In the midst of the pandemic on November 7, Americans voted in record numbers to cast divisiveness and dishonesty out of the White House and return to an era of unity, honesty, and respect by electing Joe Biden and Kamala Harris. President Biden’s inauguration is the start of a new day in America. While the last four years gave us a leader who was most concerned about enriching himself, the next four will be marked by one who seeks to build a country that benefits us all.

Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will set our country on a better, more united path.

As IFT President Dan Montgomery said after the election, “Under their leadership, we will deal with our critical challenges head on and work together to help mend the divisions among Americans that keep us from reaching our greatest potential.”

It won’t be an easy task. With the vaccine in the early stages of distribution, our nation is still struggling with the deadly virus that has taken a devastating toll, from tremendous loss of life to massive unemployment to the shuttering of schools. At the same time, our long fight for racial justice continues with no end in sight.

A proven leader, Joe Biden has committed to confront these crises and overcome them. He’s already hard at work. Before even taking office, Biden began the critical job of getting the virus under control. First, he tasked Dr. Anthony Fauci and a diverse group of experts on a COVID-19 task force to develop specific, measurable plans to reduce the spread of the virus and to implement basic virus control measures, including a national system for testing and contact tracing. He also spoke out powerfully for mask wearing, initially asking Americans to do their part by wearing masks during his first 100 days in office to help control spread.

Biden understands that controlling – and eventually conquering – the virus will not only save lives and help alleviate the uncertainty and fear Americans feel, but it is the only way to bring back jobs and stabilize our economy for the millions who have suffered loss of work and income.

He also knows that defeating the virus will allow us to focus on other priorities, including education. Biden has vowed to work with Congress to pass a COVID-19 relief package that will provide resources to schools and communities to help them reopen schools safely for adults and children alike. The package would also provide essential funding to help our schools recover from the devastating academic, social, health and nutrition effects of the pandemic on children.

President Biden and Vice President Harris have also committed to enact an education plan that will bolster learning and academic opportunities, particularly for low-income students. Their plan will fully fund the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and triple funding for Title I. It will also provide universal prekindergarten for all 3- and 4-year-olds and expand community schools.

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2021 IS FINALLY HERE.

Looking back at last year, I can only say this—it was unlike any we’ve ever known and surely the most difficult one of our lifetimes. From the pandemic and its devastating, far-reaching consequences to the murder of George Floyd by police and the resulting social unrest to the constant lies and inaction from then-President Trump, every day was a stress and challenge, both physically and emotionally, personally and in our unions. The pain has been real and deep.

In the midst of it all though, I have never been prouder of or more inspired by the members of this union. No matter where you work or what job you do, you adapted to the new normal the virus forced upon us. You faced the challenges, overcame them, and got the work done under the most difficult of circumstances. You stepped up for your students and communities in countless, inspiring ways. You proved that you are truly heroes.

At the same time, you led the fight in your local councils and districts to demand that your schools and workplaces were safe and that your colleagues, students, and Illinois residents were protected from the virus. In some cases that meant tough fights to allow for remote learning when officials demanded a return to unsafe in-person instruction.

You worked harder than ever leading up to the November elections to get-out-the-vote for IFT-supported candidates in Illinois and Washington D.C., who share our values and priorities. Your efforts were invaluable and made a difference in important elections, including the race for president.

At the same time, you remained focused on our collective work to increase equity and inclusion in our state and local unions.

Watching IFT members accomplish so much during such a difficult year gives me hope for our state and local unions.

The inauguration of the Biden/Harris team also means tough fights to allow for remote learning when officials demanded a return to unsafe in-person instruction.

We continue to grapple with profound racial justice and economic crises. And our state is facing significant budgetary issues under the weight of the pandemic that must be addressed.

Despite these serious challenges we still face, I am confident that much better days are coming.

With the ongoing distribution of vaccines we can finally dare to hope for an end to the horrific loss of life from the pandemic. We can feel confident that we will (eventually) get back to a real recovery where we are determined to make sure our world is in better shape than before COVID. And we can look forward to going back to classrooms and workplaces when we know they are safe once again.

