Good morning Council. As always it’s great to be here with you. It’s an honor to serve as your Executive Director and work with this outstanding team of leaders: Dean, Eric and Mikki. It’s also special for me this weekend because my husband, Roger, who has supported me, put up with me, and patiently endured my schedule all these years – all of you know how important the support of a loved one is to union work – is attending his first State Council. Roger, thank you. I love you, honey.

In what’s become my March tradition, today, I want to celebrate Women’s History Month and women in the labor movement:

- How far we’ve come...how far we have to go.
- How our history can inspire us for the fights ahead – like defeating the Corporate Power Grab and fighting for tax fairness.
- And how we have a responsibility to carry on the legacy for a new generation.

But first, I want to talk a little bit about the CTA Budget. As part of another March tradition, I spent yesterday with the Budget Committee and the Secretary-Treasurer making some very hard decisions. The economic recession and the loss of 30,000 members, which is more than $19 million in the CTA budget, means some things will change. Some of the changes I honestly don’t want to make. And some of these changes will be painful. But they are necessary and the right action to take to ensure that we continue to provide the services that our members need and depend on. They’re the right action to take to ensure a strong CTA with a strong future.

Led by the diligent work of the Budget Committee and the CTA Controller, I want you to know that we are a little ahead of the game because we’ve been planning and taking steps the last two years. As I mentioned at the last Council meeting, CTA reached tentative agreements with both of the staff unions. Those agreements were ratified earlier this month and recognize the need to not fill some positions through attrition. Those positions are at all levels of the Association. I have said from day one I want to avoid layoffs like other state affiliates and NEA are experiencing. And as you know, the management staff took a two percent pay cut.

I’m committed to keeping the impact of those vacancies as far away from the field as possible, but with the loss of 30,000 members there will be some changes and those are part of the painful decisions. I also proposed cutting more than a million dollars from program budgets yesterday – painful reductions for all of us. But again, the right action to ensure the strong CTA that we need to win the oh-so-very-important election battles in November, and to secure a strong future. In the words of our Secretary-Treasurer, be sure and hug your Budget Committee member today. They did some very hard work on your behalf. And they’ll be talking to you about the details of the budget in your local meetings before the June Council.

Now, let’s talk about girl power. The theme for Women’s History Month this year is “Women’s Education—Women’s Empowerment.” Women certainly have come a long way, and belonging to a union continues to make a huge difference. The number of working women in the United States has risen from 5 million in
1990 to nearly 66 million 2010. We are 47 percent of the general workforce and women make up 45 percent of union workers. But challenges and inequalities remain.

Equal Pay Day is April 17. This symbolizes how far into 2012, women must work to make what men earned in 2011. On average, women earn 77 cents for every dollar a man earns. And that gap gets even wider for women of color. African American women earn 61 cents on the dollar. And Hispanic women earn just 52 cents.

One study estimates that the average female worker loses nearly $435,000 in wages over a 40-year period as a direct result of pay inequalities. The good news is that every woman in this room is doing a little better because you belong to a union. The average union woman earns an extra $2 an hour compared to non-union counterparts. Union preschool and kindergarten teachers earn almost 65 percent more than their non-union counterparts. For elementary and middle school teachers, the union wage advantage is 32 percent. The advantage is similar for college professors, social workers and counselors.

Unionized women of color earn almost 35 percent more than non-union women of color. And, of course, when women belong to a union, they are also more likely to have a secure pension, health care and access to child care. That’s the power of being a union member.

It’s also always empowering for me to reflect upon our history. We made those tough budget decisions yesterday. I know it’s tough out there in your schools and local chapters as you too are doing more with less. But then I look back at the sacrifices of those who paved the way for us – young immigrant women who toiled in sweatshops and who launched the labor movement and in many ways the idea of political action – and I can’t help but be inspired and energized.

In 1834, the Lowell Mill Women, or mill girls as they were called, created the first union of working women in American history. They organized, went on strike, and mobilized in politics when women couldn’t even vote. The mill girls worked in the textile mills of Lowell, Massachusetts. They worked 13 hours a day or about 73 hours a week. Most mills had 80 women cramped into a relatively tight space, where they each stood and worked beside eardrum-blowing loud machines.

Windows in the mills were kept closed, even in the summer, to enhance the quality of the thread. The air was filled with lint, making it really difficult to breath. Their average age was 24. Some of them were as young as 12. In 1834, when the mill bosses decided to cut their wages by 15 percent, the mill girls had enough. They “turned out” or went on strike to protest. They marched from mill to mill encouraging others to join them, gathered in an outdoor rally and signed a petition that said: “We will not go back into the mills to work unless our wages are continued.”

No one had ever seen anything like this. Owners didn’t know what to do. One boss fumed, “A spirit of evil omen has prevailed.” A showdown came and the bosses won with the mills reopening in a week. But the mill girls didn’t stop. They launched a second shutdown in 1836. This time they were better organized and the strike was bigger. They even penned some of the first union songs:

“Oh! isn’t it a pity, such a pretty girl as I – Should be sent to the factory to pine away and die? Oh! I cannot be a slave, I will not be a slave – For I’m so fond of liberty, That I cannot be a slave.”

Unfortunately, the end results of the second strike were the same. But the mill girls would not give up. This time, they changed tactics. In the early 1840’s, they shifted to a different strategy – political action.
They formed the Lowell Female Labor Reform Association and pushed legislation for a 10 hour work day. Women couldn’t vote anywhere in the country, but that didn’t stop them. They circulated petitions. They organized chapters in other mill towns in Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

They started publishing news bulletins to expose the wretched conditions in the mills. They testified before state legislative committees. And when one lawmaker decided to lead the charge against them, they organized male voters and took that lawmaker out of office in the next election. In 1847 New Hampshire became the first state to pass a 10-hour workday law. The mill girls started something that transformed this country.

