Teacher union oral histories necessarily reference many different individuals and organizations, which can make understanding their narratives a challenge for those unacquainted with the full historical context. To assist in reading for those newer to the subject, we have annotated the narrative with hyperlinks and footnotes that can provide quick reference information. In addition, readers may want to consult Jack Schierenbeck's *New York Teacher* series, "Class Struggles: The UFT Story," which covers many of the events discussed in George Altomare's oral history. Three particularly helpful print publications for understanding these events are Rick Kahlenberg's biography of Al Shanker, *Tough Liberal*, Dave Selden's memoirs, *The Teacher Rebellion*, and Eric Chenoweth's study of Shanker's international politics, *Democracy's Champion*.

The annotations (hyperlinks and footnotes) in the transcript are the work and responsibility of the interviewer, Leo Casey.

LC: Today is May 25th, 2018. This is Leo Casey (in transcript, LC) and I'm interviewing George Altomare (in transcript, GA), and we are at the headquarters of the United Federation of Teachers.

LC: George, why don't we begin by having you tell us a little bit about your family, especially your parents and if you had any siblings, and their influence on you growing up.

GA: Alright, I'm starting with my mother because she influenced me greatly. In the two sides of my family, my mother's side was Maffei. She was born in Brazil, but to Italian immigrants from Italy – Avellino, which is near Naples. They went from Sao Paulo, Brazil to Boston. That was a route at that time of many Italian immigrants. She came to the U.S. when she was six.

GA: My father's side came from Columbia, a tough place. My father was born in Medford, Massachusetts, near Revere, that area of Boston. His father, George Altomare, who I was named after, was a tailor. He taught my father about being a tailor and that influenced him later when he was with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and played some role there.

GA: As far as the others, there were eight in my mother's family. Three or four in my father's family and that was the sum of it.

GA: In terms of schooling, my mother proudly finished the eighth grade that was grammar school. That was a big deal for an immigrant working class woman in those days. Her handwriting, that Palmer certificate they get, which is amazing compared to today. It's almost gone that script. And she was an active person, but years later there was a separation in my family, so my mother had to go to work. She worked in a union shop, organized by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, where she was a sleeve sewer. It was the closest you could get to a sweat shop at that time, even though they had a union. The bosses knew how to get around all kinds of situations, and they ignored the contract and so on. But my mother was a person who could fight for her rights.

LC: Your mother had the strongest influence on you?

GA: Yes. During her time as a sewing machine operator, she didn't have any training. She was out of school when she was 14; she even had to lie about her age to get her in a couple extra months of work. Later she had me as a son. I have two siblings, both older sisters: Georgine (as you can tell from her name, she was supposed to be me, or I was supposed to be her) and Pauline. Then myself, as the youngest. My father was Salvador; he was born here. But his father wasn't. His father was George Altomare from Columbia, and he was a tailor.

GA: So what is significant was that while my mother was working there was a union, but the union was not all powerful as far as trying to get the bosses to follow the union contract in sewing. They also were not as tough as some people thought they should have been. The union was the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and it was part of the CIO at that time.[1]

GA: At any rate, during this time, her bosses were saying that they were paying too much in labor costs and paying too much money per sleeve. They exploited the workers. They said, work on Saturday, but don't punch your

[1] This was before the merger of the AFL and the CIO, which took place in 1955.

time clock because we don't want that to pay overtime where you get more money.

GA: So, my mother was trying to do something about it, because she was elected as steward of about 200 people in her shop. I remember to this day; it was J & J Clothing on Prince Street. In my $50 car, an old jalopy that always broke down, I'd drive from City College downtown and I would pick up my mother, and then we'd talk about what to do as I drove her home. They had the union, but it was tough to get it to bear down, so they didn't have enough.

GA: While I was still a high school student at Brooklyn Tech, I said to my mother, "Get a contract, so we can read it," but she couldn't get a contract. So, I said "Mom, I'll get the contract." There was a teacher at Tech who was very pro-union, Albert Sayer.[2] He didn't exploit his position, he taught everything, but he was active in the Teachers Guild. So, I asked Mr. Sayer, "Could you give me a contract? I'm writing a report." So, he did and I looked it up where it said what the overtime was, what the piece work was and so on. I figured it out with my mother, and my mother said to the boss, Pauline was her name, "Look right here. It says so and so, and if you don't give us the overtime, we're going to just close the place." This is all grass roots. The boss Pauline says, "How'd you get that contract?" And my mom said, "My Georgie got it for me." When she told me the story of what happened, I think of that as my first labor victory.

LC: So, your mom was obviously a fervent unionist. Was she political at all? Did she consider herself a socialist?

GA: No, she wasn't political; she didn't join anything. My father was political, but she simply had a sense of what was right and what was wrong. What was just and what our rights should be. So, she was a natural leader. After she brought in the contract, they tested her, saying "oh, we're not doing that." Long before *Norma Rae* was a movie, my mother would go to the main place, pull

[2] Sayer was an important figure in New York City teacher unionism and on the New York City left. For these connections, see footnote 7.

down the electrical switch and everyone would stop. It really happened. I wish I had a movie of it. The real Norma Rae.

