Why Political Involvement?

The issues that we confront are being confronted worldwide - the ecological destruction of the earth, the privatization and commercialization of education, the criminalization of immigrants, the narrowing of educational scope from broad liberal arts education to narrow career oriented training, the threats of standardized testing being implemented into higher education in ways similar to the No Child Left Behind program, two tier salary and benefit provisions like those experienced by our part-time faculty and some of our most recently hired employees, declines in labor rights including restrictions on the use of e-mail and college mailboxes, a growing movement away from shared governance, attacks on the academic freedom we hold dear, and the continuing lack of sufficient financial support for our schools and colleges. We often forget that the problems that we face are byproducts of the drive to the bottom inherent in the current drive toward the globalization of markets.

At the CFT convention in March we heard about the fight that teachers in British Columbia are waging to secure their collective bargaining rights. In France, students and workers have been demonstrating against an attempt by the government to eliminate long held worker rights. At the AFT Higher Education Council I listen to stories from all across our country concerning slow progress in some areas but more often I hear of efforts to deny faculty and staff their union rights and reasonable working conditions. The assault on health benefit packages appears to be national in scope. Long held pension provisions are under attack not only in the United States but in Canada and Mexico as well.

So what do we do to help move our country and the governments of the world toward more civilized approaches to the solving of economic and social problems? How do we move away from what appears to me to be the ever more apparent retreat to barbarism? We first must recognize that the decline in living conditions that we are experiencing is not inevitable. It is a result of political decisions made by those who will not work in the common interest. So we must use the power of the many to defeat the insatiable hunger for wealth and power by the few. The most immediate, and perhaps least sexy, avenue toward progressive change is through education. That means that we must educate our members and then the general public that positive change is possible. That there are candidates that put working people’s interests at the top of their agendas. In this June’s Democratic primary we have the opportunity to choose labor Democrats over business Democrats at both the state and the national level. We even have the chance to elect a few moderate Republicans to replace those that are entirely hostile to the general welfare. Check out the CFT endorsed candidates. We screen the candidates carefully in order to support those that are most progressive (and most pro-education) and will fight for working families. In November we need to get the vote out for a new Governor – hopefully that candidate will be Phil Angelides. Our work is set out for us. If we don’t cause at least a small change of direction this year then the next few years are very likely to see an accelerated movement toward barbarism. How much more decline can the Earth endure and still survive as a planet? Do what you can and then do more.