

**Remarks of Colleen M. Kelley
NTEU National President
55th National Convention**

Once again I want to welcome you to South Florida and NTEU's 55th National Convention. At this historic convention, we will conduct the important business of governing our great union, we will chart a path for the future in selecting new leadership for the years ahead, and we will celebrate the Power of NTEU.

We ARE a powerful force for our members, for our union, and for our country. Do you agree? Let's see those signs.

Much of NTEU's power is generated by the leaders in this room. You left your many responsibilities and your busy lives to attend this convention because you know we make a difference. Thank you for attending.

Can I see a show of hands? How many are attending your first NTEU convention? How many have been to five or more. How many are attending your last convention in your role as an NTEU leader? (*Colleen raises your own hand.*) You are in good company.

Thursday will be my last day as your National President. As I say those words, my heart is very full.

I have served with many of you seasoned leaders...longer than some of us care to admit.

I cannot thank you all enough for stepping up to serve our union. I will miss the meaningful work that we do together more than I can say.

As NTEU leaders, the question we ask ourselves every day through words or deeds is this: do we want to sit on the sidelines and watch history happen or do we want to make history?

At NTEU, we make history.

We make history when we bring union representation to new groups of employees and to new occupations that traditionally were not part of a union, and in turn, improve the lives of thousands. Since the last convention we organized employees

in the Commodity Futures Trading Commission and the National Park Service-National Capital Region.

My very first organizing campaign as national president was the SEC campaign. What a fight that was!

The SEC fought us tooth and nail. They agreed to an election, then reneged. The FLRA ordered an election; SEC appealed. We held a very visible rally and finally an election and, of course, we won.

Our success in the financial regulatory sector has been a source of great pride for me. Over the last 16 years, we have expanded in SEC, FDIC, NCUA, OCC, CFPB and CFTC. We lead the federal sector in negotiating compensation agreements, helping to make these workplaces competitive within the financial industry.

At NTEU, we make history by standing together in crises. When a plane struck an IRS office in Austin, Texas, killing an IRS manager and endangering the lives of hundreds of employees, NTEU was there for our members and our members were there for each other.

After Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy hit, NTEU established funds to help affected employees and many chapters and members made generous contributions. NTEU also went to bat for our members who were impacted by these natural disasters on issues surrounding leave, identity theft and more.

And, I will never forget the days and months after September 11th and how our union stood together when tragedy struck.

Our first priority in the aftermath of the attack was to ensure the safety of our members. It took us four days to make sure members from our nine chapters at or near the Trade Center were accounted for.

The hardest hit was our Customs chapter in 6 World Trade Center. They were holding training that day so there were more employees there than usual. For those employees, the aftermath was extremely difficult. They had nowhere to work. They were traumatized by what they had experienced. CBP did not make it easy for us. NTEU fought hard to ensure our members were treated with dignity and respect.

In New York and around the nation, I witnessed our members at their best. Our country was in shock and the public turned to the federal government for help. Federal employees secured our borders, protected our energy supplies and ensured the safety of our food and water. Americans were scared, but every federal agency

kept functioning and that steady continuation of our work reassured our citizens and aided our recovery.

Most people run away from trouble, but our CBP members are the kind of people that run toward trouble to see how they can help. They volunteered to do whatever was necessary. No one was waving around contracts. That is what I kept telling DHS Secretary Tom Ridge and why I was so furious when the Bush Administration proposed regulations that would strip our Homeland Security employees of their most basic rights.

NTEU made history when we defeated those restrictive personnel rules. First, we won three federal court victories to stop the regulations, then we passed a legislative moratorium on funding. Our victory preserved a fair personnel system for all federal employees. Part of our success was getting in the legislation, a requirement that the DHS continue good faith bargaining. That was the basis of our lawsuit. I do not think any other union could have delivered that case with that result.

At NTEU, when we get our teeth into something, we do not let go until we are victorious on behalf of those we represent.

In my 16 years as national president and my 35 years as an NTEU leader, I have learned some absolute truths. These are things I know beyond a shadow of a doubt.

Here is one: Our fights are always about people...The DHS fight was an incredibly complex legal case, but the legal technicalities are never the real issue. At the heart of the matter, it is about people, always, about treating people right. Ninety percent of our grievances would go away if someone could flip a switch and management could see that.

Another truth I have learned is this: given the tools and resources, no one does the work of the federal government better than federal employees. No one.

