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ABSTRACT

Albert Shanker headed the American Federation of Teachers for 22 years and was president of the New York City teachers union. Both organizations were transformed by his presence. Shanker altered the politics of education and teacher unionism. During his tenure, American political life encountered the birth of social movements challenging the nation's political underpinnings (e.g., civil rights, women's rights, and protests of the Vietnam war). The teacher union movement was reborn amidst intense political ferment that influenced the political culture of schools and teachers' self-conceptions. Shanker's reputation as a militant, combative unionist was earned when teacher unionism was a dynamic social movement. He had a reputation as an aggressive opponent of progressive social change. As the nation's political climate became more conservative over time, Shanker's opposition to progressive political causes and his public rejection of militant unionism won him the support of conservatives. His prominence as a teacher unionist and political figure rested upon his significant organizational skills and acumen. He had enormous control over policy and personnel, reinforcing his image as a powerful leader who spoke forcefully for teachers. He was presented the Medal of Freedom by President Clinton. Shanker's heirs have inherited his power without his moral and political claims to leadership of teacher's battles. His legacy may prove to be that he gained personal prominence by creating a tight organizational apparatus in a union susceptible to the same winds of change that swept John Sweeney's supporters into the AFL-CIO and Albert Shanker's collaborators out. (Contains 36 references.) (SM)

ALBERT SHANKER'S LEGACY:

A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Educational Research Assocation

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After Albert Shanker's death in February 1997, the numerous obituaries in newspapers throughout the United States testified to his notable presence in American political life. Shanker headed the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) for twenty-two years, his responsibility for the national union overlapping his equally long career as president of the New York City teachers union, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). In both cases the organizations he left were transformed by his presence. Early in his tenure as president, the UFT grew from 2,500 to 110,000, becoming collective bargaining agent for New York's teachers and paraprofessionals (Goldberg, 1993); during his presidency of the AFT, it grew from about 400,000 members (AFT, 1976a) to over 900,000 (Weil, 1997).

As the obituaries make clear, Shanker made a significant mark on American political life and altered the politics of education and teacher unionism. According to the Washington Post, he helped "revolutionize both the nation's labor movement and its educational system in the years after World War II" through his work in bringing New York's school teachers under the union umbrella (Weil, 1997, p. B:5). Newspaper headlines eulogized him as a "visionary" (Dine, 1997)" and "crusader for education reform" (Woo, 1997) who was "stronger than an atom bomb" (Warsh, 1997). Curiously though, each obituary identified a salient but different aspect of his long career as a teacher union leader to commemorate. For Philip Dine of the Wall Street Journal, Shanker was best remembered as a legendary labor leader whose major contribution was prescient support of "workers' struggles in communist countries" (p. 14). The author of Shanker's obituary in the Los Angeles Times identified him as the country's leading spokesman for teachers, with "trailblazing ideas about teachers' rights and educational reform," (Woo, 1997, p. 1). The Boston Globe columnist argued that Albert Shanker was best

known for leading the UFT's 55 day strike to halt a plan to allow local community boards to control educational policy, as well as for being mentioned by Woody Allen in his movie Sleeper, for destroying civilization when he obtained an nuclear warhead (Warsh, 1997). Writing in the Chicago Tribune, Linda Chavez, former editor of the AFT's magazine and a self-confessed protege of the union head, saluted him for his political ideas: outspoken criticism of racial quotas and preferences, opposition to bilingual education, and lifelong anti-communism (Chavez, 1997). Writing in the Christian Science Monitor, three educational researchers remembered his transition from labor militant, "spreading fear and in some cases loathing throughout the land" to educational reformer and statesman who saved New York City from bankruptcy by lending the government $150 million dollars from the teachers' pension fund (Weeres, Koppich & Kerchner, 1997, p. 1).

A partial explanation for the divergence of views about Shanker's most memorable accomplishments is his longevity on the political scene. Unlike the presidents of the United States who cannot serve for more than two terms, Albert Shanker was not limited in the amount of time he could remain in office. Although the union membership could, technically, unseat him, the possibility was unlikely without a sustained, well-organized opposition that had links to reform movements in other unions, an occurrence which has been quite rare in American unions in the past three decades.[1] Within a few years of becoming AFT president, Shanker instituted several organizational changes that served to insulate his authority, duplicating the method of consolidating control that he had used successfully in the UFT (Lieberman, 1997). A full discussion of the alterations in the union's structure would go beyond the focus of this article, but two key changes should be noted: making the heretofore

annual membership conventions biennial and broadening the union's membership to include nurses and health care workers, who now comprise a considerable portion of the union's membership. Another modification, probably more notable for its symbolic importance than its impact on the union's functioning, was elimination of the verbatim transcripts of convention proceedings distributed during conventions and mailed to each local. The transcripts were replaced by summaries of the convention proceedings highlighting speeches given by union officers and invited guests, edited by union staff headed by Linda Chavez, whose remembrance of Shanker (1997) called attention to his powerful influence on her political thinking.

