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Ocean Hill-Brownsville, 40 Years Later

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✓ PREMIUM

The lessons of the New York City school strike

They were the pink slips that helped change American liberalism.

Forty years ago — on May 9, 1968 — the local school board in Brooklyn's black ghetto of Ocean Hill-Brownsville sent telegrams to 19 unionized educators, informing them that their employment in the district was terminated. Eighteen were white. One black teacher was mistakenly included on the list but reinstated almost immediately after the error was discovered. Although there was some ambiguity in the notices about whether the teachers were being terminated or merely transferred to another district, members of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board repeatedly said they had "fired" the teachers, and Rhody McCoy, the local superintendent, told *The New York Times*: "Not one of these teachers will be allowed to teach anywhere in this city. The black community will see to that."

Fred Nauman, a United Federation of Teachers chapter leader, was among those fired. An admirer of Martin Luther King Jr. and a member of the NAACP, he was sympathetic to the plight of his black students. Unlike many teachers in ghetto districts who moved to more-affluent schools at the first opportunity, Nauman, a Holocaust survivor, started teaching at a junior high in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in 1959, and he had stayed because he enjoyed the kids. As required by the UFT contract, hearings were eventually held, and a retired African-American judge determined that there were no credible charges against the teachers. In one case, a teacher accused of allowing students to throw chairs was found to have taught in a classroom where chairs were nailed to the floor.

Liberals in New York were not sure how to react. When white people fired black people for no cause, liberals knew it was wrong; when conservative employers arbitrarily fired unionized employees, they knew which side they were on. But what was one to think when black people were firing white people, and when the assault on labor unions came from the left? The controversy unleashed a civil war within American liberalism, tearing apart groups that had hitherto been allies: black people and Jews, and civil-rights groups and organized labor.

Most upper-middle-class liberal New Yorkers, including the leadership of the New York Civil Liberties Union and the editorial pages of the *Times*, were sympathetic to the black community school board. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville board had been established as part of an effort to give poor minority communities greater say over the affairs of New York City schools. School integration — the old liberal dream — had run up against white flight, so an unlikely coalition of Black Power activists, like Sonny Carson, and white, patrician liberals, like Mayor John V. Lindsay and McGeorge Bundy, president of the Ford Foundation, advocated letting black communities control their own de facto segregated schools.

Part of the idea behind community control was that students of color would perform better if local school boards hired more minority teachers as role models. Bundy — whose 1967 report on school decentralization, "Reconnection for Learning: A Community School System for New York City," laid the intellectual and political groundwork for community control — noted that 50 percent of New York City public-school students, but just 9 percent of the system's staff members, were black or Puerto Rican. While New York City schools had long been run by a single citywide school board, the Bundy report called for establishing between 30 and 60 community control boards and allowing local boards to use race as a factor in hiring and promotion. Black and Puerto Rican candidates often had special "knowledge of, and sensitivity to, the environment of pupils" and should be provided preference, the Bundy report said. It was one of the nation's earliest calls for race-conscious affirmative action as a remedy for past discrimination.

But a second camp of liberals, led by Albert Shanker, the 39-year-old head of the UFT, took a different view. Shanker, the son of a newspaper deliverer and a seamstress, was a strong advocate of civil rights, had traveled with a contingent of teachers to hear King's address at the 1963 March on Washington, and had marched with King in Selma in 1965. A supporter of school integration and magnet schools, Shanker had gotten into some trouble with his union's members for being too concerned about civil rights and not sticking to bread-and-butter issues like wages and working conditions.

Shanker understood and sympathized with the need for more black teachers, but he thought firing (or hiring) based on race was antithetical to what the civil-rights movement had been about. He believed that the universality of King's message — that people be judged not "by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" — was fundamental to the moral power of the movement, not something to be casually dismissed, as Bundy seemed to suggest.

