



A Union of Professionals

## **Fighting White Nationalism On Campus: A Guide for AFT Locals August 28, 2017**

**White nationalist organizations are fighting for a legitimate presence on college campuses and communities.**

These groups take advantage of the higher education community's commitment to free speech and free inquiry in order to spread toxic, repugnant and discredited ideology.<sup>1</sup>

While they claim to “promote dialogue,” they have admitted—most recently, in coverage of the August 2017 white nationalist demonstrations in Charlottesville—that their intent is to foment hatred and violence in our communities, and to destroy the institutions that they view as hostile to their bigoted worldview.

***They will not do this on our watch.***

Freedom of speech, academic freedom, and safety are key AFT values, and we must attend to all of them as we engage in resistance to white nationalism:

- Everyone has First Amendment rights to free speech and association.
- Some members of the “far-right” are our students or colleagues, and have legitimate claims to the same academic freedom we prize ourselves.
- As “far-right” organizations love to point out, public institutions of higher education are legally prohibited from content-based denial of outside groups’ equal opportunity to be heard on campus.
- White nationalists’ intent to harass, intimidate and assault those who oppose them raises real concerns about physical and psychological safety for people who plan to oppose their ideology through direct protest.

***But resistance to white nationalism—in words and in actions—is not optional. We’re sharing the recommendations in this document to help you think through how to engage in that resistance in ways that honor AFT commitments to freedom of speech, to academic freedom, and to safety for everyone in our communities.***

These recommendations are divided into two categories:

- Actions you can take immediately, before a white nationalist event is proposed or scheduled for your campus.
- Actions you can take when a white nationalist event is proposed or scheduled for your campus.

### **Actions you can take immediately**

- **Join, support or form a campus and community coalition:** Come together with other labor, campus, community and faith groups to cultivate a climate in which the dignity, voice and safety

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of all members of the community will be respected. Involve the coalition in every one of the strategies described throughout this document.

- Begin by meeting with organizations likely to be targeted by white nationalists. It is critical to learn from and be led in your interactions with them; many of them have dealt with the reality of white supremacy for their entire lives.
  - Develop a strategy and action plan to raise awareness of and combat threats posed by white nationalists to your campus and the community.
  - Consider engaging with members of the campus police/security to give you their view of the federal, state and local statutes that pertain to such situations.
  - Also consider what steps a coalition can take proactively to create an anti-racist culture on your campus and in your community. While these campaigns can attract the attention of white nationalists, they are also necessary to create an equitable, democratic society for all. Campaigns may include:
    - Removing racist memorials or renaming buildings named after racists;
    - Creating sanctuary campuses/communities;
    - Bargaining collectively to proactively advance the rights of specific members of the community who are being targeted by white nationalists (people of color, women, LGBT people, Jews, Muslims, people with disabilities).
    - Campaigns to educate local and state lawmakers about statutory changes that could be made in your municipality or state to further protect civil and human rights.
- **Respond authoritatively to racism expressed in the classroom:** If you are a teacher, don't let expressions of white nationalist sentiment—or discredited white nationalist claims about anthropology, history, science or any other topic—go unchallenged in your classroom. Connect with colleagues in and out of your discipline to plan and refine how you handle these moments, both in and out of class. Through your union, get your institution's administration on the record about the rights and responsibilities teachers have to shut down harassing and discriminatory speech in the classroom. Make particularly sure that the institution is committed to backing adjunct and contingent faculty who shut down inappropriate white nationalist speech in their classes.
  - **Take responsibility for the physical environment of your campus:** Be on the lookout for distribution of white nationalist fliers or posters, which is often an effort to test the waters and see what will be tolerated. Document, report and tear down white nationalist materials. Counter-flyer with your own materials. Depending on the level of this activity on your campus, consider forming a committee of people who will do this regularly. Record and publicize your campus administration's responses to white nationalist leafleting.
  - **Demand a plan from your college** president, campus administrators, campus safety officers and local law enforcement. Given the violence of recent events, campus administrators and campus and local law enforcement have no excuse for not having contingencies in place to keep members of the community safe should white nationalists choose to target your campus. In particular, you should demand answers to the following questions:
    - How much notice do host organizations—or outside white nationalist speakers who tend to require high levels of public safety resources—need to give campus officials of a planned event?