Borrowing a strategy more commonly used by political activists than union leaders, Shanker exercised authority through the mechanism of political caucuses, the "Unity Caucus" in the UFT, the "Progressive Caucus" in the AFT. As is still true, these were "disciplined" caucuses, meaning that if members disagree with a position taken by the group, they may not express their opposition outside of the caucus in a public forum (Lieberman, 1997.) In the Unity Caucus, discipline extends to votes as well; to vote or speak against a caucus position carries the risk of exclusion, from the caucus and the many jobs the union leadership controls (Weiner, 1976). Analyzing Shanker's mechanisms for controlling debate and decision-making in the AFT, one critic compared Shanker's exercise of authority to the Leninist concept of "democratic centralism" (Lieberman, 1997). However, comparison of accounts of organizational life in both organizations suggests that Lenin's Bolshevik party, at least until the Russian revolution, was less tightly-controlled than was the Unity Caucus under Shanker (Deutscher, 1954; Weiner & Markens, 1990).

Examination of the last verbatim transcripts of proceedings at AFT conventions sent to

delegates (AFT, 1976a) reveals an illuminating pattern in Shanker's method of dealing with dissension from the floor. While the norms of democratic debate in the form of adherence to Roberts Rules of Order were generally upheld, no vote occurred that might have undermined the public unanimity expected of caucus members. When the prospect of such a vote occurred, a delegate who was closely identified with Shanker, often a UFT officer, moved to refer the measure to the AFT Executive Council. Shanker himself rarely entered into debates on issues before conventions, except when important votes seemed in jeopardy. The intervention of a trusted lieutenant was sufficient signal to UFT delegates and Shanker's supporters from other locals about how they were expected to vote. In one instance, the president of a large local and member of Shanker's caucus introduced a special order of business that called on the AFT to defend a teacher's right to maintain discipline, opposing any diminution of laws that supported corporal punishment. The resolution noted that the NEA had filed a suit on behalf of a student challenging Florida's corporal punishment statute before the Supreme Court and demanded that the AFT counter the NEA's stance by filing a brief in support of the principal, who had exercised his right to paddle the student.

The verbatim transcript shows intense reaction to the resolution. One delegate argued "I do believe that teachers have the right to maintain discipline...That does not mean that they have a right to beat people who are smaller than they are." The transcript shows his marks interrupted by "[Boos and catcalls]" (AFT, 1976a, p. 26). Shortly thereafter, an officer of the UFT moved to refer the issue to the AFT Executive Council. A delegate from a small California local in California spoke against allowing the Executive Council to decide the matter, as did a teacher from a local in New York state. He acknowledged that the issue was

divisive but he argued that it merited debate because it was significant, as were the differences that had come to light. His remarks bespoke a frustration that the convention had taken up so many resolutions about social and political issues, and so few that addressed teaching and learning: "I am depressed, frankly, when I look at the number of the resolutions that have come before the body and that we have considered, whatever our viewpoint on them, that have to do with our relationship with our students" (AFT, 1976a, p. 28). The booklet containing resolutions submitted by locals and by the union leadership shows that his perception was accurate. Out of 62 resolutions, only nine focused on instructional concerns (AFT, 1976b).

Shanker's longevity in office cannot fully explain his prominence because presidents of larger unions who have also served life-long terms in office, have not made a noticeable mark on American political life, either through their unions or their direct involvement in politics. The other key to explaining Shanker's renown is understanding the period of time in which he exercised control of the AFT and UFT. During his tenure in office, American political life was shaken by the birth of social movements that challenged the nation's political underpinnings. First the civil rights movement, then the women's movement drew attention to social inequality and demanded an end to legally-sanctioned discrimination; American schools and universities were shaken by student protests of the war in Vietnam. The teacher union movement was reborn in the twentieth century amid intense political ferment that influenced the political culture of schools and teachers' self-conceptions (Murphy, 1990). The dramatic effect of the UFT's early strikes and its militance was captured by one mourner at the memorial service for Shanker when she recalled that "he made teachers go from being people who took orders" to being people who gained self-respect (Steinberg, 1997, p. 7). Although sizable teacher strikes

had occurred earlier in other American cities, the UFT became the model for teacher unionists throughout the country struggling to establish collective bargaining agreements with their school boards. Thus, Shanker's reputation as a militant, combative unionist was earned in the days when teacher unionism was a dynamic social movement, many of its members active in anti-war and civil rights protests.

