The Bargaining Table and Beyond

How the AFT Came to Support Labor-Management Collaboration

Israel Kugler (third from left) on a 1973 picket line at Baruch College.

By Phil Kugler

When I first came to the American Federation of Teachers in 1973, there was no such thing as labor-management collaboration. It was a term I had never heard of, and no one used it. Back then, we focused on supporting local unions in their struggles to win collective bargaining rights. At the time, teachers were fighting to achieve basic rights just to organize, so the priority was on establishing locals and helping them achieve the pay, benefits, and working conditions that teachers demanded and deserved as professionals.

For the last 32 years, I have led the AFT's organizing and field services department, which supports our union's efforts to organize the unorganized and to assist affiliates in contract negotiations and administration, internal organizing, and member mobilization. In that time, I have seen a gradual shift within the AFT toward encouraging local leaders to cultivate strong relationships with management. Such partnerships have taken hold in New Haven, Baltimore, Cleveland, Cincinnati (see the sidebar on page 10), the ABC school district in California (see the article on page 22), and Meriden, Connecticut (see the article on page 29), among other places. These partnerships are the result of hard work between local leaders and school officials, who together have created, as AFT President Randi Weingarten often says, the conditions that enable teachers to teach and students to learn.

Growing up in the labor movement during the 1950s and 1960s, I could not have predicted that a major focus of this great union would eventually be on strengthening labor-management relations. All that I knew, and all that my family knew, was about fighting for basic rights on the job. My grandparents were immigrants. My paternal grandmother was in the International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union. My paternal grandfather was involved in a painters' union, but I never got to meet him. While picketing with his fellow painters, he was arrested, and he died in jail from a heart attack.

My father, Israel Kugler, who became a social science professor, absorbed the lessons his parents taught him about workers' rights. He was really a pioneer in the AFT in terms of organizing college professors. In the 1950s, he was a professor in Brooklyn at one of the first community colleges established in New York state. At this college, he and some of his colleagues formed an independent union and then affiliated with the New York Teach-

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Albert Shanker teaching a class at the Harvard University School of Education in 1987.

ers Guild, the AFT affiliate at the time in New York City. The Guild was one of the predecessor organizations of the United Federation of Teachers. My father eventually became vice president of the UFT for colleges and universities, and later became president of a New York City metropolitan higher education local. He also cofounded the Professional Staff Congress, a union of faculty members at the City University of New York, which now represents more than 25,000 faculty and staff members.

I've been around organizing all my life; it was something my parents constantly discussed at home. We lived in one of the first cooperative housing developments in Queens. Albert Shanker, the late president of the AFT, grew up 8 to 10 blocks away in another housing development. He taught at Junior High School 126 in our neighborhood; so did George Altomare, a founder of the UFT, its vice president for high schools, and later its director of worker education, who lived in the same housing development as us. Eli Trachtenberg also lived in the area and was an activist in the UFT; he was an architect of local school chapter development in the union. (His work was so instrumental that the UFT created an award in his honor.) In fact, Shanker and Altomare were my counselors at summer camp.

Underneath New York City's Triborough Bridge (renamed the Robert F. Kennedy Bridge in 2008) is a stadium on Randall's Island. When the UFT was first organizing for recognition, it would hold its rallies on Randall's Island. I remember more than one occasion when UFT leaders would come over to our apartment after a rally to watch the news coverage on TV. I'd be walking around carrying cookies and drinks. I was about 13 or 14 years old. I was no stranger to politics. I would march with my parents on picket lines and in Labor Day parades. In 1963, I rode on a UFT bus to attend the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.* The importance of the labor movement was deeply ingrained in me.

I pretty much knew in high school and college that I wanted to pursue a career in the labor movement. I went to Oberlin College in Ohio, where I helped develop a chapter of Young Democrats. We had 250 dues-paying members. When Barry Goldwater ran against Lyndon Johnson for president in 1964, we organized students to walk precincts for Johnson in Cleveland and other communities along Lake Erie. I drove around candidates for state legislature and went to union functions for the United Auto Workers and the steelworkers.