- How can members of the campus community find out what proposed events are approved?
  - How will threats from white nationalists against individuals and organizations be investigated and handled?
  - If white nationalist speakers and/or known provocateurs are invited onto campus, or request and are granted a platform on the same basis as the “general public,”
    - What will be the institution’s response to a speaker’s singling out of individuals, groups or organizations for derision and hatred (whether “as a joke” or in more ominous terms)?
    - What measures will be put in place to ensure the safety of the community before, during and after the speaking event?
    - How will protests against the speaker be handled? What measures will be taken to ensure the safety of the protesters?
  - How will the presence of armed extremist groups in the community be handled?
  - How will your institution cover the cost of hosting white nationalist speakers who have incited violence at past events? Example: The University of California, Berkeley will spend up to \$500,000 to protect a single lecture; beyond that, the speakers or host organizations must pay for security.<sup>ii</sup>
- **Use your free speech rights proactively, to educate the campus and community** about the white nationalist agenda and about white nationalists’ interest in campus communities; extremism festers in ignorance.
    - Get informed about white nationalist groups on your campus and in the academy in general. Get to know local and national figures associated with white nationalism before they become active in your community.
    - Research and inform others about white nationalist donors who may have disproportionate influence with your institution’s administration.
    - Develop a list of teachers who teach relevant courses (e.g., ethnic studies, women’s studies, social sciences, print and broadcast journalism and other media studies classes) and approach them for one-on-one conversations about how to address the issues raised by the resurgence of open white nationalism. Solicit resources from them and offer any support (e.g., literature, speakers) you may have to help them address the issue in class.
    - Organize public forums—with skilled facilitation—to discuss the threat white nationalism poses to marginalized communities, democratic values and civil rights posed.
    - Encourage and support members of marginalized communities to share their stories in public forums, in the media and over social media, to raise awareness of both acute and ongoing threats related to white supremacy and white nationalism.

**Actions you can take when a white nationalist event is announced on your campus**

*You have every right to condemn white nationalism on your campus, and you have the full support of the AFT in dissenting from it and nonviolently resisting it.*

While we recognize the free speech rights of all, we also know that taking fast action when you find out your campus and community have been targeted for a white nationalist event can ensure they receive the message that they are not welcome—and can even result in them being denied a platform, as they are a clear threat to the public.

Following the violence in Charlottesville, quick action by unions and community organizations in Gainesville, Fla., and East Lansing, Mich., forced the University of Florida and Michigan State University to deny white nationalist Richard Spencer and his National Policy Institute event space because of the danger they posed to public safety. Based in part on these examples, we recommend the following steps when an event is announced on your campus:

- **Alert your partners:** Alert state and national affiliates and other partner organizations. We can help you plan, train for and publicize your actions against white nationalism on your campus—but we can't help unless we know what's happening.
- **“Name the evil”:** When white nationalists are organizing on your campus, it is not time to equivocate or be polite. Do not refer to these speakers with shorthand descriptions such as “alt-right,” “controversial” or “edgy”; they must be correctly identified from the beginning.
  - Get informed about the individuals/groups present in or coming into your community. Find out what they have said at past events, and what kinds of actions have occurred at past events.
  - Label these individuals and groups as what they are: racists, sexists, anti-Semites, homophobes, transphobes, nativists, white supremacists. If there is a pattern of inciting violence at events where they appear, call attention to them as violent extremists.
  - Use media, social media and public forums to amplify this information—make sure your entire community knows what these individuals or groups stand for and is aware of your resistance to having these views and actions poison your community.
  - Make sure campus and local officials are aware of the public safety threat posed by hosting a white nationalist event, and that the projected expense of policing that event should be comparable to the amount spent on policing events with other content. Public institutions may have to provide an equal platform, but they are under no obligation to foot a disproportionate bill.
  - Ask campus and local officials to denounce the white nationalist group/individual, and provide some suggested language for doing this. In some instances, campus administrators may not prohibit individuals or groups from appearing on campus on content grounds. Just because they cannot be turned away, however, does not mean that those who speak for the institution and the surrounding community cannot denounce the views of the speakers.
- **Develop a plan** for nonviolent confrontation of white nationalists before they show up on your campus. Reach out early to every group that might be planning to oppose white nationalists on campus; discuss the strategic and tactical value of planning and deciding together on a united response, or at least of knowing what range of responses will be implemented.
- **Demand accountability:** Hold administrators, campus safety officers and local law enforcement accountable for ensuring public safety. Again, given recent events, there is absolutely no reason for administrators, local government officials and local law enforcement agencies not to have contingencies in place to ensure the community is safe before, during and after these events.
  - Pressure administrators to apply the same public safety standards they apply to other proposed activities to proposals for white nationalist speakers or organizations to gather on campus.
  - Designate liaisons between your organization/coalition and local officials to share concerns and information before, during and after the event.

