

Remarks of NTEU National President Colleen M. Kelley



Once again I would like to welcome you to Seattle and to our 53rd National Convention. This week is our time to celebrate our achievements, to take pride in the great legacy of our union, and to lay the ground work for our future.

In the words of Bill Clinton, “Though we march to the music of our time, our mission is timeless.”

Our mission: “to organize federal employees to work together to ensure that every federal employee is treated with dignity and respect” is indeed timeless, and it is more relevant and more critical than at any time in our 73-year-history.

Our work—the work that you do every day on behalf of those we represent—makes a tremendous difference in the lives of federal employees. Whether it be ensuring they are treated fairly in the promotion process, helping them achieve work-life balance through a scheduling agreement, or fighting for accommodations for employees with disabilities, we are the voice and the champion of the frontline federal worker.

Believing that we will continue to make a difference every day to tens of thousands of federal workers in our 31 agencies is what brings all of us here this week to conduct the important business of our union.

Tom Brokaw once said, “It’s easy to make a buck. It’s a lot tougher to make a difference.”

Well, I am sure you will agree that making a difference is what we do best at NTEU and that is why the theme of our convention is “Proud to be NTEU.” Can I see a show of hands? How many of you are proud to be part of NTEU? Two hands if you are really proud.

I want to share with you what some of our leaders and members had to say about why they are so proud to be part of NTEU.

This from an IRS leader in Oklahoma:

“I am proud to be a part of NTEU because I am continuing the family tradition of union membership, government service and fighting for the rights of others! I’m proud to serve!”

One NTEU member from Michigan put it like this: *“I am proud to be an NTEU member and of the work they do to protect my employment benefits... I am grateful they devote their time to addressing and fighting the issues that impact our employment and me personally.”*

And from a leader in CBP Calexico: *“NTEU is a union that never gives up. It fights for as long as it can to get the best possible outcome for its members... There is no telling where this agency would be or what I would be doing if NTEU wasn’t around. Proud to be an NTEU member is not a strong enough statement.”*

What is so important about what you do every day as NTEU leaders is that there are people only you can reach...and differences only you can make in their lives.

And in so doing, across the country, you have represented individual employees in the workplace, solving problems, and filing grievances when they could not be solved otherwise, enforcing contract provisions and helping employees help themselves through issue organizing. Whether it is about bathroom breaks at call sites, consecutive days off at border crossings or mileage rates for bank examiners, you take the day-to-day concerns of our members to heart and you advocate tirelessly on their behalf. And because I know that sometimes our members might forget, I want to thank you for your service. I thank you for them and I thank you for me. Leading this great organization has been and remains one of the great joys of my life.

The work of all the NTEU leaders in this room and all the NTEU chapters across the country adds up, over time, to big, big differences for federal workers.



Today, on top of the daily battles you take on, there is a bigger fight. Government employees are facing new and serious threats to our rights, the right to fair pay, fair treatment, and a decent retirement in exchange for a lifetime of public service. Every day on the news we see teachers, firefighters, prison guards and police officers, fighting to retain their collective bargaining rights and to assure fair play in the workplace.

NTEU has been present and accounted for, and usually leading the charge, on the front lines of every battle on behalf of federal workers.

That is why NTEU did not stand by and let 44,000 TSA employees go without collective bargaining rights. Denial of collective bargaining rights for them was a threat to employees in every agency. If it were not for NTEU's involvement in TSA, those employees would not have those rights today.

Yes, we lost the election by the narrowest of margins, but we won a great victory for the principle we hold dearest and the reason we exist. Hundreds of NTEU leaders--many in this room--were involved in this effort to educate and organize TSA employees about the value of collective bargaining and union representation. I am tremendously proud of all that we achieved for those employees in the time that we represented them and I do not apologize for the decisions that we made.

And our battle on behalf of federal employees continues. Let me set the record straight this morning about the issue of compensation. Repetition does not transform a lie into a truth.

We aggressively opposed the negative myths on federal pay being pushed by conservative think tanks that would like to cut our salaries, outsource our work, and significantly cut the workforce. Federal employees are not overpaid for the work that they do.

Here is what one of our members, a retired CBP employee, had to say about being overpaid:

"I worked nights, weekends, holidays, sometimes rotating work schedules. I missed time with my family, vacations, different children's events...while others were home sleeping snug in their beds. I earned my pay and what I have and I will not apologize to anyone for it."

