

## **Winning the Future: American Federation of Teachers-Wisconsin 2026-27 Strategic Plan**

We stand at an inflection point: for years, our members have been fighting with everything we have: for our rights, for public education and other public services, and for democracy, in Wisconsin, and in the nation. Now, as the events in Minnesota and elsewhere are showing us, we face a struggle over the existence of democracy itself.

It is an understatement indeed to say the next few years are going to be critical in determining our future. As Americans face increasingly unsustainable economic conditions and the erosion of democratic norms, common sense political assumptions are falling. The only question that matters for us as a union is will we be able to defend and strengthen worker power? Our belief, as an AFT-Wisconsin executive council, is that we can do these things, and not only can we do them, but that we can position our members to lead, not just in our workplaces, but in the political arena as well. The work our members do is at the core of what it takes for a democracy to function, and thus, our union vision can and should be steering the trajectory of progressive politics in Wisconsin.

### **What do we stand for?**

AFT-Wisconsin is a union that stands for democracy in the workplace, fairness and equity for our students and our clients, and the public services that everyone needs for our democracy to thrive.

Recent convention actions ([you can read these right here](#)) and other member leaders actions show that our union values the following:

- A fully funded PK-12 education system, technical college system, public defenders office, UW system, and state agencies
- A system of public services where workers, through their unions, have a defining voice, through collective bargaining and other collective power, in how resources are distributed, ensuring our working conditions are excellent, and our students and clients have the resources they need to thrive
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion for every resident of Wisconsin no matter what their race, gender, sexual identity, or citizenship status
- Ensuring that our public institutions are guided by democratic accountability and decision-making, not the narrow agenda of corporations

- Safeguarding a politics of democracy, where our union is part of a foundational bulwark against authoritarianism
- A society that honors the inherent value and dignity of all people by providing equitable access to affordable, high-quality public education, healthcare, housing, and nutrition; family-supporting wages and benefits; upward mobility; a stable environment with clean air and water; and a secure retirement.

The following strategic plan maps how we fight for the commitments above made at our convention, what we do well, what we need to do, what our broader goals should be for the next two years, and how we should succeed at those goals.

### **What we do well:**

To say that AFT-Wisconsin locals have shown resilience in the face of devastating attacks on both our rights and our livelihoods is an understatement. In the face of a deeply unfair process, many of our K-12 locals and technical college locals recertify each year by overwhelming margins. Other locals, even if they don't recertify, win gains in their workplaces building collective power their administrations cannot ignore. In the UW System, where workers are barred entirely from even certifying, our leaders have fought admirably against budget cuts and efforts to lay off our coworkers. We've built relationships with legislators and regents. And we stand on the precipice of a Gov. Evers-appointed Board of Regents issuing a policy to force chancellors to "meet-and-confer" with leaders of our unions, a major step toward building greater institutional legitimacy.

We've also reinvigorated moribund locals or organized new ones in the past decade: the statewide public defenders union, Whitnall, Whitewater, Oshkosh, Milwaukee, Parkside, Carthage College, and elsewhere.

Though we still need effective leadership development in our workplaces, in each of our constituencies, a cohort of effective leaders (such as Angela Bazan-K-12; Lisa Conley, WTCS; Clayton Cavanaugh, Public Defenders; Barb Smith, Brock Barber and Nate Fiene, state employees; Neil Kraus, Lauren Gantz, David Simmons and others in UW) are committed not just to building power at their workplaces, but to building power across the state.

After elevating our relationship with AFT national following Randi Weingarten's visit to Wisconsin in 2025 and having made some very smart strategic political decisions (such

as endorsing Superintendent Jill Underly in the contested 2025 primary), AFT-Wisconsin is also emerging as a leading partner voice in Democratic political circles. The open letter co-authored by Pres. Shelton and Sen. Chris Larson calling for a pro-public education, pro-labor governor (signed by a number of AFT-W leaders) in July 2025 is a piece of clear evidence of the growing platform our union is building.