The inauguration of the Biden/Harris team also gives us tremendous hope. It means an end to four dark years under Trump and the return of decency, civility, and a call for unity. It means our nation will have the will and courage to face its racial justice issues head on. And it means workers and our unions will be valued and respected again by our country’s leaders.

After a brutal 2020, it feels good to look ahead to things with a bright perspective. It’s as if we’ve collectively emerged from a long, dark tunnel into at least a patch of sunshine. I’m sure many of you feel the same way.

We’ll continue to face major challenges in 2021, and I don’t suggest that they’ll be easy to overcome. But I’ve seen firsthand during times of crisis that our members are resilient and never give up.

As part of an ongoing effort to keep our members and those they serve safe, the union this month launched the IFT COVID Tracker. The new interactive website is designed to help track coronavirus-related health and safety concerns in real time for schools and campuses across the state.

We know that schools and institutions should not reopen until we have a clear picture of critical health data in our buildings and communities. The IFT COVID Tracker helps to gather that data by crowdsourcing reports of health and safety violations and concerns identified by staff members, parents, and community members. The site includes a mapping tool that shows district-by-district information reported to the IFT to help easily identify issues in each area. The data will also help our union draw comparisons between various areas and identify any potential “hot spots”.

“Some employers are working closely with their local unions to prioritize health and safety for employees and students, but others are ignoring the science and our members’ voices in important conversations about reopening,” said IFT President Dan Montgomery. “The IFT COVID Tracker gives our members and the community a place to report issues and concerns so we have a central source of data about school and campus safety that we can point to as we work to develop local agreements surrounding safety issues.”

Members are encouraged to submit reports of cases or unsafe conditions in their workplaces on the website’s homepage by clicking “Submit a Report.” All reports submitted will be verified to ensure accuracy, and the identity of submitters will remain anonymous. Members are also urged to share their personal stories and concerns about safety via the site. Similar websites are being used effectively by the Chicago Teachers Union, New York State United Teachers, and AFT Massachusetts to identify safety issues.

“Everyone deserves to feel safe at work,” added Montgomery. “The new IFT COVID Tracker provides us with another tool in our fight for safe and healthy workplaces by raising awareness about safety issues and collecting data we can use to hold elected officials accountable to their decisions related to reopening schools and workplaces in the midst of the ongoing health crisis.”

Use the IFT COVID-19 Tracker, covidtracker.ift-aft.org, to share information on cleaning, maintenance and whether safety protocol is (or isn’t) being followed in your workplace.

The new initiative is helping you do that with the launch of our new COVID-19 Tracker on the next page. It’s a new day in America and I am confident that much better days are coming.

“By securing more votes than any other presidential candidate in U.S. history, Joe Biden has proven that the people eagerly await a return to a leader who cares about every one of us, not just an elite few,” added Montgomery. “In the days ahead, I look forward to a focus on restoring decency, respect, and equality to the White House. The IFT will be proud to work with our national union and the Biden administration to promote our shared values and help create the future we all deserve.”

IT’S A NEW DAY IN AMERICA continued...
IFT members, staff are ready for Kamala!

We’re proud to support the first Black and South Asian woman elected to our nation’s second highest office. We asked IFT members and staff their thoughts about Vice President Kamala Harris.

Kamala’s election as vice president means so much! Her race reminded me of the plight of so many women, especially women of color, who get passed over due to misogyny or racial biases. She is smart, prepared, confident, and READY to lead, and I am here to support her all the way to the top!

Benita Twillie
IFT Union Professional Issues
Department Support Staff

My mother taught us to use our head for more than a hat rack and that we can do and be anything we wanted. I am sure these words are heard by many Black women, so Kamala Harris’ election was not a surprise – it was a matter of when. I cannot be prouder to have witnessed the installation of the first Black president and now the first Black woman vice president.