And while Shanker agreed with Bundy that one shouldn't just maintain the status quo of racial exclusion and the legacy of segregation, he argued for taking affirmative action that helped the economically disadvantaged of all races, an approach that King also embraced. In his 1964 book, *Why We Can't Wait*, and in his 1967 testimony before the Kerner Commission, King argued that it was not enough to pass civil-rights legislation and expect equality to ensue. He said, "For it is obvious that if a man is entered at the starting line in a race 300 years after another man, the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up with his fellow runner." But the remedy had to be racially inclusive, King added. He proposed a "Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged," not a "Bill of Rights for Blacks," saying: "While Negroes form the vast majority of America's disadvantaged, there are millions of white poor who would also benefit from such a bill. ... It is a simple matter of justice that America, in dealing creatively with the task of raising the Negro from backwardness, should also be rescuing a large stratum of the forgotten white poor." Over time, King's commitment to broadening the civil-rights movement to include all races deepened, and in April 1968, when he was cut down by an assassin's bullet, he was in the midst of planning a Poor People's Campaign to unite low-income people of all races.

The Ocean Hill-Brownsville board, however, had a very different vision in mind. Its superintendent, McCoy, took his inspiration not from King but from Malcolm X, whose home he had visited on many occasions. McCoy made clear that his ultimate goal was an all-black teaching force in his district.

Shanker and UFT members reacted to the firings by voting to strike in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district. If teachers didn't unify and protect their colleagues from arbitrary dismissal, why have a union at all? When the Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers were not reinstated, Shanker suggested that the entire New York City teaching force go on strike in the fall. Some union members raised concerns that the strike would be seen as antiblack, but Shanker responded: "This is nonsense. This is a strike that will protect black teachers against white racists and white teachers against black racists." Members overwhelmingly voted to go on what would turn out to be a series of three strikes, from September to November 1968, throwing one million students out of school for a total of 36 days. At the time, it was the largest and longest set of school strikes in American history.

Shanker drew strong support from pro-labor white liberals like Michael Harrington, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Arthur Schlesinger Jr., and some black allies of King's from the March on Washington — Bayard Rustin, the march's organizer, and A. Philip Randolph, the former head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Randolph and Rustin held a joint news conference and released a statement saying: "It is the right of every worker not to be transferred or fired at the whim of his employer. ... It is the right of every worker to job security. These are the rights that black workers have struggled and sacrificed to win for generations."

For their support of the UFT, Rustin and Randolph were pilloried in the black community. Rustin later recalled, "You'd think we had committed a heinous crime from the insulting telephone calls, vulgar letters, and general denunciation in the press we received from a number of black people." King's allies from the Washington march were effectively written out of the civil-rights movement.

As the strikes wore on, a number of Black Power advocates took an increasingly anti-Semitic tone. Many Jews had flocked to teaching in part because they faced less discrimination in hiring than in the private sector; at the time, about two-thirds of New York City's teachers, supervisors, and principals were Jewish. One community-control protester complained, "We got too many teachers and principals named Ginzburg and Rosenberg in Harlem." During the strike, Shanker learned that a particularly egregious leaflet had been distributed to teachers in mailboxes at two schools. It labeled Jewish teachers "Bloodsucking Exploiters" and called on them to get out of black schools. Shanker decided to have 500,000 copies of the fliers distributed, giving them far more circulation than they originally received. Critics accused Shanker of unfairly trumpeting the ravings of a lunatic as if they were representative of black leaders in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. The local board issued a statement denouncing anti-Semitism, but then, astoundingly, McCoy refused to condemn the statements in the fliers. "I have to work in both worlds," he said. "We have more things to be concerned about than making anti-Semitism a priority." Later a black teacher in Ocean Hill-Brownsville appeared on a radio show and read a poem written by a 15-year-old student dedicated to Shanker. The poem began: "Hey, Jew boy, with that yarmulke on your head/You pale-faced Jew boy — I wish you were dead." The teacher called the poem "beautiful" and "true."