NTEU fought back against proposals by the deficit commission and Republicans to extend the pay freeze, increase our retirement contributions, reduce the size of the federal workforce and significantly cut agency budgets. And while we are in the midst of a two-year pay freeze, we defeated an attempt by a powerful Republican leader to eliminate within-grade and step increases for federal workers.

And that is not all.

As the clock ticked down to the first possible shutdown in 16 years, federal employees left their workplaces on a Friday evening uncertain of when they would next report to work. To make matters worse, the shutdown came in the middle of tax filing season, threatening to delay refunds for taxpayers.

We led the way, and others joined us, in holding a federal employee call-in day asking members of Congress to say no to a government shutdown and severe budget cuts. I spent hours on the phone with the administration and agency heads pressing them on when employees would receive information. And I devoted still more hours with the media to get the word out about how the public would suffer in a shutdown.

I met with members of Congress to ensure that the compromise did not involve huge cuts to federal budgets and further moves to freeze pay or eliminate federal jobs. In the end, we were successful in avoiding what could have been devastating cuts.



Then it was déjà-vu all over again, when the deadline for a default on the national debt approached with no compromise in sight. We pressed to get answers to our questions and lobbied successfully in the initial round to keep federal pensions off the chopping block. We will be carefully monitoring the work of the Super Committee and expect a hard fight ahead of us as we work to protect federal retirement, pay, and health care benefits. During all the uncertainty, we set up a special web page with frequently-asked-questions and communicated to our members. We were the only source of information for employees.

Here is one response we received from a member in Utah:

“Thank you so much for being ever vigilant and also for keeping all of us informed as soon as anything occurs. You are so deeply appreciated and I'm sure I speak for so many.”

Let us take a quick look at some other NTEU accomplishments since our last convention.

When the new Congress came to town, many lawmakers wasted no time in letting us know they had little respect for federal employees. Well, I have news for them: While we will gladly work with anyone who will work with us, when we cannot—when ideology overwhelms common sense and respect for workers—we will go under, over, around or through those who will not work with us. And we will never give up.

We brought hundreds of NTEU members to town as part of our Legislative Conference and staged a very effective rally at the Capitol. Seven members of Congress joined us and spoke on our behalf and we had extensive TV and media coverage.

NTEU played a key role in protecting employee rights in the financial regulatory reform act so their pay could not be downgraded and their livelihood would be secure. And, last month, we welcomed 500 new bargaining unit employees from the Office of Thrift Supervision into NTEU.

Working with our IRS chapters, we converted thousands of seasonal employees to full-time positions. And, we brought new work to the Andover IRS Campus after submission processing ramped down, providing continued employment for many NTEU members.

In the federal sector, 280,000 young adults are now on their parents' policies because of the language won by NTEU

for FEHBP coverage to include dependents up to age 26.

We won a major victory in a CBP case which will lead to employees receiving millions in back pay for being forced to work without two consecutive days off. We won reinstatement of the Foreign Language Award Program for CBP employees, won a journeyman pay increase, and fought for CBP employees to be allowed to wear protective equipment during the H1N1 health scare.

We won the right to retirement credit for unused sick leave for FERS employees and the approval of important telework legislation.

We saw a decline in contracting and won a moratorium on new A-76 competitions.

We negotiated, fought, and won strong new contracts in CBP, HHS FMS, NRC, FNS, the Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, and the IRS Chief Counsel's Office.

Our active communications program has us interacting with more members than ever before through the *Bulletin*, the *e-Bulletin*, our multiple web sites, electronic agency newsletters, bargaining updates, contract quizzes and social media sites. Our goal is to provide our members with timely, accurate information before management even has it.



Another reason I am so proud to be part of NTEU is that in spite of the unrelenting attacks, our members have remained focused on the important work that they do for the country—collecting taxes, safeguarding our retirement, guarding our borders, feeding our schoolchildren, inspecting our food and drugs, protecting our banking system, monitoring nuclear materials, providing services to the elderly and those with disabilities, printing our money and preserving our national parks. No matter what else is going on, the American people can count on our members, and our members can count on NTEU.

