



UPDATE

American Federation of Teachers Local 604, AFL-CIO

www.aftlocal604.org

October/November 2024

It's Time to Fix Tier 2!

As we face the current shortage of educators, we must acknowledge the many root causes that got us here. Years of attacks on public educators have made the jobs more challenging and less rewarding. One example of that is the Tier 2 pension that came into existence in 2010.

For decades, the Illinois legislature neglected to pay it's full obligation to the pension systems, using the resources for other needs and hoping to catch up at a later date. The financial crisis brought on by the sub-prime housing crash of 2008 reduced revenue and exacerbated the problem. In March of 2010, the legislation that created Tier 2 pensions was passed in a single day and was signed into law shortly thereafter by then Governor Pat Quinn. The speed with which the legislature moved the bill gave the unions of impacted members no chance to mobilize opposition. Governor Pritzker and the current legislature have committed to making full payments to the pension systems and the State's financial health has improved. The time has finally come for us to address the insufficiency and unfairness of Tier 2 pensions.

Tier 2 pensions impact any member who began employment in a position covered by a pension system on or after January 1, 2011. Tier 2 harms Illinois' workers and communities in several ways:

- ◆ It hurts recruitment and retention in crucial jobs, diminishing important services for communities,
- ◆ it creates divisiveness and unfairness in the workplace, and
- ◆ it fails to provide dignity and security for retirees.

The Illinois Federation of Teachers and AFT Local 604 are working to promote legislation to fix Tier 2. We are part of the "We Are One" coalition of unions whose members are impacted by Tier 2, including the Illinois Education Association, AFSCME, SEIU and police and firefighter unions. The Secretary-Treasurer of the Illinois

AFL-CIO, Pat Devaney, is spearheading the campaign. Webinars and town-hall meetings have taken place in the past few months to educate members and the community about why Tier 2 needs to be improved. Some possible changes include:

- ◆ Lowering the retirement age from 67,
- ◆ improving how Cost of Living Allowances are calculated, and
- ◆ reducing the number of years used to calculate the final average salary that determines a retiree's annuity.

The coalition is planning a day of action at the State Capitol in Springfield on Wednesday, November 13, 2024.



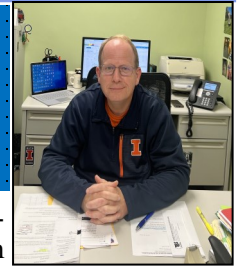
2 Out of many, one
By president, Dan Mercer

3 The importance of 4 numbers
By retiree, Bill Briggs

4 Workplace rights
By attorney, James Ridge

Out of many, one

By Dan Mercer, President of AFT Local 604



As I write this article, I've just completed my first month as president of AFT Local 604. Let me start by saying that it is a tremendous honor to be in this position. I take the responsibility of leading our union very seriously. We have a large, diverse membership. Our councils range in size from fewer than ten members to nearly 2,000. We have urban and rural members, and members of different races, ethnicities, religions, sexual orientations and political inclinations. In the context of this diversity, it is my goal to lead in a way that strengthens our unity so we can most effectively represent our members as we fight to improve our lives and the lives of those in the communities we serve.

The divisiveness in our society is a challenge to achieving that unity. Differences among us are too often exploited for political or economic gain. Social media is engineered to drive us farther apart, leading many down a path of extremism, while providing opportunities for us to attack each other 24/7 from behind the comfort of our keyboards. Artificial intelligence adds to the potential for deception to the point where it's difficult to know what to believe. It is too easy to see those who are different from us as the "other" or the enemy, to blame them for what we think is wrong in the world, and to treat them with anger and even violence. In such a climate, how do we move toward the unity we must achieve for our union to be strong and effective?

One arena where we face this challenge is politics. I grew up in a rural, conservative small town. I came of age in the Reagan era and largely embraced the way he made me feel about our nation. Even so, I remember being concerned when he fired over 11,000 striking air traffic controllers, banning them from ever holding government employment again. That number of union members equals the membership of AFT Local 604. Imagine every member of our local being fired and banned from future employment for exercising their right to fight for a better contract! Over the years, my own journey of being a union member, council president, field service director and now local president provides me with a different perspective of how politics affects workers.