An article in *Commentary* magazine, noting the unusual alliance between black militants and the upper crust of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant establishment, like Bundy and Lindsay, theorized that "WASPs are exercising residual anti-Semitism by encouraging blacks to attack Jews." But Shanker rejected that idea, saying the alliance was explained not by ethnicity or religion, but by class: "What you have is people on the upper, upper economic level who are willing to make any change that does not affect their own position." Such people condemned insecure middle-class white teachers who didn't wish to sacrifice their jobs for black advancement, Shanker argued, but "what if you said give 20 percent of Time Inc. or U.S. Steel to the blacks? Who would be narrow then?"

Ultimately, the public was on Shanker's side, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville experiment was shut down. Although Shanker was victorious, he was despised by the chattering class and "most of the literary intelligentsia," one journalist wrote. Woody Allen, a good gauge of New York liberalism, made Shanker the butt of a joke a few years later in his science-fiction comedy, *Sleeper*. In the film, Allen's character wakes up 200 years in the future to discover that civilization was destroyed when "a man by the name of Albert Shanker got hold of a nuclear weapon."

In the real world, however, Shanker immediately set out to repair the labor-civil-rights alliance, which lay in tatters, by finding a way to increase the number of black teachers in New York without resorting to racial hiring or firing. In 1969 he sought to unionize the city's teachers' aides, known as paraprofessionals, who were mostly poorly educated black and Hispanic welfare mothers. Shanker wanted to improve their wages — then just about \$2 to \$2.25 an hour — but also negotiated a career ladder for them, including a stipend so they could go back to school, earn high-school diplomas and college degrees, and become full-fledged teachers. He proclaimed that "this is going to be a generation of black teachers in the future." By the time of Shanker's death in 1997, the career-ladders program had helped more than 8,000 paraprofessionals to become teachers, making the program the largest source of minority teachers in New York City.

Civil-rights groups and Democrats, however, took a different line, endorsing not the difficult and costly task of providing advancement programs for low-income and working-class people of all races, but rather championing a race-specific program of preferences. It was a pivotal decision, and a turning point for American liberalism.

While the more extreme tactics of the Black Power movement in Ocean Hill-Brownsville — like the embrace of anti-Semitism — fortunately proved not to have much staying power, Black Power's rejection of colorblind hiring, firing, and university admissions moved into the mainstream of Democratic Party thinking. Republicans, too, briefly flirted with affirmative action. In 1969, Richard Nixon put into effect the Philadelphia Plan to impose quotas in the construction trades, in part to divide organized labor and civil-rights groups. But by 1972, Nixon would reverse himself and run against George McGovern's embrace of racial preferences.

Shanker and Rustin favored race-blind, class-based affirmative action not only as a matter of principle, but also because they worried that race-conscious policies were thrusting a dagger into the heart of the traditional Democratic alliance. They saw Bundy and Lindsay's coalition of support in Ocean Hill-Brownsville — centered on members of minority groups and upper-middle-class white people — as far less potent than an alliance of the black and white working classes, especially if one hoped to promote both economic and racial equality in the United States. Shanker and Rustin agreed with King that the labor-civil-rights alliance was a natural one. "Negroes are almost entirely a working people," King told the AFL-CIO in 1961. "The identity of interests of labor and Negroes makes any crisis which lacerates you, a crisis in which we bleed."

Shanker and Rustin warned that the racial preferences embraced in Ocean Hill-Brownsville were unleashing a second white backlash against civil rights and liberalism. The first backlash, against the 1964 Civil Rights Act, involved a salutary cleansing of the Democratic Party's unholy alliance with white racists. But the second backlash was disastrous, for it involved many Northern white people who had come to embrace King's universal version of civil rights and felt betrayed by the politics of racial preference.