Shortly after Shanker and the UFT established themselves as significant political players, changes in the nation's political climate configured what many commentators have identified as a turning point in racial relations in American cities. Shanker led the UFT in dogged opposition to decentralization of the New York City Board of Education, a position upheld by a series of strikes in the 1968-69 school year that polarized racial relations in the city. Civil rights groups, unable to integrate the New York City schools, decided instead to agitate for more control of the schools serving poor, black students. The confrontation between the largely Jewish membership of the UFT and the black proponents of decentralization and community control became symbolic of the unravelled liberal alliance (Berube, 1988).

Shanker's reputation as an aggressive opponent of progressive social change was buttressed by his uncompromising support of the war in Vietnam. As political opposition to the war mounted among liberals and labor's allies in the Democratic party, agreement on foreign policy became increasingly important to the AFL-CIO leadership, which fervidly supported U.S. military intervention in the war (Schmidt, 1978; Buhle, 1997). Meany appointed Shanker, only a vice-president of the AFT at the time, to the AFL-CIO Executive Board, rather than the AFT President, David Selden. Curiously, the author of the highly sympathetic biography of Shanker, Where He Stands, states that Shanker explained that both he and Selden "opposed the

war in Vietnam and Meany supported it" (Mungazi, 1995, p. 94). Berube's description of the circumstances is more accurate: At a time when public employee unions were a weak force in the labor federation George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO "was dubious about teacher or white-collar organization" (Berube, 1988, p. 65) but elevated Shanker to the executive board because Shanker, unlike Selden, was in political agreement with Meany about how U.S. and labor's interests should be defined.

As the nation's political climate became more conservative in the 1980s and 90s, Shanker's opposition to progressive political causes and his public rejection of the militant unionism that had earned him his early prominence enabled him to win the support of conservative authors and politicians with whom he had previously locked horns (Lieberman, 1995). Like Reagan and his appointees, Shanker opposed bilingual education, mainstreaming of handicapped students, and efforts to make the curriculum more multicultural. However, it is essential to note that what changed was the political temper of the period, not Shanker's ideology, which remained essentially the same as it had been since he became UFT President. Herein lies the element that connects all of the seemingly diverse aspects of Shanker's legacy, his political ideology, which requires explanation of events that one author has described as "byzantine" (Mahler, 1997). Shanker was a political co-thinker of a small group of former socialists, organized into Social Democrats-USA, commonly known by the acronym SD-USA. The intellectual mentor of this group, Max Shachtman, was well known in left-wing circles up until the mid-1950s as a socialist, a left-wing opponent of communism. However, as the cold war intensified, Shachtman viewed American capitalism in an increasingly favorable light that called for forgiving many of the practices that he had previously contested. In an obituary, the

theme of which was Shachtman's two deaths, one moral, the other corporeal, a critic of Shachtman's "turn to the right" noted, "Shachtman had become an apologist for American imperialism's filthy war in Vietnam, aligned himself with the ugliest elements in the unions, rationalized the racist practices of the construction unions" (Jacobson, 1973, p. 99). Echoing SD-USA's cold war politics and its concern that labor not be too militant, lest it weaken communism's protagonist, liberal capitalism, the AFT under Shanker assumed a more aggressive stance on foreign policy and more attenuated support for social movements challenging the status quo. Examination of AFT convention transcripts supports contentions that Shanker's defense of human rights was politically lopsided, targeting violations and repression in communist countries but not those by U.S. allies, especially in Latin America (Berube, 1988; Schmidt, 1978). In 1976, the union passed Resolution #21, submitted by the UFT, demanding freedom for Yakov Suslensky, a Soviet teacher who wanted to emigrate to Israel. However, when two resolutions came to the floor soon after, dealing with political repression in two countries within the U.S. sphere of influence, South Korea (#23) and in Chile (#24), the convention declined to identify wrongdoing in a specific locale, opting instead to condemn "all nations governed by Fascists and Communist dictatorships" (AFT, 1976a, p. 28). The same pattern exists in resolutions on foreign policy passed in 1978, 1979, 1980, and 1981.[2]