On my summers off from college in 1965 and 1966, I got my Coast Guard papers and worked on merchant ships, joining the Seafarers International Union. In the summer of 1967, I worked in a steel mill in Cleveland. Foster Stringer, the former head of the AFT's human rights department, worked in the same steel mill. He was the first African American foreman there. At the time, I didn't know him, but we probably passed each other there. I took the job because I wanted to earn money and work in the political campaign for Carl Stokes, who became the first African American mayor of Cleveland.

In 1968, when I graduated, I was all set to go to graduate school in labor relations. But the summer before I was to enroll, as I waited once again for my merchant ship assignment one day in the Brooklyn union headquarters, I was called to the office of the president of the Seafarers International Union, Paul Hall. I spent three or four hours talking with him about the union, the labor movement, politics, and my career plans. He suggested I delay going to graduate school and work on merchant ships for several years to learn what the workers, who experienced high rates of alcoholism and divorce, really faced on the job. So I took his advice.

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After that experience, I attended graduate school at the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (now the ILR School at Cornell University). I accepted an internship at the AFL-CIO in legislation, where I worked for a year. Then I heard that the AFT had just merged with the National Education Association in New York (becoming the New York State United Teachers) and had brought in 90,000 members. Because of this, the AFT was expanding its staff and wanted to build up its legislative and political operation. Since my internship was in legislation, I applied. In those days, the executive committee of the AFT executive council interviewed every prospective staff person prior to hire. As I walked into the room for my interview, I saw all these people I knew: Al Shanker; Mary Ellen Riordan, the former president of the Detroit Federation of Teachers; and Frank Sullivan, the former president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers; among others. Needless to say, I got the job. I started at the AFT when I was 26 years old as assistant director of legislation.

*For more on the March on Washington, see our package on the march's 50th anniversary in the Fall 2013 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2013/MOW.pdf.

At the AFT, Shanker asked all professional staff to spend some time out in the field. I was assigned to a campaign in Jefferson Parish, Louisiana. We won that campaign, and it was there that I developed a strong interest in organizing.

Building Bridges after Bleak Times

As I mentioned earlier, in the 1970s, there was no such thing as collaboration between labor and management. In the early 1960s when the AFT was pushing for collective bargaining, the response from critics of the labor movement was that collective bargaining was for blue-collar workers, and for teachers to go after it was unprofessional. Al Shanker would tell stories about his time as a young math teacher in New York City. He was desperate for support, and the first time the assistant principal opened the door to his classroom, Al remembered saying to himself, "Great! He's coming in to observe my class and to give me help." But instead of helping him, the assistant principal poked his head in the classroom and said, "Mr. Shanker, do you see the rolled-up paper balls on the floor? Very unprofessional. Very unprofessional." Al was demoralized. On top of that, teachers suffered other indignities, such as snow patrol, when they had to shovel snow outside of the school, and bathroom patrol, when they had to monitor students as they used the restroom.

Al saw that teachers worked in this rigid, top-down, command-and-control structure, in which they were not expected to ask questions, make suggestions, or receive help. They were also poorly paid, at a time when the economy was experiencing tremendous growth after World War II. All sorts of opportunities were opening up: veterans were taking advantage of the GI Bill and attending college, and the suburbs were growing, as was the middle class, yet teachers were being left way behind.

So conditions were ripe for a revolution. During the war, people had fought for this country and for democracy abroad, but when they came home, they were denied rights in the workplace. There were no collective bargaining laws; just the law of the jungle. If teachers and other public employees went on strike, state laws often dictated they would be fired. The state labor relations laws granting collective bargaining rights to teachers and other public employees came later and were designed to regulate collective bargaining and actually limit the rights in certain ways. The whole idea of teacher rights captivated the imagination of a courageous group of people, many of whom—like Al—went to jail for these rights. They believed that educators and other public employees deserved the same rights as workers in the private sector. At the same time, these leaders cared very much about students. But without the ability to have a voice, to have basic rights of recognition, they realized they could not help children.

In 1975, Al asked me to become a field director in the organizing department. At that time, it was chaotic at the AFT. I remember having more than 40 strikes going on simultaneously all across the country. I also recall one year when we had the Chicago and New York City locals on strike at the same time. This was after the initial recognitions to engage in collective bargaining. Chicago was striking almost every year for a period of time, sometimes several years in a row, until the union was able to secure a multi-year agreement.