GA: It taught me down the line that you can have all the big union leaders, all the speech makers and so on, but if you don't have your grass roots support, you have nothing.

LC: So, your dad was political?

GA: Yeah. He was in and out of the house before he and my mom split permanently. He was a tough guy, and he had a role in the union. They had a term in the old days – I haven't heard it recently – a gorilla. The goons, the tough guys for the bosses, they had to be matched and fought at times. My father was part of that fight. He was down to earth, and at the top of the clothing industry. He was a skilled worker, a pattern maker and a cutter. But he had a fierce temper. I remember he lost jobs, and he was more unemployed than employed because of his temperament. He could not take authority, certainly if the authority was not well founded. I remember one time he lost a job because he was called something, an insult about his Italian roots or whatever, and he threw his shears at a foreman, and of course he lost his job. I remember that one because we suffered at the loss of that job. Sometimes you have to have pride.

GA: He was active through the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and the American Labor Party, the ALP.[3] I remember his political involvement when I was a kid.

[3] The American Labor Party was founded in 1936 as a fusion party, with the strategy of ensuring that the most progressive candidates were elected by cross-endorsing pro-labor candidates on the Republican and Democratic Party lines, as well as running its own candidates. The ALP founders were democratic socialists and social democrats in New York City's needle trade unions, especially the Amalgamated Clothing Workers and Garment Workers unions, who wanted to find a vehicle for their socialist minded members to support President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal without having to vote for the Democratic Party. There was a close relationship between the American Labor Party and Sidney Hillman, the long-time president of the Amalgamated and an important leader in the CIO who had a great deal of influence with President Franklin Roosevelt. (Roosevelt was known for saying of proposals, "Clear it with Sidney.") Given the then dominance of the Tammany Hall machine in New York City Democratic Party politics, some of the more progressive New York City politicians in the first half of the 20th century, men like Fiorello La Guardia, ran as Republicans, so the ALP would cross-endorse with either major party, depending upon the candidate. By the early 1940s, the Communist Party had taken control of the ALP, leading a number of the needle trade unions to leave the ALP and start the Liberal Party. By the late 1940s, the ALP was hemorrhaging support, and a decision to follow the Communist Party lead in endorsing →

When you're a kid, you need pencils. I remember because of an ALP campaign—I think it was for Bill O'Dwyer[4] – there's a box of pencils with a politician's name on it, and I thought wow, politics is great. You have all these pencils. At any rate he was politically active. I don't think he was himself a communist, but he had very good friends who were. When I was about, let's say six, seven, or eight, at the end of the Great Depression, I remember dressing up and going to a political parade.

LC: A May Day parade?

GA: Probably. Friends of my father came over to the house and I knew, even as a little kid, that they were communists. My mother was interested, but she never joined anything. She was busy trying to scrape together a meal with a couple cents, because things were rough during the Depression. There was no welfare in those days: you get a couple pounds of sugar, a couple pounds of flour and you do your best. There was piece work that she took home to make some extra money; she could do it because she was Italian and knew how to put on little spangles on dishes, decorations on clothing and such. So, she was attuned to that. In terms of elections, I remember my father being involved in an election for Bill Grogan[5] for City Council on the ALP line. As a kid I remember the ALP through the button and the pencils and so on, and that they were connected in some way with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers as well. That's what I remember as a kid.

LC: What's interesting about your history is that one of the things I have found is that people who were active in teacher unionism, going back to the 1930's,

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third party candidate Henry Wallace for President in 1948 proved fatal to its influence. By 1954, it polled insufficient votes to maintain its ballot line, and dissolved shortly thereafter.

[4] O'Dwyer was elected as the 100th mayor of New York City in 1945, running on both the Democratic Party and American Labor Party lines.

[5] Grogan was an officer of New York City's Transport Workers Union. He periodically ran unsuccessful campaigns for City Council from Queens on the ALP line. While on the left, he was an Irish Catholic and was not known as a communist. When TWU President Mike Quill split with the Communist Party over its insistence that the TWU support the third party Presidential candidacy of Henry Wallace in 1948, a major factional battle developed over control of the TWU, which Quill would win. Grogan did not align with either the Quill faction or the communist faction. (Joshua Freeman, *In Transit: The Transport Workers Union in New York City, 1937-1966*. pp. 305, 315-316.)

tended to be the sons and daughters of radicals from the New York City needle trades.

GA: I agree with the observation. Those of us who started the union in JHS 126 built an almost unanimous membership from the school staff in the Teachers Guild chapter, which was unheard of at that time. If a school – there were about 900 schools at that time – had even a few members, they were praised. It was very tough to get teachers to sign up. One of the things about the core of our chapter was that a lot of the activists had parents in unions. That was true, but with a footnote; because what happened in New York City was that many – not all, but many – of the teachers whose parents were union members working in the garment industry or wherever said we're for unions, but not for us: we're professionals.