Marcy Lee
Cafeteria Clerical and Paraprofessional Support Staff, Local 6099

Kamala Harris’ victory is significant to Black women who have consistently supported the democratic party and been the party’s most powerful weapon, and it provides recognition to Black mothers, aunts, sisters, and grandmothers who paved the way for her to become the vice president of the United States. My sorority sister, Vice President Kamala Harris, is our ancestors’ wildest dreams. I am immensely proud!

Lana Turley
IFT Field Service Director

Elected Kamala Harris as the first woman of color to the second highest position in government gives my girls and future generations of girls of color hope that they can overcome systemic racism. It also encourages them to continue to set goals and work to achieve them. Her parents’ stories of being immigrants are examples of familiar stories for many people in this diverse nation.

CM Winters Palacio
Cock County College Teachers Union, Local 1600

The overwhelming will of the people has been reflected in this momentous appointment. Vice President Kamala Harris is not only the first woman to hold one of the highest offices in the world but to boot she is a woman of hue. I say proudly and with love, “Let freedom continue to ring!”

Gwen Harrison
Illinois Federation of Public Employees, Local 4408

Finally, America is developing into a reflection of its people. Women of color have always been the foundation of this great nation! Now a great woman will help to lead it.

Linda Wilson
Peoria Federation of Teachers, Local 780

It’s exciting to have a woman of color on any major party ticket. I believe it is a powerful elevation for all women. I’m thrilled that little girls will now be able to identify with a political figure in our country and it may spark interest in politics.

Phyllis Brooks
Shiloh Federation of Support Personnel, Local 6425

I feel excited and affirmed, yet cautiously optimistic. She must be courageously innovative about all the necessary changes to secure our rights as women and Black people in America. What is good for us is good for everyone. We can no longer afford to blur the lines.

Kelly Turner
IFT Legislative Director

The selection of Kamala Harris as vice president symbolizes representation and signifies intentional movement toward deploying the ample resources of American intelligence, ingenuity, fortitude, and integrity. It is progress, but it is not change. This historic selection is tremendously satisfying. Kamala Harris is the first BLACK WOMAN vice president, one of the highest offices in American politics, and I unapologetically proclaim that with pride.

Renette Jackson
Pontiac William Holliday Federation of Teachers, Local 1811

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"WHILE I MAY BE THE FIRST WOMAN IN THIS OFFICE, I WILL NOT BE THE LAST." - VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS
Q: When did you start getting involved in politics?
HARMON: Right about the time I was in law school at the University of Chicago I volunteered for the Carol Mosely Braun campaign for United States Senate and the Bill Clinton for President campaign in 1992. About the same time, I met with my State Senator, Phil Rock, to ask what I could do locally. I asked if I could re-charter the Young Democrats of Oak Park, which had gone dormant and he said, “Alright kid, go ahead.” After Senator Rock announced his retirement as committeeman in 2000 I threw my hat in the ring to replace him.

Q: The Constitution and the Supreme Court have made it very clear that a pension is a promise, yet politicians from both sides of the aisle keep trying to rob us of our benefits to solve a problem we didn’t cause. How will you approach the pension funding issue and protect our retirement security?
HARMON: I intend to keep that promise. I believe that respect for the job educators and staff do every day in our schools - especially during a pandemic where the value of essential workers is plain for all to see - involves not only treating them well now, but also when they retire. I will work diligently with our caucus, the governor, and colleagues in the House to work through some difficult budgets ahead for the State of Illinois.

Q: What is your position on collective bargaining and other rights important to working women and men?
HARMON: I am a strong believer in the rights of workers to bargain collectively. There is a cohort of right wing millionaires and billionaires in this country who have done everything in their power to undo this right, and the Senate will use every tool at our disposal to fight back and protect these fundamental labor rights.

Q: Do you believe we adequately fund Illinois schools? If not, what is your plan to ensure our students have what they need to succeed in both K-12 and higher education?
HARMON: No, and it's one of the reasons I've spent a decade fighting for progressive revenue and increased, more equitable funding for our schools. I was greatly disappointed that the Fair Tax didn’t pass last year. It means we have some tough choices ahead of us in fashioning pandemic recovery budgets. I think about some of the first issues I worked on as a young senator and I believe strongly that one of our greatest public investments is in education. We have no future as a state where people want to live unless we make this a top priority.