In the decades after Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Bundy and other white liberals continued to push for race-conscious policies. Prior to the famous 1978 case of *Regents of the University of California v. Bakke* — in which the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed quotas in college admissions but upheld the ability of universities to use race as a factor in admissions — Bundy penned a line in *The Atlantic*, later paraphrased by Justice Harry Blackmun in *Bakke*, that "to get past racism, we must here take account of race."

A generation later, in the 2003 University of Michigan cases contesting affirmative action, the old Lindsay-Bundy coalition of civil-rights groups allied with wealthy corporations and foundations successfully appealed to Justice Sandra Day O'Connor to preserve racial preferences for another 25 years. However, in the very states whose policies were litigated in the Supreme Court — California and Michigan — white voters subsequently came roaring back and passed anti-affirmative-action ballot initiatives. This November antipreference initiatives are expected to be on the ballots in four additional states — Arizona, Colorado, Missouri, and Nebraska. Affirmative action remains deeply unpopular and carries great symbolic value. Unlike welfare or crime, issues that merely have racial overtones, racial preferences are explicitly about race, and the Democratic embrace of them surely helps solve the central political riddle of why the party of working people consistently loses the white working-class vote. Non-college-educated white people supported Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and both Bushes. According to my Century Foundation colleague Ruy Teixeira, Al Gore lost the non-college-educated white vote by 17 points in 2000, as did John Kerry by 23 points in 2004.

Forty years after Ocean Hill-Brownsville, however, liberals have a unique opportunity to heal old wounds. While tensions remain among groups pitted in that battle — some minority parents and a mostly white teaching force now fight over the No Child Left Behind Act, charter schools, and private-school vouchers; and blacks and Jews remain wary partners — Democrats may finally find a way out of the moral and political thicket of affirmative action.

Barack Obama's candidacy offers the possibility of resolving the difficult question raised in Ocean Hill-Brownsville: how to remedy the history of discrimination in this country without creating new inequities and divisions. Hillary Rodham Clinton has been a strong supporter of race- and gender-based affirmative-action preferences and has shown little openness to new ideas on that front. By contrast, Obama, who sounds far more like King than Ocean Hill-Brownsville's McCoy, emphasizes common ground among races. He declared in his recent speech in Philadelphia on race, "We may not look the same and we may not have come from the same places, but we all want to move in the same direction — towards a better future for our children and our grandchildren."

Still, in many states, Obama has failed to reach beyond the old Lindsay political coalition of black people and highly educated white people. Nothing would galvanize white working-class voters more than a rejection of the racial preferences born in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in favor of King's Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged.

Obama appears open to that approach. In his Philadelphia speech, he outlined the need to remedy discrimination but also acknowledged the anger that racial preferences inspire. Most stunning, for a Democratic politician, he observed: "Most working- and middle-class white Americans don't feel that they have been particularly privileged by their race. ... As far as they're concerned, no one's handed them anything." Resentment builds, Obama said,

"when they hear that an African-American is getting an advantage in landing a good job or a spot in a good college because of an injustice that they themselves never committed." He warned against seeing those resentments as "misguided or even racist" without understanding that they are "grounded in legitimate concerns."

Moreover, in response to a reporter's question last May, Obama said that his own relatively privileged girls don't deserve affirmative-action preferences, but poor minority and white students do. Emphasizing class would remove such preferences for upper-income members of minority groups — treatment that Obama concedes makes little sense — and would, for the first time in 40 years, benefit the vast majority of working-class black people who have been helped little by affirmative-action programs to date. It also would be politically popular: While racial preferences are strongly opposed by Americans, income-based preferences are supported by a two-to-one margin.

The change would remove the message that race-based preferences send to white people — that their interests are distinct from those of people of color — and instead help unify the old coalition of working-class white and black people that conservatives most fear. The move would be transformative, recapturing not only the colorblind character of King's vision but also its aggressive assault on class inequality. And it would, at long last, turn the page on the divisiveness of Ocean Hill-Brownsville.

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