Finally, our professional staff, though small in numbers, functions extremely well as a team and understands and helps actualize the organizational philosophy of member-driven unionism. This is a testament to the work of our chief of staff in hiring, retaining, mentoring, and team-building. Guided by the executive board, our president and chief-of-staff work very closely together to lead this work, and our organizing staff is devoted to doing the painstaking work of helping our member leaders build power without doing the work of organizing *for* them.

In just the past few months, we've restructured the internal workings of our organizing, reaching an agreement with a professional accounting firm to ensure we are using member dues resources most effectively and to free up more organizing resources. We've invested in the position of a data director, which will ensure our field staff and elected leadership are more accountable for the organizing work they do at their workplaces.

In short, AFT-Wisconsin is punching well above its weight class right now.

### **What we still need to do:**

We have a very firm foundation on which to build, but at the moment, we are not doing enough to build the institutional capacity we need to grow and, to put it bluntly, ensure management fears us as a force to be reckoned with; political actors in the state see us as a co-governing entity; and AFT national sees us as a state to truly pay attention to.

Our overarching goal for the next two years should be two-fold: first, we need to double our membership over the next two years, and, second, we need to continue to magnify our impact in Wisconsin politics and policy.

To do all this, we need to reexamine every aspect of our organization so we are maximizing the use of our resources. The following four aspects of our organization in particular need reexamination:

- 1) Overall organizing procedures, particularly around adding new members, creating new leaders, and holding both leaders and staff accountable for building our shared vision.
- 2) Better telling the story of our union and our members, through social media, op-eds, member-to-member engagement, and other venues.
- 3) A more clearly defined political strategy for each election cycle, and a more structured level of engagement with organizational and political partners.
- 4) More efficiently structured internal processes, including data management and financial management.

## **I. Organizing and Leader Development**

As a union, our organization exists only for one purpose: to build power for our members, and the primary place to develop that power is in the workplace. What that means, practically speaking, is not that workers in a union always agree on tactics, but they operate, as much as possible, in unison, with strong leadership that truly represents the will of the broader group and advances their interests.

Achieving these goals is even more important given the possibilities of the next two years. With the clear possibility of the courts overturning Act 10 in 2026 and Democrats winning a majority (or close to it) in both houses of the legislature, we stand to have the possibility of legislation to make real collective bargaining possible for every one of our constituencies (including in the UW system). We must prioritize building strong memberships and organizing cores now, to maximize these new possibilities.

Following from this premise, there are two specific areas for development on which AFT-Wisconsin should focus: 1) pushing and assisting locals with building membership, which leads to institutional power, and 2) developing and supporting effective elected leaders and organizing committees.

At least in recent memory, AFT-Wisconsin has never set any long-term institutional goals for membership. If building institutional power through membership is our primary purpose, we need to prioritize this as a union. *Everything else is secondary.*

### **Action #1:**

AFT-Wisconsin executive leadership and staff will set overall membership goals and work with local leaders to track those goals over the course of the next two years.

### **Action #2:**

AFT-Wisconsin executive leadership and field staff will more heavily support and feature the organizing work of locals.

### **Action #3:**

AFT-Wisconsin will develop a proposal, based on feedback from local leaders, for a Union Leadership Institute (or series of) over the summer and set dates much earlier than

we have in the past so that we can build programming around this as the year moves forward.

**Action #4:**

AFT-Wisconsin will continue to aggressively seek out new organizing opportunities.

**Action #5:**

AFT-Wisconsin will develop a comprehensive readiness plan for the overturn of Act 10.

## **Storytelling and Social Media**

Telling our story as a union is vitally important for several reasons. First and foremost, we need to ensure our narrative reaches both members and potential members to support our organizing work and leadership development. But, telling our story is also important as it relates to building power and influence with external stakeholders such as partner organizations, political figures, and policy makers. In short, AFT-Wisconsin needs to be ever-present, and we need to project ourselves as a union, both internally and externally, that is both powerful and fun to be a part of. Our communications should show members they made the right decision in joining and inspire them to get more involved; show non-members they should join our union; and show stake-holders that they will miss out if they don't engage with us.

At the moment, our storytelling is pretty compelling when we produce content (such as the *Roger and Me* style demonstrations our higher ed leaders did in March and April 2025), but it is too sporadic, doesn't widely feature our membership, and is often out of sync with the news cycle.

