



I recently announced I will be retiring from state service and my position as Central Region president in November. This will be my last convention and my final message to our activist leadership and delegates.

After serving as your Region president in three terms over the past ten years, this will really be a bittersweet time for me. Over the past thirty five years, being a member and then serving as a leader in our union has been a huge part of my life. Whether it was serving on Local committees, or as Local President at SUNY Potsdam, or on Regional committees, or as Region secretary and then president, my union involvement has meant so much more to me than just a job. While I will certainly enjoy the opportunity to spend more time with my friends and family, I will miss all the times I spent with my CSEA family and participating in the union events that have become such an important part of my life.

I will miss the opportunities to stand shoulder to shoulder with workers when we are fighting the good fight. I will miss the opportunities to lead spirited debates over how we run our union. I will miss going to clambakes, picnics, information days, lunch and learns, the State Fair and membership meetings to talk directly with our members. Most of all, I will miss our dedicated activist leaders, and you, our delegates, who have become my good friends and my second family.

But I don't want to dwell too much on the past. Those of you who know me know that I always talk about the future when it comes to my annual delegates messages. I know that when I have retired, the work that we all do as a union, staff and activists and officers, will continue. I'm so proud of what we've been able to accomplish throughout all my years, and I'm very hopeful for what our future will hold, despite, and maybe even because of, the threats to our existence we've recently faced.

I'm hopeful because I have heard from so many of our members how strongly they support our union. For those of us who live and breathe union on a daily basis, over the years I think we had become somewhat desensitized to the perspective of the average member, and how much they support us, but that is changing, and in a good way.

Our efforts to engage our members have been nothing less than complete culture change in CSEA, and have been met with an overwhelmingly positive response. I've been out knocking on doors speaking with members at their homes, and I've spoken at countless membership meetings to rank and file union members who never participated much in our union before. Despite their lack of direct involvement, their overwhelming support for what we do has been reassuring and re-energizing. When we talk, they express to me their shared frustration that somebody could get most of the benefits of the union without paying for it, because they understand that it's just common-sense to have everyone paying their fair share. The overwhelming majority tell me they would never quit on each other or our union, and that gives me great hope.

And while we continue to work hard to engage our members, we also are working hard to be the best union we can be, to improve our union and make CSEA the union that our members want to be a part of. I have been proud to help lead our Robust Communications Workgroup, made up of a team of activists and staff who are working to enhance our internal and external communications, something we know is vitally important. We have several other workgroups that are doing equally important research in other areas of our operations to examine how we and other unions operate, and what best practices and lessons we can take away from others. Doing this work will allow us to decide how and what we can change in how we do business to stay relevant, competitive and, most of all, strong. I know that everyone involved in these workgroups, and everyone who cares about our union, is doing their best to make sure that CSEA will be around for the next 108 years and beyond.

Our convention theme this year is “Stay Union Stay Strong.” Because of all our efforts to improve and strengthen our union, I am encouraged that we can come out of this even stronger than before, but we cannot and will not do this just by making changes from the top down.

I’m probably going to sound like a broken record here, because I’ve talked about this before, but If we are to be truly successful on behalf of our members, we will also need to focus on improving our union from the grass-roots up. We will need to be more visible and successful in the everyday workplace issues that our members expect us to be involved in. At the same time, we will need to continue engaging our members and involving them in their own fights, and those of their union brothers and sisters, if we want to grow stronger. This will not be easy work, because it means continuing to look at changing our culture in our workplaces and doing whatever we can to encourage actual participation by our members. The bottom line is that we will never be a successful member-run union if our members aren’t invested in their own success.

Now that the anvil hanging over our heads of the Supreme Court case has finally fallen, like we knew it was going to, we will ALL have to recommit to doing the hard work of fighting back against those who want to take away our power. We WILL work to engage and educate our members. We WILL work to improve our union. We WILL change the way we do business. We WILL get more members involved. We WILL fight back and WE WILL SUCCEED. We really have no other choice.

Although I am retiring from my union office, I will remain a union activist forever. Just because you may not see me as often, you must know that I remain committed to keeping a strong union movement, and that won’t stop just because I’m not around as much. I WILL stay union and I WILL stay strong. I know you will all join me.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Colleen Wheaton". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

**Colleen Wheaton, President
CSEA Central Region 5**