Another inspiring example is the strike by thousands of African American women in Atlanta, Georgia. At that time, one-third of the African American women living in Atlanta raised families alone. Nearly 80 percent of these black working women were household workers. Many of them started working as laundresses between the ages of 10 and 16, and worked until they were 65 or older. They earned about $6 a month. In July of 1881, 20 laundresses met to form the trade organization, the Washing Society.

They wanted higher pay and a uniform rate across the city. Their organizing approach is what we today would call the old-fashioned way: they canvassed door-to-door…talking to every laundry worker they knew. They involved white laundresses, who were less than two percent of the laundry workers in the city, an unheard of sign of interracial solidarity. In three weeks, the Washing Society grew from 20 to 3,000 strikers.

In less than a month, the City Council imposed an annual fee on members of any washerwoman’s organization. The women would not be defeated. They paid the fee and showed the Council they would not be deterred. Their resolve inspired other domestic workers. Soon, cooks, maids, nurses and hotel workers joined the strike.

The following week, the City Council rescinded the fees and the laundresses prevailed. Not only did they get their salary increase, but they proved that black women workers had a role in the New South’s economy. And they did this just a mere 15 years after the end of the civil war. Think of the courage it took to stand up for what they believed in. And for one last inspiring example – as I could go on for hours because there are hundreds of stories.

Just as last year marked the 100 year anniversary of the Triangle Factory Fire, this year marks the centennial celebration of the historic Bread and Roses strike. Taking from an article in this month’s Educator by CTA members Emma Rosenthal and Andy Griggs, in January of 1912, when mill owners in Lawrence, Massachusetts unilaterally cut wages, thousands of workers – most of them young immigrant women and children – took to the streets to demand bread and roses: basic necessities and a decent way of life.

Rose Schneiderman, president of the New York Women’s Trade Union League, said, “What the woman who labors wants is the right to live, not simply exist. The worker must have bread, but she must have roses, too.” The strike included more than 20,000 workers and lasted more than two months. Woman played a central role throughout the effort. They led aggressive demonstrations in the face of fierce police opposition. They organized the first ever walking picket lines. They translated materials into 25 different languages.

And in one brutal showdown at the rail station, as strikers tried to get their children to safety in other towns, the women and children were savagely attacked by police. One woman was killed and another
suffered a miscarriage. The attacks backfired and gained national attention for the poor working conditions in the mills. Two weeks later, the owners caved and gave in to the workers’ demands. These women won a 15 percent pay hike that gave the largest raise to the lowest-paid workers. They won the right to over-time and a no reprisal agreement for strikers. In the end, their efforts led to pay hikes for more than 150,000 textile workers.

It is considered one of the most successful victories in U.S. labor history. If all of these women could put their lives on the line not just for themselves and what they believed in, but for the rights of others who couldn’t speak out, I know we can get passed the burnout we sometimes feel. I know we can overcome the demoralizing attacks on educators by billionaires who know nothing about educating children, but have tons of ideas for “reforming” our schools and colleges.

I know we can and will rally to defeat the Corporate Power Grab and to pass a tax on the wealthy. You know, CTA celebrates a milestone anniversary next year as well. We turn 150 years old. And I can’t help but remember that CTA was founded for one reason and one reason only: it was to have a voice in politics, education policy and legislation that was determining the fate of public education and educators. Defeating the Corporate Power Grab must be our top priority. We will not be silenced.

And as Dean said yesterday, we must take every opportunity to talk about this initiative. It should be part of every union meeting. It should be part of every discussion with colleagues, friends and family. Another famous union member, labor activist and First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, wrote this back in 1958 as she fought against right-to-work legislation, but it is as if she were writing against the Corporate Power Grab:

“I am opposed to this legislation because it is narrow in concept, punitive and discriminatory against wage-earners, and is designed solely to benefit employers. I am opposed to it because its real aim is to destroy American labor. I’m opposed to it because the campaign to enact these laws is based on dishonesty and deception. I’m opposed because it would upset the present balance between labor and management that has become a basic guarantee of a prosperous national economy. I’m opposed because these laws promote industrial strife instead of industrial peace. It is true that unions have become powerful over the years. But we should not forget that the power of the unions is puny compared to the power that goes with the enormous wealth of Big Business. And business had power first.” Yes, we can learn a lot from our history and from Eleanor.

And finally, when I think about our legacy as labor women, I am reminded of the responsibility we have to the next generation. In the 150 years of CTA, I am the first woman to serve as Executive Director. There are still only a handful of female state execs in the NEA family. So to all of the women in this room, guys, I don’t mean to ignore you, but in the spirit of Women’s History Month, to all the woman in this room, I challenge you to go back to your local chapter and be a union mentor to a young woman – those Millennials or Generation Y members.

It is our responsibility to reach out to younger women, make them feel welcome in the union, encourage them to participate and build new leaders. It is clear that the labor movement needs young people and young leaders – just like mill girls. And you know as well as I do, too often our current structures don’t encourage involvement and sometimes can even block it. We don’t like to talk about it, but sexism and racism still exist in the labor movement.

That’s why it is equally important that you reach out to young women of all colors. One simple way to start would be to invite someone to coffee and ask them what they think about the union or see what they know
about the Corporate Power Grab. One person may not be able to change the world immediately, but our individual actions can make a difference one person at a time.

I’m going to close today in memory of a famous union activist: Crystal Lee Jordan – probably better known to all of you by her 1979 Hollywood movie name: Norma Rae. Because this is what it’s ALL about. It’s why we're here this weekend. It’s why we do what we do for our students. It's what’s at stake in the November Election. It’s our past. It’s our future. It’s what we owe to the next generation. It’s our battle cry.

It's WHO WE ARE.