Statement

The SVFT is an organization of professional educators that promotes excellence through the mutual adherence to policies, documents, and procedures negotiated with the CTEC. We work to guarantee that the contract is followed and positive working conditions are maintained. This organization shall be to provide a safe and positive teaching environment for all by:

1. Maintaining the integrity of the contract, the Vocational Technical High School System, and the solidarity of the union
2. Ensuring all members are protected by the contract and equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to make them successful
3. Protecting the jobs of our members and strengthening our system
4. Providing members opportunities to further their education and receive quality professional development
5. Responding quickly to the emerging changes to the workplace and technological challenges
6. Handling all interactions with fairness and integrity
7. Striving for productive, open communication between the SVFT leadership and our membership
8. Building and improving relationships with our union affiliates and local labor councils