



## **On the murder of George Floyd and all of the black and brown victims of police and vigilante violence...and what we can do about it**

We have witnessed yet another video-recorded murder of a black man – George Floyd...one more that *was recorded* with witnesses and no apparent concern from the police officers present that their actions were being documented. We know that the videos of assaults that we see are only the tip of the iceberg, and that many more black and brown people are subject to the sometimes deadly and always dehumanizing assault by those whose job is to serve and protect.

On Saturday I spent three hours in the pouring rain with thousands of peaceful protestors. Because of police aggression, acts of vandalism and looting, and the images of chaos and destruction played on some media outlets over and over again, it would be easy to lose sight of the reason we had to protest to begin with. If George Floyd's life had not been violently ended on a sidewalk in Minneapolis, none of what followed would have occurred. We must take the pain, the fear, the trauma, the injustice that black and brown people live with day in and day out and let it fuel our dedication to dismantling centuries of systemic racism.

As the president of AFT Washington, I have sought to build a union of inclusion and equity side-by-side with our executive board and staff. We aspire to maintaining vigilance against practices and priorities that keep some of our members out and transforming AFT Washington to be fully inclusive and equity-centered throughout our union. We seek awareness of our intention vs. our impact and to consistently examine our work through a racial equity lens. We do this with the knowledge of unionism's fraught relationship with racism, especially in the past, but continuing into the present. We look to AFT's history of requiring locals to desegregate in the 1950s as a condition of affiliation to AFT as a moral compass guiding our actions today.

The tragedy of George Floyd's death followed the horrific deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, all recent examples of police and vigilante violence against black people. And all of this is happening in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the racially disparate impacts of which are starkly illuminated in the form of higher infection and death rates, low wages and inadequate paid sick leave, and increased risk on an essential job. The pre-pandemic economic inequity is worsened by, and worsening the impact of, the pandemic.

While everyone has a role to play in the fight for racial equality, I want to speak to our white members now. In this moment, we must recognize our responsibility for increasing our efforts to dismantle the racist system that benefits white people at the expense of people of color. We must ask ourselves, *how am I showing up as an ally, even as an accomplice?* (Thank you to Valerie Hunt for challenging me to contemplate the difference.) We must ask ourselves, *is our union showing all of our members that they belong here?* That their voice matters? That the union has their back? If the answer is "I don't know," or "no, not really," then we must ask ourselves, *what must we do differently to change that answer?*

I just happen to have a list of 75 things each of us can do; you don't have to do all of them...but do something.

<https://medium.com/equality-includes-you/what-white-people-can-do-for-racial-justice-f2d18b0e0234>

And here's a short list of actions you can take within your union:

- When planning for negotiations, ask yourselves if the interests of all of your members are included. If not, proactively seek inclusion.
- When at a union membership or leadership meeting, notice who isn't present and figure out why that is.
- When a member of color comes to you about mistreatment on the job, consider the role that racism (or sexism, homophobia, etc.) may be playing.
- If a member has a complaint filed about them, consider the role that racism (or sexism, homophobia, etc.) may be playing.
- When a co-worker of color shares with you how they are treated differently than other workers, listen to understand...and believe them.
- Advocate for equity and inclusion in the policies and practices at your school or college.
- And so many more...

I saw a sign at the protest on Saturday, a quote by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. – “a riot is the language of the unheard.” Then I watched Trevor Noah speak about the social contract – that agreement within society that most of us buy into and benefit from – that has been null and void in the lives of so many black and brown people. Acknowledging the fact that the majority of rioters were white and not rioting in the interest of demanding basic human rights, these two quotes still got my attention and are instructive. If you consider what it is that we aren't hearing, I think it's pretty clear – the social contract has been revoked and simply doesn't exist for far too many people. It's about time we turn that around.