- Request a public debrief following the event to discuss what went well and what needs to be improved, and share other concerns.
- If a white nationalist speaker will be appearing on your campus *at the invitation of a campus group*, **approach the host organization with your concerns:**
  - Find out why the group invited this speaker to campus. Is it a good faith (but perhaps misguided) effort to foster “honest dialogue”? Is it intended as a political rally? Is it a stunt to agitate their fellow students and community members?
  - Assess whether they are aware of the speaker’s agenda. Do they agree with this agenda? Do the values of the speaker uphold the values of the campus community? Are they aware of what the speaker has said and what actions have occurred at prior engagements? Are they looking to bring these types of disruptions to their community?
  - Have people from targeted communities tell their stories about how these speakers harm them as individuals. Some organizations may enjoy being “disruptive” or “transgressive” in the abstract, but when confronted with a peer who is being harmed, they may change their behavior.
  - Ask the group not to host the speaker or to rescind its invitation.
  - Don’t skip this step, but don’t waste a lot of time on it. If the host group is insistent, accept that and move on to the rest of the plan.
- **Educate audience members:** Inform audience members about the views of the speaker on their way into the event. People may take at face value that the event is intended as an “airing of views” or an evening’s entertainment. We can ensure all audience members are fully informed when they enter the event:
  - Create fliers with examples of things the speaker has said and/or actions he or she has taken that conflict with the values of our institutions, our profession and our highest aspirations for this country.
  - Suggest questions for specific audience members to ask during Q&A sessions that will reveal the actual agenda of the white nationalist speaker.
- **Organize a counter-protest:** As post-Charlottesville events in Boston illustrate, public demonstrations against white nationalist events in your community can show in a vivid, media-savvy way the breadth and depth of opposition to white supremacy and bigotry in your community. Here are some things to keep in mind when organizing a counter-demonstration:
  - Consider your goals: How can you prevent white nationalists from reaching their audience? (Pack the venue with anti-white-nationalist protestors, for example.) How can you embarrass them? (Ask people to donate a dollar for every 10 feet the white nationalists march on your campus or every minute their speaker speaks. You could raise a lot of money for anti-white-nationalist groups on campus!) How can you prevent them from goading people into a violent confrontation? (Schedule mass training for nonviolent action.) How can you get across your own message of inclusion and social justice? (Hold your own event; develop memes, slogans and signs with a consistent, united message.) How can you use this moment to build long-term solidarity against racism and other forms of oppression?
  - Decide what kind of action you want to undertake. Will it be a rally removed from the space where white nationalists will be gathering? Or will it be a direct confrontation with white nationalists at their event?

- Assess the risk for the type of event you wish to undertake, including the threat of arrest for counter-protesters and the threats of violence and physical harm. Be responsive to how much risk individuals are willing to endure when participating in a public protest. Do not assume that, just because your protest is removed from the location of the white nationalist event, there is not a risk of verbal or physical confrontation. Remember that there is likely to be a diversity of experiences and views about law enforcement in your coalition; some important coalition members (for example, undocumented students) may need to avoid engagement with the police.
- Get trained: “Far-right” organizations train their members and come prepared to incite confrontations at their public events. Your organization should also seek and receive training for the following:
  - Direct action: If direct action is part of your demonstration plans, the people participating in it should be trained so the action is focused and disciplined.
  - Marshals: You should train people who will take a heightened level of responsibility for keeping your protestors safe. Marshals should be informed about the general parameters you have worked out with local law enforcement to ensure safety, be trained in de-escalation tactics, and be given tools to communicate with event leaders to respond to events as they unfold in real time. At least some of these marshals should be trained as liaisons with law enforcement.
  - Legal observers: You should recruit local lawyers to act as legal observers. These observers can act as third-party witnesses to the events to ensure that rights are respected and the law is followed. They are also on hand to provide just-in-time legal advice, as needed. If you don’t know where to start, the National Lawyers Guild offers training for legal observers: [www.nlg.org/massdefensecommittee/](http://www.nlg.org/massdefensecommittee/).
  - Medical first responders: Have people who are trained in first aid available, not only to respond to and treat instances of intentional injury, but to ensure the health and safety of protestors who may experience, for example, dehydration, bee stings or psychological trauma.
  - Photographers, videographers, and documenters: These don’t need to be professionals, just people with fully charged cell phone batteries who will be focused on documenting the event.
  - Media spokespeople: Train people to interact with the media to make sure that the message you want conveyed from the protest is reported.
- Develop a positive message: While the protest will clearly be aimed at countering the repugnant views of white nationalists and other members of the “far-right,” it’s just as important that we articulate and broadcast a message about what we support: human rights and dignity, inclusivity, and democratic values such as equality. Make sure that message is consistent in your organizing efforts, media outreach, protest signs and chants, and other modes of communication.
- Organize, organize, organize: Don’t assume people will just show up. At this historic moment, very little could be worse strategically than an anemic counter-demonstration to a white nationalist event.
  - Advertise the event through fliers, local media, social media and especially one-on-one conversations.
  - Get commitments for folks to attend the event and commitments on specific roles people will take on.

