

Companion Guide: Educators Fighting Authoritarianism

Freedom Trainers Presentation Companion

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Introduction

Authoritarianism is on the rise globally and in the United States, threatening democratic norms and freedoms. This guide accompanies the Freedom Trainers presentation and offers a narrative framework for understanding the problem, exploring strategies for resistance, and highlighting the unique role educators can play in defending democracy.

1. Understanding the Context

Authoritarianism is not just about individual leaders?it is a system supported by multiple institutions. Over the past two decades, elected autocrats have increasingly subverted democratic processes, consolidating power through legal and extralegal means. In the U.S., this trend is accelerating, rooted in historical patterns of racism, misogyny, and white supremacy.

Academic freedom is often an early casualty. Autocrats fear independent thought, making schools and universities prime targets for control. Recognizing these dynamics is essential for educators who seek to safeguard democratic values.

2. The Authoritarian Playbook

Authoritarian regimes employ predictable tactics: deploying military forces domestically; overreaching federal law enforcement; targeting critics through investigations; granting impunity for lawbreaking; regulatory retaliation against opponents; and refusing to relinquish power. Reflect on how these tactics manifest locally and how they impact communities.

3. Why Civil Resistance Matters

Research analyzing 35 cases of democratic backsliding (1991-2021) reveals a stark truth: without civil resistance there is roughly a 7.5% chance of reversing backsliding, whereas with civil resistance the chance rises to about 51.7%. Movements that include national trade unions succeed at far higher rates (around 83%) than those without (about 29%).

Civil resistance—nonviolent struggle for political, economic, or social objectives—includes protests, strikes, boycotts, civil disobedience, and constructive interventions.

4. Lessons from History

Educators have historically played pivotal roles in resisting authoritarianism:

? Norway (1942): Teachers refused Nazi curricula, taught in secret, and made repression backfire.

? Chile (1980s): Educators and students organized strikes, hunger protests, and international advocacy under Pinochet.

? Hungary (2022?present): The Tanítanék movement mobilized tens of thousands against Orbán's education policies through strikes and creative noncooperation.

5. Strategies for Today

Resistance requires undermining the regime's pillars of support—institutions and actors that enable authoritarian power. The most effective tool is noncooperation, which can range from symbolic acts to mass collective action. Enough noncooperation can cause pillars to defect or become unreliable.

Key tactics include:

- ? Protest and Persuasion: Vigils, marches, symbolic acts.
- ? Social Noncooperation: Cultural refusals, boycotts, mass resignations.
- ? Economic Noncooperation: Strikes, divestment campaigns.
- ? Political Noncooperation: Local governments refusing unlawful directives.

6. Planning for Redlines

Movements must identify redlines?clear triggers for mobilization?and prepare tactics before and after these thresholds are crossed. Planning ensures rapid response and prevents despair. Examples of redlines include: privatization of public education, removal of DEI materials, and deployment of military forces in communities. Organizing around redlines builds capacity, unity, and resilience.

7. Educators as Movement Builders

Educators can: celebrate and protect colleagues who take courageous stands; use classrooms and public platforms to teach about authoritarianism and resistance; organize symbolic actions and noncooperation campaigns; and partner with trusted institutions to create safe spaces for organizing.

8. Resources and Next Steps

? Freedom Trainers: <https://freedomtrainers.net>

? Redline Workbook:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1KWwQUDZv17irtGVouwlXmIJu2WfWRuYMmO0oIHwCIYw/edit?tab=t.0>

? International Center on Nonviolent Conflict resources: <https://www.nonviolent-conflict.org/>

? Beautiful Trouble: <https://beautifultrouble.org>

? Horizons Project (HOPE-PV): <https://horizonsproject.us/hope-pv/>

Conclusion

Authoritarianism thrives on obedience. Educators, through organized noncooperation and civil resistance, can help dismantle the pillars that sustain authoritarian regimes. This guide provides a roadmap for understanding the threat, learning from history, and taking strategic action to defend democracy.