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AFT Votes bus tour finishes with a flourish

Ending on Nov. 1 after a spirited dash through Florida, the AFT Votes bus tour visited thousands of members in 14 states, tapping into excitement for the presidential election and helping our members get out the vote nationwide.



AFT President Randi Weingarten, joined most of the way by Secretary-Treasurer Fedrick C. Ingram and Executive Vice President Evelyn DeJesus, hosted every type of event possible while maintaining stringent pandemic protections, from drive-in rallies and car caravans to safely distanced marches, meetings and canvasses.

The 33-day tour was covered by media around the world. Here at home, it turned out our members and communities to vote for Joe Biden, Kamala

Harris and hundreds of other candidates who believe in the value of public services.

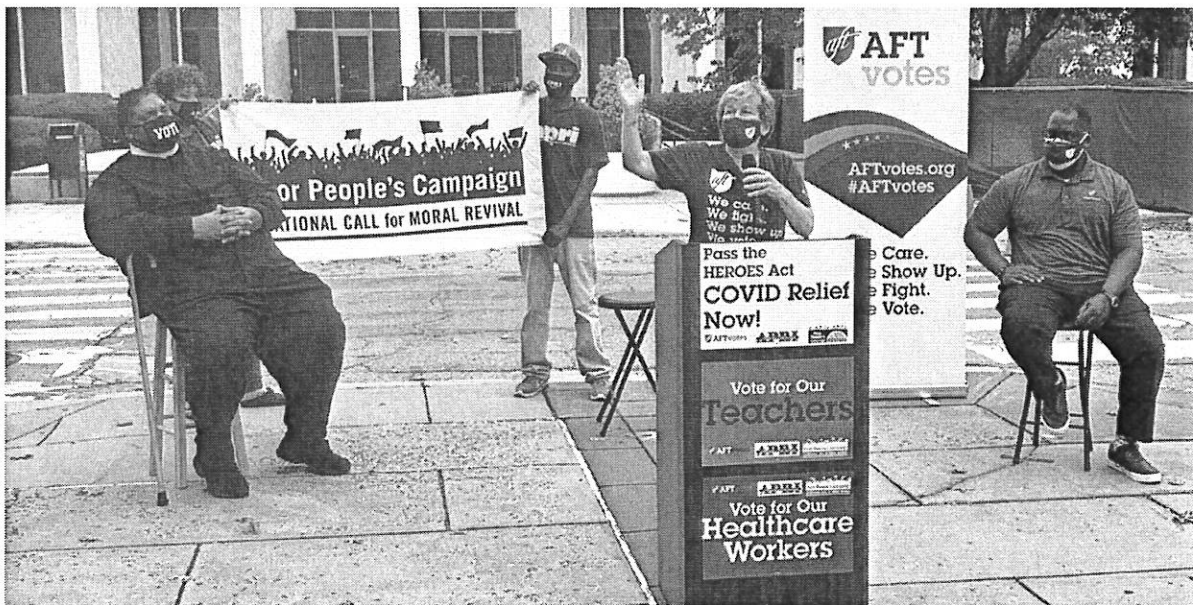
New Jersey

After leaving Philadelphia, the AFT Votes bus joined congressional candidate Amy Kennedy for visits at two ballot drop boxes in South Jersey. There, AFT activists met with Latino grass-roots leaders. Kennedy, a former public school teacher and mental health advocate, is running against a Republican who has pledged his “undying support” for President Donald Trump.



North Carolina

Then it was off to the Southern states, starting with a stop on Oct. 27 in Raleigh, N.C. Weingarten and Ingram met with U.S. Senate candidate Cal Cunningham and joined state Attorney General Josh Stein. Later in the afternoon, the AFT bus pulled up in front of the state Capitol for a **news conference and car caravan** (<https://www.facebook.com/AFTunion/videos/689467988612834/>) with the Rev. William J. Barber II, Melvin Montford of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, and other community leaders.



Georgia

By Wednesday, Oct. 28, our **bus had reached Atlanta**

(<https://www.facebook.com/AFTunion/videos/693008644949899/>), where riders met with U.S. Rep. Lucy McBath, a prominent gun safety and racial justice advocate. Later in the afternoon, tour participants turned their attention to the state's two U.S. Senate seats up for grabs. Georgia Federation of Teachers members heard from Charlie Flemming, president of the Georgia AFL-CIO, and Heather Fenton, the mother of U.S. Senate candidate Jon Ossoff. Flemming noted that the Georgia AFL-CIO has surpassed 100,000 phone calls asking members to vote blue.

Florida

The bus tour's first stop in Florida was Gainesville on Oct. 29, where University of Florida faculty and graduate assistants **rallied with community partners**

(<https://www.facebook.com/AFTunion/videos/2743921905848193/>) to bring the win for Biden and Harris, even as their AFT affiliate, the University of Florida Graduate Assistants Union, bravely navigates COVID-19 and privatization threats.

Friday, Oct. 30, saw the bus wheeling around Central Florida in Tampa, Sanford and Kissimmee, the largest city in Osceola County. In Tampa, our

national leaders met in the morning with local leaders, rallied and spoke at a voting site.

In the afternoon, **the bus pulled into Kissimmee**

(<https://www.facebook.com/AFTunion/videos/2719075571693013/>), where Weingarten and Ingram met with activists from Voces Unidas, the NAACP, the Florida Education Association and the Osceola Education Association at a “Dignity for Low-Wage Workers and Engaging the Community” rally at an outdoor pavilion.