Shanker's prominence as a teacher unionist and political figure rested in great measure upon his remarkable organizational skills and acumen, which both his sharpest critics and impassioned supporters noted. His considerable ability as an orator, coupled with the structural changes in the union that made opposition Herculean, go far in answering how he was able to

retain control of the union. Unlike most other American unions, the AFT does not allow for direct election of national officers; the convention, heavily weighted in favor of large locals, especially the UFT, elected Shanker at its annual, then biennial meetings (Weiner, 1976). Whether, as one columnist noted, Shanker "was able to maintain the loyalty" of the UFT and AFT membership is therefore open to question. But his achievements and distinctions also relied on the political fit between his ideology and the nation's climate. As political debate became more sympathetic to corporate prerogatives, Shanker's ideological predilection to downplay conflicts between labor and management, teachers and school boards, was enhanced. In a nation more receptive to conservative ideas, Albert Shanker became a spokesperson for a unionism that rejected confrontation and articulated a vision of educational reform that was more similar to that of corporate leaders and school boards (Shanker, 1985, 1988 & 1989; Kerchner & Mitchell, 1988).

However, in the last few years of his life, political events developed that have illuminated the underside of Shanker's achievements, events that have made his legacy far more problematic than the obituaries suggest. With the collapse of communism, the cold war dimension of Shanker's politics became meaningless (Mahler, 1997), reducing his political beliefs to a conservatism more similar than not to that of mainstream Republicans (Buhle, 1997). But conservatives are not often supporters of organized labor, especially not in an AFL-CIO that has resurrected at least the verbal banner of class struggle. John Sweeney, who defeated Lane Kirkland and his supporters, prominently among them, Albert Shanker (Manegold, 1995) "has set a whole new tone" for the labor movement (Cooper, 1997). Though the right-wing of the labor federation, which counts as a leader Sandra Feldman, Shanker's

heir to the AFT and UFT presidencies, (who was a youthful protege of Shachtman), is poised to retake control if Sweeney's hold of the AFL-CIO apparatus is significantly weakened, SD-USA's ideological hegemony and organizational infuence have clearly been shattered.

Shanker's policy of quelling lively internal debate about educational issues and international politics for close to three decades in the UFT and two in the AFT, allowed him to present a picture of unified UFT/AFT opinion to politicians and the public. And the organizational changes that gave him enormous control over policy and personnel reinforced his image as a powerful leader, speaking forcefully for teachers. But the positions he took that made his reputation as a labor statesman are clearly not shared by classroom teachers today. Reliable national polls show that teachers are skeptical about the usefulness of national standards in education (Ford Foundation, 1993). They believe that traditional teacher union issues are relevant and legitimate; they expect the union to intervene about workload, health and safety, theirs and that of their students, and resources (Bascia, 1994). Teachers are rarely permitted to vote on educational issues, because of the narrow scope of collective bargaining laws, but when they do, the results suggest that classroom teachers are, at best, sharply divided about many of the positions Shanker advocated. For instance, in Rochester, members of the teachers union voted down a contract that contained financial incentives, a policy Shanker advocated; they approved the contract only after it had been altered to remove the provision (Blinder, 1992; Koppich, 1993). In 1995, New York City teachers voted down a contract for the first time in the UFT's history. The contract rejection occurred for many different reasons, but the vote revealed that the union leadership was unable to bargain effectively for teachers because it had misunderstood their desires.

President Clinton's decision to award Shanker the Medal of Freedom, commending him as "a staunch proponent of teacher certification and higher standards for students" (Lewis, 1998, p. 16), demonstrated that Albert Shanker had been accepted in the most powerful political circles. Yet, a good many of the 2,000 people attending his memorial service in New York City were retired rather than active members of the union, who recalled his leadership in the battle to give teachers a voice in school policy. Shanker's heirs have inherited his power without his moral and political claims to leadership of teachers' battles. His legacy may prove to be that he gained personal prominence by creating a tight organizational apparatus in a union susceptible to the same winds of change that swept John Sweeney's supporters into the AFL-CIO and Albert Shanker's collaborators out.

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1. Two sources of information about the physical, legal, and political obstacles union reformers confront are Union Democracy Review published by the Association for Union Democracy, Brooklyn New York, and Labor Notes, published by the Labor Education and Research Center, Detroit Michigan.

2. George Schmidt's booklet identifies specific individuals who took charge of AFT's involvement with the Central Intelligence Agency; the endnotes in Paul Buhle's commentary on Shanker's politics contain several references to works more easily available than Schmidt's that examine much the same territory.

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