Many of our members would rather not engage in politics. Many would prefer if our union steered clear of it as well. **However, given the fact that our right to collectively bargain could be taken from us with the stroke of a pen as it essentially was in Wisconsin in 2010, it is our duty to participate in the process to protect the rights we currently have, which members of the past won through hard-fought battles.**

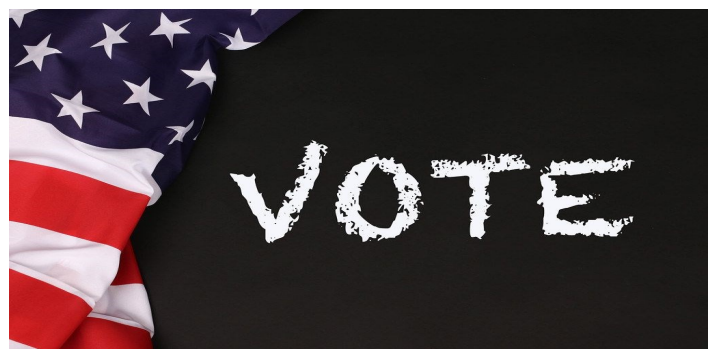
In light of this, when the union endorses candidates, we do so based on issues of workers' rights. Conservative members often ask, "Why does the union only endorse Democrats?" First of all, that isn't a correct statement. While I admit that the majority of endorsed candidates are Democrats, our union does not endorse based on political party. We are open to endorsing candidates who value our rights, believe in retirement with dignity and are committed to adequately funding our educational institutions. Sadly, while some Republicans share those values, the party on the whole attacks public education, blames teachers for all of society's ills and seeks to eliminate our pensions.



REGISTER TO VOTE



Whether you are a Democrat, Republican, Independent, Socialist, Libertarian or something else, I encourage you to register to vote, educate yourself on the issues that affect your life and the lives of those you love, and participate in our democratic process by voting. Vote early, by mail or on election day. The right to choose our government and influence its policies must be treasured—never taken for granted and never lost to authoritarianism. As for me, I will cast my ballot for Kamala Harris for President.



The importance of 4 numbers

By Bill Briggs, Retiree

Two—Zero—Two—Five

Although they don't look scary, they are.

Most Americans have heard of the Project 2025, but few have read the 900+ document that outlines what former president Donald Trump would do if reelected.

Anyone in public education should be concerned and learn as much as possible before voting. This is not about Republicans vs Democrats, but about saving our Democracy and our public schools.

According to the Democracy Forward Foundation, "The Project 2025 Presidential Transition Project is a well-funded effort of the Heritage Foundation and more than 100 organizations to enable a future anti-democratic presidential administration to take swift, far-right action that would cut wages for working people, dismantle social safety-net programs, reverse decades of progress for civil rights, redefine the way our society operates, and undermine our economy,"

Because of major public pushback against this plan, Trump is now trying to distance himself from a project his closest advisers wrote. He says he knows nothing about it; one more of his lies.

What isn't included in the definition above should concern all reading this article: **eliminate The Department of Education!** Zachary Schermele in *USA Today*, wrote, in addition, it would establish "a national 'Parents' Bill of Rights' to give conservatives more control over what their children learn."

Although privately, some in the GOP are not in favor of destroying the Department of Education, can you give me the names of any of their leaders who have publicly voiced opposition.

Think back to Trump's term in office and the damage Betsy DeVos caused. She was vocal about her belief that the U. S. should encourage the proliferation of charter schools and open private schools to more students via financial assistance programs, or what we refer to as vouchers.

Local 604 President Dan Mercer said, "It would be devastating for public education and so much more in our country."

Schermele went on to say, the project "would allow schools to out LGBTQ+ students to their parents and define sex 'to mean only biological sex recognized at birth.'"

Along with this goal, Project 2025 would eliminate federal funds for programs related to diversity, equity and inclusion; remove legal protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity; reverse President Biden's student debt relief efforts; and eliminate the Head Start early education program which serves over 1 million children annually.

If this does not worry you, think about what is already happening in states like Florida. *The Florida Phoenix* reported, "The Orange County School District removed 673 books this year (2023)—they were listed as books from public school teachers' classrooms, not school libraries."

In Texas, during the same period, San Antonio "removed more than 400 books for 'review' to identify school library books considered inappropriate.

Some classic titles included are *To Kill a Mockingbird*, by Harper Lee; *The Catcher in the Rye*, by J. D. Salinger; *Brave New World*, by Aldous Huxley; *The Color Purple*, by Alice Walker; *Of Mice and Men*, by John Steinbeck; *Ulysses*, by James Joyce; and maybe most ironic based on what is going on in this country, *1984*, by George Orwell. And the list of school-age related books is long.