An SEC member from Fort Worth had this to say: *“I am proud to be a government employee because I am part of a team that protects investors, their money, their retirement and their life savings every day.”*

And an IRS Philadelphia Campus member sent this message, *“There are times when a taxpayer is frustrated with the IRS. They feel like the bureaucracy is insurmountable. Then they talk to me and I can help them. I am a person, not the government. They deal with me. I can make it happen.”*

To demonstrate the dedication of federal workers and the importance of the work they do to every American, this summer we launched our new NTEU public service campaign.

Already, the TV PSAs have aired more than 200 times, reaching more than 5 million people in top markets such as Los Angeles, Philadelphia, San Francisco, and Miami!

The radio spots have now aired over 5,000 times, and have been heard by more than 8.6 million Americans in cities such as Chicago, Dallas, Boston, Atlanta, Washington, DC, Phoenix and more!

Our campaign was met with great enthusiasm from our members. In fact, within the first two days our “They Work For US” Facebook page gained more than 300 friends.

We will continue to build on that campaign and invite all NTEU chapters to find ways to extend our message in their communities.

Here are a few member comments:

From a CBP member in Miami: *“Keep up the good work. Keep Hope alive!”*

And from Los Angeles: *“Thanks NTEU for doing the public service campaign to offer a better light and enhance the public value of federal employees. This is really good and very needed.”*

Federal workers see the value of NTEU and the proof is that our membership has continued to grow. Our membership has grown to historic levels. That is a tribute to chapters across the country, especially considering that most chapters are seeing few new hires. Even without hiring, and the prospects not looking good in the foreseeable future for big hires, I am confident our membership will continue to grow as you convince more and more federal employees to stand with us on the important issues in these challenging times.

And as we continue to strengthen our membership, our challenge now lies in getting more members more active in our union than ever before.

We need to mobilize federal employees to stand with us, not behind us, and inspire more members to speak up for themselves, even as we speak up for them.

Working together we must continue to find new ways to engage and involve our members in their future. We must show them how each of them can make a difference in our current struggles.

Benjamin Franklin said, “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.”

As we move into the 2012 elections, the political rhetoric will become even more shrill. We need to channel our anger and work as a single force to defeat those who would denigrate federal workers.

As part of our Labor Recognition Week celebration and beyond, I am asking you to work with me to get more of our members actively involved in our union. We are calling it the “NTEU Now” campaign. I realize that everyone cannot do everything, but I am asking each to do something. Contribute to TEPAC, call their members of Congress, volunteer at a chapter event, respond to a survey, recruit a new member, learn about their contract and exercise their workplace rights. I know I can count on you, our NTEU leaders, to help make these opportunities to get involved a reality.

Our union is more relevant now than ever. As part of the “NTEU Now” campaign, we will invite our members to get involved in a way that best suits their comfort level. I am sure you have a lot of creative ideas about what we can do and I look forward to discussing those with you. When we combine our record membership levels with record levels of member involvement, we will be unstoppable.

Next month we mark the 10th anniversary of 9/11. We will be providing NTEU chapters with commemorative posters and other materials so that you can plan your own tribute. Many of our members were directly impacted by the events on that day and many more made vital contributions to our country’s recovery. I know you will pay homage to the memory of Sept. 11 and our members’ service in a way that is most meaningful to your members.

Part of the proud legacy of our union is one of achieving the impossible. As we look to the days ahead, we are determined to capitalize on every opportunity for federal employees and to create opportunities where none exist.

In these challenging times, it would be easy to be frustrated and give up, but at NTEU we never, never, never, never give up. Ever.



Even when we are dealt a bad hand by an agency, Congress, an arbitrator, or an administration, we regroup and figure out how to undo the bad hand, how to right the wrongs, how to re-define the issue and take another hard run at it.

At NTEU, we are relentless and because of that we are successful. Our continued success will require vision, imagination and leadership...The same sort of vision and imagination and leadership that inspired our founders to band together more than 70 years ago.

Robert F. Kennedy said “Each time we stand up for an ideal, or act to improve the lot of others, or strike out against injustice, we send forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

Our job is to send forth ripples of hope and build a current that will sweep down those walls of oppression and resistance and create a better world for those who serve our country. No matter how great the journey, no matter how hard the task, we are NTEU and we are more than up to the challenge.



Thank you for standing up for our members each and every day. I am proud to stand with all of you, and I am so proud to be NTEU.

Thank you.