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AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS
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Thank you, thank you very much. I am really privileged to be able to address you as president of the AFT, which I have been for about a little over a year. And I'm privileged to be walking in the shoes of a very great man, the founding president of Education International and my long-time mentor and friend, Al Shanker.

I want to welcome you on behalf of AFT. You may know that here in this capital, we are in the throes of a great deal of discussion about education, and that education, as in so many countries, is really a priority in the United States. And with that debate, with that discussion, there is good news and there is bad news. The good news is that, like for most of you, education is a priority. We have a President of the United States whom you will hear from later in this Congress, who believes in public education and who knows more about public education than any other president of the United States that we have known. And he is fighting very hard for the things that our children need. He is fighting very hard to lower class size and we, in the AFT and NEA, are supporting that fight--to lower class size and to bring in 100,000 new teachers, especially for children in the early grades.

We are fighting to do something about the shamefully deteriorating school buildings in this country. We have children going to school with leaky roofs, in

over-crowded conditions, where they have to sometimes convert bathrooms or closets to classrooms, or have classes going on in hallways. And this, in the wealthiest nation in the world, is a disgrace. We are fighting very hard to change that and we are lucky to have a president on our side. We are fighting to bring higher standards for academics and for behavior into our classrooms so that we can have orderly places for our children to learn and for our teachers to teach, and so that our standards can compete on a world-class basis. Our schools are improving and that's the good news. The bad news is that we have a majority in the Congress of the United States, that wants to privatize, that wants to bring in vouchers and cares very little about the programs that the President and that the AFT and the NEA espouse to improve public education.

Instead, and I know you have this going on in many of your countries, they want to put education on a market basis. They believe that somehow free market competition is going to improve our schools. We believe that it will do the opposite--that it will deepen the inequities that we already have and make schools, especially schools for the poorest children, schools of last resort instead of vehicles into the mainstream of American society and American life. That is what our schools have been and what they must be even more than ever in this global society. And so, like so many of you, we are in a struggle to preserve and improve our schools, to preserve and improve public education. We fight especially for the education of poor children in America who are mostly in urban or rural areas where the tax base and revenues cannot support schools that are good enough, and where more help is needed from the federal government.

I know that many of you here have the same problems, differing mostly in intensity of degree. We -- like many of you -- face attacks on our unions, and too often our efforts to work with local school officials, to improve teacher quality in the education of our students, are rebuffed. But we don't give up; none of us here gives up. We continue to fight, not just for better salaries and conditions for our members--that is a fight which is in our gut--but for the things that our students need to learn and for partnerships and alliances that will help. The world is growing smaller everyday and we truly live in a global economy where more and more education is the key, not just to prosperity, but to a better life for all people, especially, I might add, the education of young girls. There is nothing, as so many studies have pointed out, that can do more to improve the economy of a country, than to educate the girls. Yet the struggle for equal opportunity for all children and equity of resources for all schools, regardless of the wealth of the area in which they are located, goes on in all our countries. And so it is even more important than ever that we are unified, as we are here at EI, and show the international solidarity that we have as teacher unionists.

Our exchanges are invaluable. They help us go back and do our work with greater

information, greater authority and the strength to fight harder on behalf of our members

and the children we serve. And so on behalf of the American Federation of Teachers, I

welcome you and I offer our very best wishes to all of us for a successful World Congress

of Education International. Thank you.