And the damage does not stop here. Project 2025 wants to:

- ◆ Use active-duty members of the military to help with arrest along the U.S.-Mexican border
- ◆ Outlaw pornography, and who would define that?
- ◆ Return to a gold-backed currency
- ◆ Ban transgender people from serving in the military
- ◆ Reduce federal spending on renewable energy research
- ◆ Withdraw federal approval for the abortion pill *mifepristone*
- ◆ Create more restrictions related to reproductive rights, especially for women but men are included, too.

Do I want to scare you, yes! Why, because there is much more damage included in Project 2025. We hear over and over that this election is the most important one in our lives. I couldn't agree more. Do what you can to help Kamala Harris win and protect our freedom in public schools.



Your rights under the workers' compensation act

By James M. Ridge, attorney at law

Workplace Rights

Teachers in Illinois have a variety of legal protections that safeguard their rights in the workplace. Understanding these rights helps educators advocate for themselves, maintain a safe working environment, and ensure that they are treated fairly.

1. Right to a Safe Work Environment

Every teacher has the right to a safe and healthy workplace. Under the Illinois Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA), school districts are required to maintain safe conditions in classrooms, buildings, and school grounds. Teachers have the right to report hazardous conditions, such as broken equipment, unsafe structures, mold, or threats of violence, without fear of retaliation. Schools must address these concerns and take corrective action to protect teachers and students.

2. Protection from Discrimination

Teachers are protected from discrimination in the workplace based on race, gender, age, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and other protected characteristics such as filing a worker's compensation claim. The Illinois Human Rights Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act prohibit discriminatory practices. If a teacher experiences discrimination, they can file a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) or the Illinois Department of Human Rights (IDHR).

3. Rights Related to Student Discipline and Safety

Teachers are entitled to enforce classroom discipline in accordance with school policies and Illinois state law. They have the right to remove students from the classroom if they pose a danger or create a disruptive environment. Additionally, teachers are protected by law if they are assaulted by students and can also pursue a worker's compensation claim if injured.

4. Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom

While teachers have the right to freedom of speech under the First Amendment, there are some limitations in the school setting. Teachers can express their opinions on public matters, but speech that disrupts the school environment or goes against established school policies may not be protected.

5. Employment Contracts and Tenure Protections

Employment contracts outline salary, responsibilities, and terms of employment. Tenured teachers cannot be dismissed without just cause. In addition, Illinois teachers have the right to unionize. Your union representatives can help in resolving disputes with the administration, handling grievances, safety issues, or other disciplinary actions.

6. Rights to Leave and Accommodations

Teachers are entitled to take leave for personal illness, family emergencies, or childbirth under the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and under state laws too. FMLA allows eligible teachers to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave while maintaining their job security. Teachers who need accommodations for disabilities or medical conditions are protected under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which requires schools to provide reasonable accommodations, such as modified duties or adjusted schedules, to help them perform their jobs.

Conclusion

Knowing and understanding your basic rights as a teacher in Illinois is crucial to navigating your professional responsibilities and protecting yourself in the workplace. Whether it's maintaining a safe classroom, safeguarding against discrimination, or ensuring your job security, Illinois law offers a range of protections for teachers. **If you believe you have a claim check with your union representative before taking an action that later could be used against you AND call us immediately to ensure that your protections are fully upheld.**

For more information on your rights contact:

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Local 604 Member/Local Beneficiary Form

By Darlene Mercer, Office Mngr.

As a member of AFT Local 604, you automatically receive a \$36,250 Accidental Death & Dismemberment (AD&D) Policy as part of your membership. That includes \$31,250 from your local union and another \$5,000 provided by AFT National.

If you are a retiree, you have \$5,000 of AD&D coverage through AFT only.

Please use the QR code below to confirm your membership and designate your beneficiary.

This information will be stored on a secure server and only used in the event there is a claim.

This online process takes the place of cards that we used previously. This is a more secure way to store information, so I urge you to re-do your AD&D info with this QR code.

It is not necessary to get rid of a card if someone chooses to use the QR code as well. If anything should happen, AFT will accept the card with the most recent date.

Injury or accidental death occurring at your workplace results in benefits being doubled. This does not include travel to and from work. Retired members are not eligible for this double benefit.

