

# American Teacher

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## Workers' rights are human rights

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In 2006, the AFT will celebrate 90 years as a union. Over the years, we have grown steadily and forged a reputation as a strong advocate for our members' economic and professional interests. But our success also is due—borrowing words from a 1960s melody—to “a little help from [our] friends.”

Indeed, the AFT might never have been born had it not been for the assistance of the United Auto Workers, the United Steelworkers and other private sector unions that reached out to us and offered their generous public, financial and moral support.

AFT leaders and members have always done what they could to return the favor to our union brothers and sisters. And we can do so again this Dec. 10 on International Human Rights Day, when union members across the country are mobilizing to demand that working people be guaranteed the right to join and participate in a union.

At public rallies, candlelight vigils, teach-ins and other events, union members will highlight the obstacles workers face—obstacles that exist not only in many foreign countries, but right here in America.

International Human Rights Day commemorates the anniversary of the United Nations “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” in 1948. This historic U.N.

document recognized the many fundamental rights that people in every nation enjoy, including the right to join with other workers, form unions and sit down at the table to bargain contracts.

Thirteen years before the U.N.'s declaration, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Labor Relations Act, and millions of Americans joined unions in the years that followed. The presidents who followed Roosevelt—both Democrats and Republicans—generally respected the rights of working people.

President Dwight Eisenhower once said, “Only a fool would try to deprive working men and working women of their right to join the union of their choice.” Unfortunately, across the country, there are far too many fools using threats, coercion and intimidation to block union organizing. These obstacles are particularly serious for private sector employees.

After examining hundreds of organizing campaigns, Cornell University researcher Kate Bronfenbrenner recently issued a report revealing that:

- Ninety-two percent of private sector employers require employees to attend closed-door meetings to hear one-sided, anti-union propaganda.

- Roughly half of all employers threaten to partially or completely close their operations if employees vote to form a union.
- In one out of four organizing campaigns, private employers illegally fire workers simply because they wish to form a union.
- Even when employees vote to form a union, one in three employers never negotiates a contract—using legal appeals or other delaying tactics.

This report confirmed what our union has long experienced. The AFT has helped thousands of nurses and health professionals form unions in the face of hospitals' union-busting campaigns—run by high-priced consultants and replete with disinformation and double talk.

The right to form unions is meeting hostility not only from private employers but also from our own government. In recent years, we have seen unprecedented, mean-spirited attacks on the rights and contractual benefits of thousands of employees.

Last year, for example, the National Labor Relations Board reversed itself and ruled that research or graduate assistants at

private universities do not have the right to unionize, despite the fact that they are underpaid, perform important tasks for their institutions, and deserve a union to secure better pay and working conditions. Earlier this year, the governors in Indiana and Missouri revoked the collective bargaining rights of their state employees.

Even when bargaining rights aren't under direct assault, public sector employers use pressure tactics to privatize jobs or force unions to make major concessions on salaries or benefits. Last year, Kentucky's governor tried to change a state health insurance plan and impose dramatically higher costs on state employees and teachers. It took a determined campaign to defeat the governor's scheme.

If we allow anti-union forces to continue to run roughshod over the fundamental right of workplace democracy, it's only a matter of time before all public sector AFT locals face similar attacks.

AFT members can do something about this on Saturday, Dec. 10, by participating in one of the "Workers' Rights Are Human Rights" events in their cities or states.

Find out your local's plans and learn more about this important day at <http://www.aft.org/december10>