Events included a distribution of 300 children’s bilingual and Spanish language books, plus hundreds of backpacks and supply kits from the AFT’s longtime partner First Book. Similar distributions of books and supplies were a regular feature at schools and communities throughout the tour.

A late afternoon **GOTV event in Sanford**

(<https://www.facebook.com/AFTunion/videos/1321773531492602/>), near Orlando, brought together a wide array of unions and community groups, including the FEA, the Seminole and Osceola unions, Black Lives Matter, the NAACP, Moms Demand Justice and more.

The large outdoor group was welcomed by Andrew Spar, president of the Florida Education Association and a longtime AFT leader from Volusia, and Chonta Henderson, a school bus driver and president of the Seminole County School Bus Drivers Association. This event also included a “Trunk or Treat” event afterward that distributed books, backpacks and supplies.

Halloween saw the bus tour headed into its final set of stops in South Florida. Tamarac hosted a canvassing kickoff in the morning, while the Broward Teachers Union **organized a rally** (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=274324257235396>) featuring its **favorite candidate for county school board** (<https://aftvoices.org/all-politics-is-local-especially-in-florida-6df49990e5d4>), Debbi Hixon. “I’m coming from the school building, I’m coming as a teacher and a mother,” Hixon told the group, with her son by her side. “I will ask all of the questions we need answers to. I promise to represent you with all of my heart.”

The bus stopped at an early vote rally in Coral Gables, which drew a crowd from the United Teachers of Dade. The outdoor event featured music, fun and words of encouragement from candidates at all levels of government, from the mayor to U.S. Rep. Donna Shalala, who told the crowd: “We’re the Democrats. We’re the party that believes in the American dream and our Dreamers. We’re the party that believes in equal rights for everyone. We’re the party that believes in American **heroes: our teachers, our nurses, our essential workers** (https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=361134881629427&ref=watch_permalink). And we have a message for Donald Trump: Mr. President, you’re fired!”



Another not-to-be-missed moment came when U.S. Rep. Frederica Wilson, in her trademark red cowgirl hat, joined Weingarten, Ingram and UTD President Karla Hernandez-Mats to talk about why every one of us needs to vote. **The stakes are too high to sit it out** (<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1322808448061658>), they said.

The AFT crew also visited a busy early voting site in Miami Gardens, complete with a disc jockey, to help get out the vote so critical for a Biden-Harris win.

“It is up to us. **Everything is on the line**

(https://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=1157602377968147&ref=watch_permalink),” the AFT’s Ingram exhorted the

crowd. “If you believe that our public schools need better funding, then we need you to get out there and vote for Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. Don’t leave your vote on the table. Don’t leave your voice muted. Unmute yourself and get to the polls! If we don’t vote today, they’ll be rolling back all the things that we have accomplished and that we know are important. But if we vote, our children win.”

The bus stopped in Cutler Bay

(<https://www.facebook.com/AFTunion/videos/1016956705382599>), as well, to convene with Rep. Debbie Mucarsel-Powell, a gaggle of Miami Heat players, and candidate for Miami-Dade County Mayor Daniella Levine Cava, who met with enthusiastic voters. “With so much at stake, we cannot and we will not give up,” Levine Cava said. “I am so glad to join the AFT in North Dade to fight for the future of our county and the soul of our nation in this election.”



AFT members and allies even did a little canvassing in the pouring rain, with some Halloween goodie bags for young For Our Future canvassers. They planned to hit 100 doors on Halloween and already had been part of an effort that reached 600,000 voters. During a separate canvass on Nov. 1, Unidos volunteers got a rousing send-off from the AFT’s DeJesus, who ended their

canvass kickoff with a chant sending volunteers on their way to reach out into the community and bring home the vote.

Souls to the Polls

The bus wrapped up its nationwide tour at a festive Souls to the Polls **march and drive-in car rally in Miami** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HUdeGn9Iq3k&feature=youtu.be>) on Nov. 1, from the African Heritage Cultural Arts Center to the Joseph Caleb Center. Speakers included Ruban Roberts, president of the Miami Dade NAACP, state AFSCME President Vickie Hall, Andre Washington of the A. Philip Randolph Institute, Everette Kelley, president of the American Federation of Government Employees and, of course, the irrepressible Karla Mats of UTD. Her members have been working hard to get out the African American vote, and during Sunday’s activities, UTD also notched its fifth event with the group Todos con Biden.



“I know you all voted,” Mats said. “I know you care about public education. But I need you to tell people on your phone—today is the last day of early voting. Tell them to go vote for public education.”

Joseph Thomas, a high school activist, added his plea: “If you are here today, you should be fired up and ready to vote. To my classmates, stop thinking your vote doesn’t matter. Don’t give them the power to take away your voice.”

Weingarten impressed on the crowd the urgency of this election. “How many more parents and teachers need to be upset that we don’t have the resources in schools?” she asked. “How many thousands more people need to die before we get control of this pandemic? It all comes down to getting the current president out of office.”

As the tour ended, Weingarten sent a letter praising AFT activists across the country for volunteering during this campaign.

“I’ve seen firsthand the incredible work you have done to defeat Donald Trump and elect pro-public education, pro-worker, pro-healthcare, pro-climate, pro-justice and pro-democracy candidates, starting with Joe Biden and Kamala Harris,” she wrote, adding that from here on, “we’ll have to push to make sure every vote is counted.”

[Annette Licitra/AFT photos]

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