Should an injury or accidental death occur, please contact me asap so I can prepare the paperwork to send to AFT.

If there are any questions as to what's covered, please email me at darmercer@ift-aft.org.

If for some reason the QR code won't work for you, use this link:

<https://leadernet.aft.org/webform/local-604-member-local-beneficia>



New Support Staff Hire

AFT Local 604 has hired Samantha Kelly Bullock (Sam) to work alongside Kristy Ledvina as support staff.

She is a wife and a mom to 3 sons. She enjoys nature and family.

Sam became associated with Local 604 around 17 years ago while working for the public schools in the south suburban region. She worked as an administrative assistant to the principals for a majority of her career there.

Sam also sat as a member of the Executive Board for her council for many years, so union life is very familiar to her. She says, "I am so appreciative of the new role I'm now in as a support person for IFT/AFT and look forward to creating many new memories with everyone."

We at Local 604 are excited for these new changes and we welcome Sam to our Union family!



Fannie May Candy Gift Cards 20% OFF

These gift cards can be used at any Fanny May store for any items. Make your check payable to AFT Local 604 for the total amount and include \$1.00 for postage/handling or you can stop in the office for no additional fee to pick up. **No cash or credit cards please.**

\$5.00 gift card... \$4.00 Union Cost Quantity _____

\$10.00 gift card... \$8.00 Union Cost _____

\$20.00 gift cards are sold out

Postage/handling _____

Grand Total _____

While supplies last.

**AFT Local 604
1520 N Rock Run Dr. Ste 1
Crest Hill, IL 60403**

STUDENT DEBT RELIEF VIRTUAL CLINIC

Classes taught by Katie Kollross and Bryan Devine

UPCOMING 2024 DATES

Please choose the Student Debt Clinic that best meets your needs:

- ◆ **FULL CLINIC**– This 90 minute program will introduce Income Driven Repayment (IDR) Plans, Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF), legislative updates, and next steps for you.

If you are a recent college graduate, or if you took Parent Plus Loans to help your child graduate recently, this Full Clinic is the program for you.

- ◆ **PSLF CLINIC**– This 45 minute program will dive deeper into Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) and answer questions you have about the forms. This program is geared towards people who have already entered into an income Driven Repayment Plan and needs help with the PSLF process.
- ◆ **Q & A CLINIC**– This open session is to ask specific questions about your situation. Understand that this is not a one-on-one session. There is no formal presentation to this session; it is targeting those who are already in IDR and/or PSLF plans but need answers.

Full ... Tuesday, October 22, 5:00pm

Wednesday, November 6, 4:30pm

Wednesday, December 4, 4:30pm

PSLF... Thursday, Oct.24, 5:00pm

Tuesday, Nov 12, 4:30pm

Thursday, Dec 12, 4:30pm

O&A ...Thursday Oct 24, 6:00pm

Tuesday, Nov 12, 5:30pm

Thursday, Dec 12, 5:30pm

**** more clinics will be scheduled for future months**

These programs are available not only to teachers but also to ANY educational employee.

These clinics are **FREE** to our card-signed union members as a benefit of being part of the IFT. You are encouraged to bring your union peers with you. All of these clinics are held over zoom.

Sign up for one of these clinics by emailing Stella Kapusta at skapusta@ift-aft.org

Please have available:

⇒ Your laptop computer

⇒ Your latest loan servicer(s) statement and/or online account information

⇒ Type of loan(s) held

⇒ Type of repayment plan(s) enrolled

AFT Local 604 Scholarships

COLLEGE STUDENT SCHOLARSHIP

The AFT Local 604 College Student Scholarship will be awarded to the son or daughter of an AFT Local 604 member in good standing with the Union. The student must be attending a four year college/university, trade school, or a community college.

AFT Local 604 is offering one \$4,000 (\$2,000 per semester) scholarship.

PAUL O. JOHNSON SCHOLARSHIP

This memorial scholarship was created in memory of longtime Union activist, Paul O. Johnson and will be awarded to a deserving public high school senior who has plans to pursue a career in the field of education in college.

AFT Local 604 is offering one \$4,000 (\$2,000 per semester) scholarship to dependents of AFT Local 604 members who are in good standing with the Union.

JACQUELINE B. VAUGHN SCHOLARSHIP

This memorial scholarship was established to honor the late Illinois Federation of Teachers' President, Jacqueline B. Vaughn.