Q: How will you address concerns about high-stakes teacher evaluations and overreliance on standardized tests as a measure of student performance?
HARMON: It starts with involving educators in education policy. When we have a table of stakeholders inclusive of the people on the front lines in our schools, we start from a better place. Second, I will ensure members and policymakers understand that measuring student performance shouldn’t result in reduced instructional time, teaching geared towards standardized tests, or data being used to punish schools or staff.

Q: Who was your favorite teacher?
HARMON: I had so many great teachers. My first grade teacher, Mrs. Reardon, comes to mind. She lived just a few houses away and she not only taught me well, but also became my permanent employer. I cut her grass, shoveled her snow, raked her leaves, painted her basement, cleaned her gutters, and did anything she needed. Mr. Nekrosius taught us high school English and stirred in me a love of learning and a license to think critically. I also fondly remember a great English writing professor at Knox College, Robert Metz. I was a football player fraternity guy and in a poetry program that was filled with folk who were not football players or fraternity guys. Even though I was the outlier, he defended my approach to writing and gave me the confidence to be myself. A great teacher helps everyone reach their potential in the way that makes them successful.

Q: What was your first job?
HARMON: My very first job was delivering the Chicago Daily News after school with my friend Mark who lived across the street. I was an or eight years old and I strapped the bag to the handle bars of my Schwinn Stingray. I could still take you on that route. That was also one of my first petion drives, walking my old paper route.

Q: What would people be surprised to learn about you?
HARMON: That I play guitar in a band. After hearing the Beatles, my world changed. I started taking lessons my freshman year of high school and Daytripper was the first song I learned to play. I haven’t stopped since.

Q: What kind of Illinois do you want for your children? Describe your vision for the future we all deserve.
HARMON: I said when I was sworn in that I would be guided by the principles of honesty, collaboration, and representation. That’s the vision I have for the Senate of the Illinois General Assembly and I believe it’s a vision that is much needed in the State of Illinois. I want all of our children to believe in the goodness and grace of their state. We may have some disagreements about policy here and there, but at the end of the day we can “disagree without being disagreeable,” as Paul Simon used to say and then come together to do what’s right.

One year ago, State Senator Don Harmon was elected by his Democratic colleagues to be the 39th President of the Illinois Senate. Harmon was first elected to the Illinois Senate in November 2002. As leader of the Illinois Senate Democratic Caucus, he plays a big role in shaping Illinois policy.

He recently answered our questions about pensions, teacher evaluations, school funding, and more.
Q&A with Don Harmon
State Senator Harmon answers questions about pensions, school funding, and more.

IFT launches COVID-19 Tracker
Website will report key health and safety data in real time.

We’re ready for Kamala
IFT members and staff share their thoughts about Vice President Kamala Harris.

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CFL WILLIAM A. LEE MEMORIAL .... Feb 10, 2021
CARL J. MEGEL SPECIAL EDUCATION... March 5, 2021
IFT ROBERT G. PORTER.................. March 5, 2021

VISIT IFT-AFT.ORG/SCHOLARSHIPS FOR APPLICATION INFORMATION.

2021 UNION LEADERSHIP COURSES
ADMINISTRATOR ACADEMY INITIAL TEACHERS EVALUATION TRAINING
June 3, 14, & 15, 2021

VISIT IFT-AFT.ORG/PROFESSIONALDEVELOPMENT FOR MORE INFORMATION.

PLEDGE TO SUPPORT BLACK LIVES MATTER AT SCHOOL DEMANDS ALL YEAR LONG

✓ END ZERO TOLERANCE ✓ MANDATE BLACK HISTORY & ETHNIC STUDIES
✓ HIRE BLACK TEACHERS ✓ FUND COUNSELORS NOT COPS

✓ I pledge to support A YEAR OF PURPOSE

FIND ADDITIONAL RESOURCES AT IFT-AFT.ORG/BLM