One by one by one, in the 1960s and 1970s, AFT locals—in cities such as New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, Toledo, and Minneapolis—were winning collective bargaining representation in election after election. Sometimes we wouldn't win. There was a lot of strife getting that first, basic recognition, and even strife getting the initial contract and successor agreements. One of the things that actually slowed us down was the passage of state laws before we were ready, because we didn't have the resources to go everywhere at once to organize. The laws provided the framework for teachers to engage in collective bargaining. The NEA, which already had a membership presence in these states with the new bargaining laws in place, took advantage of the opportunity to win recognition in many places.

A seminal moment for Al came in the middle of all this. Shortly after he assumed the presidency of the AFT (he was president of the AFT and the UFT simultaneously for quite a while), New York City nearly went bankrupt. In 1975, the city laid off 20,000 teachers. As a response to the chaos that the mass layoffs created in the schools, there was basically a runaway strike. But he did not want the strike. He did not think it would make a difference in terms of what the city faced and the kind of issues the union had to deal with under these circumstances. But the strike was the only option people knew. It was a last-resort weapon of choice that had been used with success in

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LORRIE ANNE GHERALDI

Albert Shanker addressing the crowd in 1968 on Randall's Island in New York City, the site of many UFT rallies.

BOB FILA, COURTESY OF CHICAGO TEACHERS UNION; LORRIE ANNE GHERALDI

Left, members of the Chicago Teachers Union vote on whether to strike in 1975. Right, members of Local 1352 in San Francisco walk the picket line in the 1970s.

the past. So they went on strike for two weeks, but they won little as a result.

The Boston Teachers Union was also voting on a strike at this time, and Al was just flat-out depressed. He realized the labor movement in education needed to think beyond the tools and strategies and tactics that we had used up to that point. We needed to be thinking about how to build bridges to the business community and to power centers, to start making arguments about the importance of high-quality public education in meeting the workforce needs of business and effectively competing in a world economy. Al's forward-thinking approach came out of this bleak time, and it meant a big change of direction for the AFT. When he became president, we started building up an educational issues department. And Al started traveling to meet with prominent people outside of education. I remember QuEST (Quality Educational Standards in Teaching, later renamed TEACH) professional issues conferences sponsored by the AFT where we brought in CEOs of major corporations to give presentations about the importance of public education.

Of course, Al was way ahead of the rest of the union. He was brilliant enough to see that we had to do something different.

Another moment when Al saw the need for the union to change was in 1983 with the release of the report *A Nation at Risk*. It basically criticized curriculum, student performance, our whole education system. Every single public education group reacted extremely defensively, except for the AFT. We embraced it and said the commission is right. There *is* something wrong. We're slipping. We're not competing. And we presented it as—don't forget this was still the Cold War—a national defense issue. We invited President Ronald Reagan to an AFT convention in Los Angeles, and he came. My point is that Al was traveling in these circles to do his best, frankly, to keep a lot of balls in the air and build support for public education, higher standards, early childhood education, and sensible evaluation. He was tinkering with lots of thoughts about reform.

One of those reforms came from the Toledo Federation of Teachers. Its president at the time, Dal Lawrence, had started a Peer Assistance and Review (PAR) program.* PAR releases "consulting" teachers, who have excelled in the classroom, from teaching duties so they can mentor new teachers and support struggling veteran teachers. These teachers also make recommendations to a district-union committee on whether the teachers they are assisting are ready to work independently, need further help, or should leave the profession. I read about Dal's work in the Toledo Federation of Teachers' newspaper and showed it to Al. He liked the idea and invited Dal to present PAR at an AFT executive council meeting. Dal was virtually shouted out of the room by all these local and state leaders who said they didn't want anything to do with this. They said the union's role was to defend teachers. In a decentralized union with autonomous affiliates, like the AFT, change happens slowly. Today, many years after Dal's presentation, several AFT locals have embraced PAR, a program that is based on teachers' commitment to educational quality and an appreciation for their contributions. Because it is a partnership reaching well beyond traditional collective bargaining, it is a great example of labor-management collaboration.