AFT Local 604 is offering one \$4,000 (\$2,000 per semester) scholarship to dependents of all AFT Local 604 members who are in good standing with the Union.

Each of these scholarship applications must be received or postmarked by Friday, February 7, 2025.

You can find the scholarship rules and requirements as well as the application on our website...

Www.aftlocal604.org...go to Resources and scroll down to scholarships for students.



Each year for the attendees of our Local 604 Senate Holiday Gathering, we ask that you donate to a food pantry.

We will again be asking that of our councils. In the past, we've had food dropped off here at the Local, but this year we would like to ask that your council take a couple photos of food to be donated and you donate to the pantry of your choice and send the photos to darmerc@ift-aft.org (Darlene Mercer.)

Your councils name will be put into the drawing for one of three \$100 checks that will go to the pantry of your choice in your schools' name.

The drawing will take place at the end of our meeting on December 9th.

Thank you in advance for participating and making a difference for so many.



Local 604 Retirees

Phil Staley, Local 604 Retiree Council President

November 5, 2024 General Election

As we move toward the election this year, remember our union supports and endorses candidates for office who are vetted by our labor organizations and share beliefs benefitting the members. A candidate's voting record, their submitted responses on the questionnaires and meeting with the Political Action Committees (PAC) are all considered before an endorsement is granted, regardless of political party. Please review the list of endorsed IFT and 604 candidates and vote your support of this union.

SAVE THE DATE: November 13, 2024

RE: Fix Tier 2 Pension Rally in Springfield

We Are One Illinois is in the process of planning a rally, Fix Tier 2, in Springfield on Wednesday, November 13th. Full details are not yet available, but should this rally occur, we hope anyone available would be able to join us in support of our fellow union members.

The We Are One Illinois Coalition held Fix Tier 2 townhalls throughout the state in September to discuss the Tier 2 Pension System and the need for its reform. This does not just effect teachers. As retired members under Tier 1, many of us fought hard to keep the pension in the early 2000's. This resulted in an Illinois Supreme Court decision upholding our pension system but ended in the legislature and the governor creating a new system for those entering the public employee workforce in January of 2011. This occurred in less than 24 hours and left out public comment. As a side note, of the 118 representatives, only 9 are still in office, and of the 59 senators, only 6 presently hold that position. As a result, a shortage of new staff to fill retirements has occurred. Currently, it is estimated that 50% of the active teachers are in Tier 2. This means they will need to work until age 67 to qualify for their pension, will receive less pension than if they were to receive Social Security and are paying into the pension the same rate as members in Tier 1.

Retirees fought hard for contracts with their districts, many of which are the foundation of the contracts still found in many of the Local 604 councils. We must continue to support our union siblings. For more information visit WWW.FIXTIER2.COM.

Illinois Alliance for Retired Americans

At the retirees September council meeting, we were joined by Krystle Able, Executive Director of the IARA. She discussed the current focus of the organization, which is to work toward more reasonable health care costs, especially related to medicines. Additionally, the IARA is supporting the effort to restore full Social Security Benefits for public employees. The IARA is working closely with many of our federal lawmakers. While this is a retiree organization, success in both efforts will benefit all our union members.

Upcoming Retiree Programs

November 6, Wednesday, 4:30 - 6:30 p.m., Painters District Council 30 (PDC 30) 1905 Sequoia Dr. Suite #1 Aurora. TRS presentation by Sandie Benhart. All TRS members, current and retired are welcome to attend.

November 12, Tuesday, 2:00 p.m., Identity Theft, Jim Rowe, Kankakee States Attorney, Kankakee Public Library.

December 3, Tuesday, 4:30 - 6:30 p.m., location, Kankakee Public Library, TRS presentation by Sandie Benhart. All TRS members, current and retired are welcome to attend.

December 10, Tuesday, 11:00 a.m., Luncheon at Metro Grill, Essington and Fiday Roads

Additionally, some of our members participate in activities we may wish to support, either on our own or as a group. If you would like to share information, let us know.

Joliet Symphony Orchestra dates: <https://www.jolietorchestra.org/concerts>

**Next Senate Meeting
Monday, December 9, 2024 @ 5pm
IBEW Hall 176
1100 NE Frontage Road
Joliet, IL**



IFT/AFT, AFL-CIO

UPDATE

American Federation of Teachers Local 604
www.aftlocal604.org
Office hours are: 8:00am-3:30pm M-F

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