

UW System workers gather to preserve academic freedom

On September 19, faculty, academic staff, and graduate students from across the UW System gathered in Milwaukee to participate in the Higher Education Workers Summit, sponsored jointly by AFT-Wisconsin and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). The meeting, organized by members of AFT-Wisconsin's Higher Education Council along with colleagues from the AAUP, brought together members from eight UW System institutions to plan a collective, statewide defense of educational quality and academic freedom in the UW System. AFT Executive Vice President Mary Cathryn Ricker urged participants to organize in their workplaces and their communities over these issues, not only for Wisconsin, but for other states that will face similar battles. "This meeting could provide inspiration to unions around the country," she told attendees.

Over the course of the day, participants discussed looming changes to tenure policy and academic freedom, including how they might—or might not—comply with national AAUP standards, and planned a coordinated series of events on the importance of academic freedom, higher education funding, and the casualization of the academic workforce. Richard Leson, a UW-Milwaukee faculty member and president of AFT local 3535, The Association of University of Wisconsin Professionals (TAUWP), left the meeting with a feeling of optimism. "The summit demonstrated the considerable analytical and strategic strengths of our combined organizations and what we can begin to accomplish if we stand together against the assaults on academic freedom and shared governance in Wisconsin," he said afterwards.



Members of AFT-Wisconsin and AAUP at the Higher Education Workers Summit, held on September 19 in Milwaukee.

Many participants noted, both during the summit and after, that such a meeting was greatly needed, coming as it did during a years-long sustained assault on the UW System and on public higher education around the country. "It's easy to feel isolated on our campuses and as individuals and, therefore, to feel helpless," said Rebecca Stephens, a faculty member of the UW-Stevens Point Academic Representation Council, AFT local 6505. "Coming together at the summit was a great reminder that the antidote to isolation is collaboration and of the potential power of a collective voice." On a similar note, Richard added, "I found it empowering and heartening to meet with concerned and dedicated colleagues from across the state, many of whom drink beer."

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Sharing best practices to support grieving students

Losing a loved one is never easy—and that’s especially true for students who lose a close friend or family member. And yet a 2012 survey by AFT and New York Life Foundation in 2012 found that 7 in 10 teachers have a grieving student in their classroom—but only 7% of teachers reported that they had ever received bereavement training. Julie Petersen, a school counselor at Parkview Elementary in Chippewa Falls and a member of AFT local 1907, is part of a group of AFT members working to change that across the country. This summer, Julie participated in a two-day AFT workshop titled “Supporting Grieving Students,” in which Julie and other attendees learned about research-based best practices for providing active support for students who are dealing with loss.

According to Julie, an essential part of the training was a focus on the need to share these practices widely—not just among school counselors and school psychologists, but among educators of all kinds. “Students need to be supported throughout the school day when they are confronted with grief and loss,” said Julie. As part of their commitment to promoting grief-sensitive schools, Julie and other AFT members will be providing trainings in their districts and beyond that will help school staff learn how best to support students through times of loss. “Both students and staff are confronted with grief and loss on a daily basis,” Julie said. “The training I’ll be sharing will give school staff information and techniques to help them help our students through these hard times.”

AFT-Wisconsin members work to address racial equity

Throughout our union’s history, AFT members have often been at the forefront of the labor movement in addressing racism and fighting for social justice—not only in our communities and our workplaces, but, when necessary, within the labor movement and the AFT itself. One of the very earliest AFT charters was issued to a union of black high school teachers in Washington, D.C., prior to the second ever AFT convention. And in the 1950s and 1960s, AFT members worked hand-in-hand with civil rights leaders to fight school segregation and Jim Crow, while the AFT banned segregated locals in 1953 and then expelled all local unions that insisted upon segregation. Now, following a series of high-profile deaths of young black men and women at the hands of police, AFT members have formed the AFT Racial Equity Task Force (RETF), which includes AFT-Wisconsin members Katie Zaman of AFT local 3220, the UW-Madison Teaching Assistants’ Association (TAA), and Cynthia Wynn of AFT local 4822, the Wisconsin State Public Defenders Association. The RETF met over the summer with the goal of drafting recommendations for our union to join the front lines of the fight against racism in the American educational, economic, and criminal justice systems.

Both Katie and Cynthia brought deep personal investment in these issues to the RETF. “As a public defender in Milwaukee County, I have witnessed the racial inequities of the criminal justice system on a daily basis,” said Cynthia, who is also an AFT-Wisconsin Vice President at Large. “I’m happy that the leadership of AFT has decided to take on this issue in a serious way, and I see the RETF as the start of a long-term process for AFT leaders and members to combat structural racism.” Katie, who is a member of the TAA’s diversity committee, a community anti-racist activist, and the AFT-Wisconsin Graduate Employees Vice President, similarly sees the work of the RETF as providing a starting point for AFT members to effect change in their communities. “Unions have the responsibility to be on the front lines of fighting racism,” she said. “This work is part of the shift toward social movement unionism—by focusing on the most important social needs in our communities, we can make our union a force for positive change in people’s lives.”

The RETF has issued a report to the AFT Executive Board, a final version of which will be released soon. After the release of the RETF report, Katie said, the real work will begin: “I am looking forward to sharing the task force’s recommendations with AFT-Wisconsin membership and working on implementing them. There will be clear ways for states and locals to begin moving towards anti-racist organizing right away.”