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*To learn more about PAR, see "Taking the Lead: With Peer Assistance and Review, the Teaching Profession Can Be in Teachers' Hands," in the Fall 2008 issue of *American Educator*, available at www.aft.org/pdfs/americaneducator/fall2008/goldstein.pdf.

Moving Collaboration Forward

While collaboration is a worthy goal, I believe it may be more difficult to achieve in education than in any other field because you don't have stability in education. You have a constant revolving door of superintendents. A new one comes in, and you've got a whole new batch of priorities moving from one CEO to another. Plus, you have the politics of school boards. The only stable force in the school system is the union. You really need stability within the union if you're trying to achieve cutting-edge programs like PAR, new systems of compensation, and new forms of evaluation. You need a strong, experienced leadership in which the members have near total confidence. You can't do this with 30 percent of the membership. First of all, employers know if you have only 30 percent of the membership because they have all the payroll deduction records. And they know that if you have only 30 percent of the membership, you're going to be weak. Members need to know that their union is strong and unified. There also needs to be confidence on the part of membership to allow for experimentation and innovation beyond the usual.

To move labor-management collaboration forward, I think the responsibility lies with the union because forward-thinking superintendents are in the minority. Local leaders need to think about ways in which they can support friendly superintendents who understand the value of collaboration and engagement. For instance, they can help them write articles for the journal of the American Association of School Administrators or help them get on the map by attending their conferences. I like to look at it this way: At conferences of school administrators, after they're done playing golf and they're in the locker room, we don't want the chatter to be about how they bashed the teachers' union and destroyed it. Instead, we want them talking about what they accomplished for students as a result of working together with the union.

A successful labor-management partnership is based on mutual respect. And it relates directly to the AFT's mission statement. Teachers care so much about children and helping them do well. Teachers also have ideas, and they have needs. And in order to make the system work at its best, the views of teachers and support staff need to be a respected part of the equation; nothing worthwhile gets done without a check of consultation and involvement. It's recognition that in order for the education process to work at maximum effectiveness, you have to honor the teachers, include them, and listen to what they say because they're the ones doing the work each and every day.

Such a partnership comes out of strength and stability of leadership on both sides. Local leaders and school officials must commit to it because it takes hard work. They must devote resources to it and protect it politically. But in order to build it, you need a mature collective bargaining relationship. Once the basics of a contract are in place and there's been some experience in administering the contract, there's a point when local leaders and school officials can resolve issues together, where grievances get worked out, and where problems that are not grievances get worked out. There's a realization that "Hey, we can get a lot more done that's mutually beneficial and good for students by working at it in a different way." Then you get to where you can actually address areas that are outside the formal scope of the bargaining relationship. That's what I mean by maturity. People get to know each other. They trust each other. They are able to, in some respect, bare their souls and be honest about problems. That honesty is met with trust. You don't have to worry about me going public and saying, "We've got a real problem here politically and internally." Ultimately, labor-management collaboration is a further development and natural evolution of the collective bargaining process.

As a national organization, the AFT has a role to play in enabling this work. An awful lot of how you move things in our union is by modeling and sharing experience. That's tough with 3,300-plus locals, and it's a slow process. But our responsibility is not only working with our own people, but engaging with management officials, guiding them, supporting them, and nurturing them in the right direction.

THOMAS GIROIR

AFT President Randi Weingarten listens as David Cicarella, president of the New Haven Federation of Teachers, speaks during a press conference on his local's groundbreaking collaborative contract.

For the education process to work at maximum effectiveness, you have to honor the teachers and listen to them because they're the ones doing the work.

The AFT's most important concern is ensuring that every child receives a high-quality education. Even in the current climate, which is often hostile to unions and critical of educators, we must continue to remind the public of the overriding commitment that teachers have to this notion of students being the best they can possibly be. The teacher voice needs to be respected and listened to, for teachers are the education experts. Processes and structures, such as those that grow out of labor-management collaboration, must be in place to ensure that teachers are heard. The leadership of both AFT President Randi Weingarten and of many local leaders from across the country around reclaiming the promise of public education is vitally important—it can strengthen teacher voice and catalyze labor-management collaboration, which has the power to make that promise real. ☐