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**Remarks by Sandra Feldman,
President, American Federation of Teachers
to the
Italian-American Labor Council**

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It's a pleasure to be among my brothers and sisters of NYSUT, UFT, the American Labor movement and the Italian-American Labor Council. Thank you so much. It's a privilege to be recognized by this great organization and an honor to receive this award. Of course, no one could accept this award without reflecting on Franklin Delano Roosevelt – the man who inspired it; the man who lifted this nation from the depths of the Great Depression and offered us a “New Deal.” A man who understood the responsibility of the free to stand together against tyranny, whose leadership helped not only to save Europe, but to save democracy itself.

I am proud that the Italian American Labor Council and the American labor movement, as a whole, stood with him in that fight. As labor has done in every struggle against dictatorship since then....

Who would have thought it? A mere 59 years after that great four freedoms speech, Soviet Communism and Nazi fascism have disintegrated; we live in an era of unparalleled peace and prosperity, and the thirst for democracy is sweeping the world.

Of course, we have to stay vigilant, because other threads remain—like crime and corruption. But a great example of the power of democratic participation was brought home to me last year during a trip to a place some of you may know well -- Palermo. For years, Palermo's Mafia used violence and intimidation to maintain control over a terrified populace. Tax dollars meant for schools, housing,

and the restoration of historic monuments were diverted to Mafia pockets. Ancient churches, museums, and public buildings were left to rot. Housing for the poor crumbled. Under the heavy weight of corruption, the economy stagnated. When it came to civic affairs, most citizens lived in fear behind closed curtains and doors.

But a few brave souls, including a handful of remarkable prosecutors, magistrates, and policemen, wouldn't give up. Two magistrates in particular, Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, heroically pursued the Mafia and ultimately became martyrs in the cause of freedom. Their murders were the last straw for the citizens of Palermo. Women hung bed sheets out of the windows with the word *Basta!* written on them, and the people of Palermo, with great courage, began to take back their city.

They elected Leoluca Orlando, a reformist mayor who won 75 percent of the vote, and began to rebuild civil society. At great risk to his life and to the lives of his family, the mayor took on the Mafia bosses. Backed by the people of Palermo, he achieved their conviction and imprisonment. He also succeeded in rebuilding trust in the processes of lawful society, where people could associate freely without fear.

And he did it in large part through education.

One of his initiatives was a “curriculum of lawfulness” for the schools – a civics course with special urgency. The children of Palermo were taught the truth about the Mafia and why obeying the law is the right thing to do. Students were encouraged to “adopt” historic monuments and buildings, to learn about their past, and to monitor their rehabilitation, including one of Italy’s greatest opera houses. Today, a city that was once a wasteland of decaying and abandoned

buildings, filled with fear and violence, is once again a safe and beautiful place to raise a family.

A place, as Roosevelt put it, where there is freedom of speech, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear.

On another important subject, I know that many of you spent the morning hearing about the struggle to end abusive child labor around the world. You heard that 250 million children between the ages of five and 14 in developing countries are working. You heard that tens of millions of these children are working in unhealthy, dangerous, even slave-like conditions.

The AFT, UNITE, and AFL-CIO are part of a worldwide movement to end abusive child labor, and to achieve universal access to education – which the World Bank has

identified as one of the best economic development programs a country can establish.

But in many developing countries, basic education is neither free nor available to all children. Where schools for the poor do exist, the quality of education is often terrible. ILO studies have demonstrated, however, that when education quality is improved, and schooling is made more accessible; with all the promise of a better life that it brings, parents will make major sacrifices for the education of their children—including some parents who otherwise would send their children out to work.

Certainly, that's the story of the evolution of education in America. We've come a long way toward ending child labor and providing a quality education to every child. But we're not there yet. Not for all our children.

Now, there are critics of public education who insist our schools are terrible and getting worse. But they are wrong. All objective statistics point to the fact that American schools are educating more children, and a more diverse and heterogeneous population of children, to higher levels than ever before in history. But while we can be proud of this, we can't stop moving forward. Because, sadly, in some respects, we have two very different school systems in the country today – one for the more advantaged and another for the poor.

Some on the right have been playing on this reality—and on the legitimate discontent of poor parents—to try to push through voucher schemes and dismantle the entire system of common, public schools. Yet each time the public is given the opportunity to vote on vouchers, they vote them down. Nine times they've done so – three times in California alone! And in the exit polls from the last election Americans

said by a ratio of 78-16 that they prefer the improvement of public schools over the introduction of vouchers.

What we need to do in America is very clear – we need to make sure that every school is a good school – one that we would want to send our own children or grandchildren to. And that good schools are easily accessible to every child, regardless of their family circumstance, or the wealth of their community.

That’s why the AFT has been a leader in the effort to establish high standards for all students, and why we continue to fight for what students and teachers need to make meeting them a reality. And we’re seeing results – youngsters taking more challenging courses, higher scores, and success stories of schools that are turning themselves around, even in some of this nation’s toughest, poorest neighborhoods. Even in this great city--where failing

schools in a program negotiated by the UFT—where days are longer, teachers are paid more, and students receive needed supports, achievement rose at a significantly higher rate than comparable schools.

As someone who grew up in public housing and public schools in Coney Island, and as a teacher unionist who knows our schools and our kids, let me tell you:

While we cannot allow poverty to be an excuse for low achievement—not for the students, not for the teachers, and not for the schools, neither can we ignore its consequences. And overcoming them takes more than we’ve been giving so far. Our class sizes are too large; our pay scales are too low; our teachers need help. They need to be treated with respect. Something that sure doesn’t happen in this city! (I wish Mayor Guiliani understood half of what Mayor Orlando understands about the value of education.)

Right now, in this historical moment, we in the United States have a rare opportunity to improve education for every child. Our booming economy and our government surpluses at every level can provide the resources to get the job done. And the American people want us to do it. In the recent election while the presidency is in dispute; some things are not. Not only did vouchers lose, but investment in education won. In state after state, voters approved funding for lowering class sizes, for enhancing teacher salaries, for fixing school buildings, and more.

The children of America—whatever their color or creed and including the poorest, the neediest, and the most difficult—are as able, and as smart as children anywhere. They are also our future—the fellow citizens whose voice and vote will determine what kind of world our own children and grandchildren will inhabit.

**With the support of good people like those in this room,
I know we'll prevail in the struggle to fulfill the American
dream of opportunity and prosperity for all, that Franklin
Delano Roosevelt envisioned.**

Thanks you.