When George W. Bush took office, he made a big push to privatize federal jobs. At one point, the administration planned to contract out as many as 850,000 federal jobs.

We left no stone unturned. We launched a forceful legislative effort and were successful in attaining reforms to the competitive sourcing process on Capitol Hill.

Our hard work led to a decision by the IRS to stop outsourcing the tax collection work of the IRS to unaccountable debt collectors. I truly believe that if they can contract out tax collection, there is no federal job that could not be contracted out.

In the last Congress, we beat an effort to revive contracting out the IRS tax collection work and we are in this fight again. We cannot put American taxpayers at risk of aggressive collection tactics and exposure of private tax information. Plus, it is a bad fiscal deal for the government.

That leads me to another truth: Most of our fights are not just about those we represent. They are about what is best for the country and for the American people.

In that vein, we made history when we fought IRS' effort to close one-quarter of the Taxpayer Assistance Centers around the country.

We demonstrated the full force of NTEU's grassroots might with our "No Taxpayer Left Behind" campaign, gaining strong support on Capitol Hill.

Our efforts were not just to save 64 offices and 434 jobs; they were to ensure taxpayers got the face-to-face help they need. That is a struggle we continue today as we fight for increased funding for the IRS, which has been decimated by five years of budget cuts. Our recent Tax Day media effort highlighted the significant job losses at the IRS on a state by state basis, showing local communities how funding cuts hurt them.

We launched a similar effort when the FDA made a move to shut down half of its laboratories. We made history when we engaged Congress, our members and the public and stopped that plan in its tracks. Currently, we are engaged in a similar battle at FCC. We were successful in reducing the number of FCC field offices that will be closed. Now, we are working to save the jobs of employees who support our country's communications systems.

Here is another important lesson I have learned. We have accomplished a lot for employees, but if we do not remind employees about what NTEU has done for them and involve them in our work, they will take it for granted.

Our activism over the years has made the working lives of thousands and thousands of federal employees, past, present and future, significantly better.

- We secured legislation giving FERS employees retirement credit for unused sick leave.
- We won FEHBP coverage for dependent children up to age 26.

- In contract negotiations, we won new rights and benefits for employees expanding telework, alternative work schedules and bargaining fair appraisal and award systems.
- We educated the millions of Americans about your contributions, launching three national public service campaigns since 2008.
- We enhanced union communications through social media pages, electronic newsletters and new Internet features.
- We have enforced our members' rights by taking thousands of cases to the courts, arbitration and other panels.
- And every day, on the frontlines, our chapters provide vital representation to employees in the workplace.

My guess is that most employees do not know that NTEU fought and won Flexible Spending Accounts for the federal workforce.

As a former IRS employee, it infuriated me that private sector employees had the ability to pretax certain expenses, but not federal workers. We were successful in getting the Clinton Administration to agree that federal employees were eligible under existing law. A program allowing premium conversation was rolled out, but it did not include out of pocket expenses.

When the Bush Administration appointed Kay Cole James as OPM director, I saw an opportunity. In an early meeting, I suggested that, while there was not a lot we would agree on, we should find one issue we could work on together. She agreed.

At a joint press conference, we announced a deal allowing federal workers to have FSAs and pretax FEHBP premiums, out-of-pocket medical and day care costs. But for NTEU, this never would have happened.

Sometimes, it takes a long time to win an economic benefit like FSAs or FERS sick leave credit, but when we do the impact can last for generations.

The enhanced Law Enforcement Officer retirement benefit we won for CBP Officers was such a case. It was a huge victory that gave onboard officers a more generous pension and newly-hired officers 20-year LEO retirement. Many believed it would never happen, but NTEU never gives up. The bill was crafted from a blank piece of paper, a typical innovative NTEU solution. The fact that it was passed and signed into law with Bush in office was remarkable.

Our work changed the lives of CBPOs present and into the future.

During the Oct. 2013 government shutdown, we made history when once again we demonstrated the true power of NTEU. Our supporters on Capitol Hill, our NTEU leaders and our members stood with us outside the Capitol building in the baking heat and in the pouring rain--and I mean torrential rain--calling for an end to the shutdown.

Chapters around the country held rallies and press conferences and members shared their personal stories with the media. We let the American people know that the federal workforce wanted to work and reminded the public of the importance of our work. In the end, we were successful in ensuring that furloughed workers were paid for the forced shutdown days and protecting federal workers in the resulting budget deal. We made sure that those who forced the shutdown lost the public opinion battle.