If we aren't telling our story to members and external stakeholders, it basically didn't happen. As a state federation, we need to make communications the work of every staff member and every board member, and the elected president should more regularly engage in external media content.

### **Action #6:**

Story-telling and communications will be woven more tightly into the work we do as a state federation, and the elected president, other board members, and organizing staff will take greater accountability for story-telling.

### **Action #7:**

AFT-Wisconsin executive leadership and staff will more proactively ask members of our locals to like, follow, share, and even produce content for social media outlets for which we already have structures in place (e.g., Facebook and Instagram), develop a Youtube channel, and in the long term, explore other social media niches like Tiktok and even gaming platforms like Twitch.

**Action #8:**

AFT-Wisconsin will continue our monthly practice of fireside chats and member emails to feature our members' stories.

**Action #9:**

AFT-Wisconsin will explore the process of creating an annual awards and leadership celebration event where we will honor member leaders, political allies, and scholarship winners.

**Action #10:**

AFT-Wisconsin executive leadership will more strategically and consistently push to feature the President, other board members, and other leaders in traditional media.

**Action #11:**

AFT-Wisconsin will convene a member-led task force to explore how to make our website better and more user-friendly.

## **Political and Policy Strategy**

According to public opinion polling, both unions and educators are highly popular. Further, there has been a vacuum of political and policy leadership, particularly in terms of a long term, pro-worker vision, in the mainstream of Wisconsin politics, for at least a generation. AFT-Wisconsin is poised to step into this void with our pro-worker, pro-public education, member-driven organizing model.

The leaders and members of AFT-Wisconsin should be at the center of the most important political campaigns in Wisconsin and driving the policy agenda in the legislature, the Governor's office, and at the school board level where we have engaged locals. We should look at every election cycle as a way to support candidates who share our values, engage our members in the work of relational voter work, recruit member candidates, and educate our members on political issues and advocacy.

We do not have the capacity to engage in every single race in the state, however, so we need to develop a clear path for priority locals through our Committee on Political Education (COPE). We also need to be able to more effectively raise money for our political action committee as we build membership.

### **Action #12:**

AFT-Wisconsin will work through its COPE committee to develop a targeted plan for endorsements and candidate support for 2026.

### **Action #13:**

AFT-Wisconsin will develop education for COPE members on political engagement process, recruit engaged COPE members and assess criteria for appointment to COPE moving forward.

### **Action #14:**

AFT-Wisconsin will create more structured paths for developing and retaining partnerships with political entities, policy partners, and community allies.

**Action #15:**

AFT-Wisconsin will explore the possibility of a member-led research fellowship.

**Action #16:**

AFT-Wisconsin will develop a longer and more intentional timeline for developing and partnering with local candidates for public office.

**Action #17:**

AFT-Wisconsin will explore ways to make PAC fundraising easier and set long term PAC fundraising goals.

## **Internal Processes**

For too long, AFT-Wisconsin has simply continued to move forward on the vestigial path of an organization rooted in a dramatically different time, before the advent of a number of technologies, and with the benefits of collective bargaining. Our union is a different organization now, and we should reassess every one of our internal procedures. Shifting away from an executive assistant and toward a data director (as well as outsourcing our accounting responsibilities) is a very important start. But there are many other aspects of our organization we should reassess so we can maximize staff time and other resources.

### **Action #18:**

Moving forward, member data and dues collection will be tightly integrated with our organization's organizing goals. The data director will work directly with other staff and local leadership to track organizing goals, and the dues draw process will be an opportunity to connect with members and local leaders about the value of our union.

### **Action #19:**

In conjunction with the Treasurer and other select executive board members, AFT-W President and Chief of Staff should reassess every financial process and vendor relationship to ensure our members' dues dollars and staff time are being used most effectively.

### **Action #20:**

AFT-Wisconsin will research and, if it makes sense, explore a proposal to maximize our contingency fund.

**Action #21:** AFT-Wisconsin will engage in negotiations with the Professional Staff Union earlier than we have in the past and explore the possibility of multi-year contracts.

**Action #22:** AFT-Wisconsin will explore the possibility of better funding scholarships for families of members.