There are risks involved in publicly taking action, and these risks fall more heavily on members of marginalized communities. People who are considering whether or how to participate in an event should be left free to determine their own level of participation, if any. As we saw in the fight over healthcare, the willingness of marginalized people—in that case, people with disabilities—to put themselves on the front line of a battle can be vital to winning that battle. At the same time, we must not enable a climate that shames people for deciding that a certain level of risk is too much for them to bear, and, as organizers, we should help to find assignments and roles for people that are appropriate to the level of risk they can accept.

### **Additional resources—a list in progress**

From Vice News, “Charlottesville: Race and Terror”: a 22-minute documentary on the Charlottesville white nationalist demonstrations, <https://news.vice.com/story/vice-news-tonight-full-episode-charlottesville-race-and-terror>

From the Southern Poverty Law Center, “The Alt-Right on Campus: What Students Need to Know”: a guide that takes an alternative view to the one we’ve proposed here about how to respond to fascist events on campus; post-Charlottesville, we disagree with the premise that a fascist event can be successfully squashed by counterprogramming that is physically distant, but this document still contains lots of good resources, [www.splcenter.org/20170810/alt-right-campus-what-students-need-know](http://www.splcenter.org/20170810/alt-right-campus-what-students-need-know)

From the Anti-Defamation League, “Lessons to Teach and Learn from ‘Unite the Right’”: a blog post on how to use the events in Charlottesville as a teachable moment, [www.adl.org/blog/lessons-to-teach-and-learn-from-unite-the-right](http://www.adl.org/blog/lessons-to-teach-and-learn-from-unite-the-right)

From Angus Johnston, a historian of student activism and Professional Staff Congress/CUNY member, “Some Thoughts for Civil Libertarians on Fighting the Far-Right on Campus”: an essay regarding the free speech rights of white nationalists, <https://studentactivism.net/2017/01/04/some-thoughts-for-civil-libertarians-on-fighting-the-far-right-on-campus/>

From Seattle teacher Jon Greenberg, “Curriculum for White Americans to Educate Themselves on Race and Racism—From Ferguson to Charleston”: a list to help more white Americans get involved in the movement for racial justice, <http://citizenshipandsocialjustice.com/2015/07/10/curriculum-for-white-americans-to-educate-themselves-on-race-and-racism/>

From the *New York Times*, “How to Make Fun of Nazis”: an opinion piece on using humor as a strategy to stand up to Nazis, [www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/opinion/how-to-make-fun-of-nazis.html? r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/17/opinion/how-to-make-fun-of-nazis.html? r=0).

From *Politico*, “President’s Arts and Humanities Committee Resigns over Trump’s Charlottesville Response”: an article about the resignation of the president’s advisory committee on arts and humanities because of his response to events in Charlottesville, [www.politico.com/story/2017/08/18/presidents-arts-and-humanities-committee-resigns-over-trumps-charlottesville-response-241781](http://www.politico.com/story/2017/08/18/presidents-arts-and-humanities-committee-resigns-over-trumps-charlottesville-response-241781)

From the AFT’s Share My Lesson, “#CharlottesvilleCurriculum”: a collection of lessons and resources to help educators address the events in Charlottesville with their students, <https://sharemylesson.com/CharlottesvilleCurriculum>.

Please send additional recommendations to [highered@aft.org](mailto:highered@aft.org).

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<sup>i</sup> In this document, we are using the phrase “white nationalism” to encompass many “far-right” groups and ideologies that seek to deny humanity and voice to our students, colleagues and neighbors. We think that the racist, authoritarian and hyper-nationalist characteristics of the hate being manifested today are important to underline, and that this phrase does that succinctly. Whether fascist, white nationalist, Nazi, racist, anti-Semitic, KKK or some other term most precisely describes the specific group or ideology you are confronting, we believe the important thing is that we learn how to fight all of these effectively.

<sup>ii</sup> Dana Goldstein, “After Charlottesville Violence, Colleges Brace for More Clashes,” New York Times, Aug. 16, 2017, [www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/us/after-charlottesville-violence-colleges-brace-for-more-clashes.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/16/us/after-charlottesville-violence-colleges-brace-for-more-clashes.html).