Certainly, the past few years will rank among some of the most difficult in the history of the federal workforce. Since our last convention, we withstood a 16-day government shutdown, an onslaught of attacks by Congress, sequestration, a cyberbreach of catastrophic proportions and a concerted effort to punish the IRS by slashing its budget.

In recent years, we have seen unprecedented attacks on the federal workforce. Pay freezes. Attacks on retirement. Draconian cuts to budgets. Assaults on employee rights.

We have fought back tirelessly defeating some of the most harmful proposals such as increased retirement contributions, changes in how your pensions are calculated, a plan to turn FEHBP into a voucher program and the elimination of your pension annuity. And, we will continue to fight until we enact programs that value and support the federal workforce. We never flinch and we never give up.

It is an absolute truth that everything about the working life of a federal employee is decided by those elected to national office.

This is why we need to get every single member involved in Election 2016. There is far too much at stake to sit on the sidelines.

When I took office in 1999, words like cyberbreach, going viral and sequestration were not even in our lexicon, let alone part of our daily lives. But at NTEU, we adapt, we develop new tools and we find new ways to fight.

When the cyberbreach was revealed, NTEU demanded answers, an extension of protections for federal workers and coverage for family members. We filed a

carefully-crafted lawsuit to gain lifetime coverage for our members and establish a constitutional right to privacy that will benefit our members and federal employees far into the future. And, we are currently working with our supporters on Capitol Hill to secure lifetime protection for all affected federal workers and their family members.

Over the years, I have learned that one of the reasons our path is often difficult is that federal employees work under the radar. The country depends on you to do your jobs without a lot of fanfare. They just expect the work to get done. It is only when something negative makes headlines, that attention is paid. That is why we must tell your story and why we must fight.

I have learned that we are most powerful when our members are standing with us.

And there are some other truths that I believe with all my heart.

And one of them is this: It takes a special person to become an NTEU leader. Like you, your coworkers see injustices in the workplace and get angry and frustrated. The big difference is that you do something to change it. You speak out and you back up your words with action. Every day. This I know with 100 percent certainty.

It would be an understatement to say that my career at NTEU has been eventful. I tell every new NTEU leader and every new NTEU employee, you will never be bored.

When we face troubles, when we have challenges, what do we do? We organize. We work together. We demand dignity and respect. And we do not stop until we achieve it for each and every federal worker.

It does not matter whether it is one person or 100,000, if we think employees have been harmed, we will put the full force of NTEU behind them. We will work in Congress, in the courts, in the workplace, at the bargaining table, in the media to fix it. Whatever it takes.

And so today, after 16 years as your president and 35 years as an NTEU leader, traveling millions of miles, working with you side by side, visiting scores of chapters, I can say that my faith in our union is even stronger than ever, and my confidence in our future is as well.

Our members need us more than ever.

Labor leader and civil rights activist Dolores Huerta said, “Every moment is an organizing opportunity, every person a potential activist, every minute a chance to change the world.”

In your chapters, in our union, you are leading that change.

You do it not for the fame or fortune or because someone is going to give you a medal. You do it because what you do makes a difference to so many.

Time and again, I have watched as you earned the respect of your opponents with your dedication and determination. I have watched as you earned the respect of our members because they know you have their back.

You do amazing work every day against great odds. You demonstrate courage, persistence and compassion.

This convention we are celebrating the power of NTEU. To me, the power of NTEU is our people, our chapters and our great leaders. It is our tenacity. Our creativity. Our refusal to give up.

The power of NTEU is the power of belonging, of standing strong. The power of lifting each other up. The power of being part of something bigger than yourself. The power of building a more just society.

So in my last days, as NTEU National President, the advice I have for you is: Keep doing what you do best. Keep accomplishing amazing things against great odds. Hold onto your faith. Stay confident. Be proud and hold your head up high. Because you are part of a great institution. While others are watching history, you are making history.

Pass it on, like the Olympic torch from one generation of leaders to the next. Never let it burn out.

Thank you for your service to our union and our country. Thank you for keeping ablaze the torch of dignity and respect for every federal employee. Thank you for your friendship and your support. Thank you for fighting by my side. And thank you for making the last 16 years of my life so meaningful.