GA: To this day, we in the UFT call ourselves, on our wall coming into this building, a "union of professionals." It is right on the wall. That was using the idea of professionals in a positive way. That's what we are, and that's what we should be, but it's not something that says that means you can't have the para-professionals, or you can't have other groups, and others working in the schools, in the union in the way they should be.[6] You can be professional and pro-union.

GA: There's a certain point, a tipping point, where we said, okay we want to be professionals, but how do we pay the rent? How about those bills we owe? How about that?

LC: So, you attended a public elementary school in Queens, right?

GA: I went to several kindergartens and elementary schools. I don't remember where they all were – Corona, Jamaica, Elmhurst, I think. As a kid I remember that our family was kicked out of our apartment six or seven times. It was horrible. In one case, I was in one part of Astoria in Queens and we were kicked out because we couldn't pay the rent, and then we moved to Queens Plaza, where we ended up in one room – my mother, my sisters and I. (God

[6] Para-professionals in the UFT are classroom-based education workers. Many of them work in special education, providing the teacher with assistance in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

knows where my father was at that time.) It was toward the end of the 30's, right before World War II, and at that time I just wanted to be with my friends. Not being disrupted so much. I had no money for buses. I ran at night from one part of Astoria to Queens Plaza just so I could be with my friends. Poverty is not something which you can just talk about theoretically. Poverty hurts.

LC: And then you went to Brooklyn Tech for high school. Do you remember much about your teachers? Albert Sayer, whom you have already mentioned, is an interesting character who played a significant role in New York City teacher unionism.[7] But were there other teachers you remember being particularly influential?

GA: Sayer was the author of a textbook, *Economics in Our Democracy*, together with Charlie Cogen, the president of the Guild and then the UFT, and Sidney Nanes, who was a teacher and principal of Seward Park High School. I remember an economics course that Sayer taught using that textbook. The lessons were not, in my mind, propaganda; they were logical discussions and

[7] Albert Sayer's involvement in teacher unionism went back to the original New York City Teachers Union (TU). In 1935, there was a major split in the Teachers Union, following years of intra-left battles inside the union as the Communist Party pursued its 'Third Period' Stalinism line, in which it accused other left groups of being fascists and engaged in violence against them. Arguing that it was impossible to coexist in a union with communists who played such a disruptive role, longtime leaders Henry Linville (the main founder of the union) and Abe Lefkowitz, supported by the leading philosopher and educator John Dewey, left and founded the Teachers Guild. Initially, many others on the left, including Sayer and others discussed by Altomare below (Charlie Cogen, Jules Kolodny, Fanny Simon, Si Beagle, Ben Mazen, Alice Marsh and David Wittes) as well as important figures who are not part of Altomare's memories (such as Layle Lane and Ben Davidson), remained in the Teachers Union, as they saw the Guild as a form of 'dual unionism.' But after a few years of Communist Party control, with the TU following every twist and turn of the communist line on issues such as the Moscow Trials, the Civil War in Spain, and the Hitler-Stalin pact, the non-communist Left, including Sayer and the above named figures, had had enough and departed for the Guild. Shortly after, in 1941, the American Federation of Teachers expelled the TU, together with the NYC College Teachers Union and the Philadelphia local, on charges of being controlled by the Communist Party. The Teachers Union then affiliated with the communist led United Public Workers (UPW) in the CIO.

There was a point in the early 1950s, after the CIO's expulsion of the communist dominated unions (including the UPW and the Teachers Union), when Sayer left the Guild and tried to form a CIO union of teachers with CIO and UAW President Walter Reuther's blessing. This union, Local 378 of the CIO, was in opposition both to the Guild and to the Teachers Union. But Local 378 didn't survive the merger of the AFL and the CIO in 1955, and Sayer rejoined the Guild. After the founding of the UFT, Sayer played an important role in forming the supervisor's union, the Council of Supervisors and Administrators (CSA). Sayer was a leader of the New York state organization of Americans for Democratic Action, an influential organization of New Deal liberals and progressives founded by a number of former Socialists such as Reinhold Niebuhr, who had left over the party's pacifist stance in the early days of World War II. Sayer was involved in Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964, as his son was a SNCC activist in Mississippi; Sayer and his wife went down to Mississippi to help his son.

readings of what history is and who fought for more justice and freedom and so on. I wish I had a copy of that book. I loved it. I used to re-read the chapters they were so well written. To his credit, Sayer never used propaganda. He let the logic speak for itself.

LC: I interviewed Sayer's son, who described his dad as a Norman Thomas socialist.

GA: That's right. Norman Thomas was also a hero of Al Shanker. I have a picture of Thomas when Al was a student and a young Socialist at the University of Illinois, with Thomas standing on a soapbox making a speech to the college. I'm trying to think, but I can't think remember the names of the other teachers. I should say something about Brooklyn Tech, not as a school, but as a social example of what was happening at that time. I was in Astoria, which was in a working class enclave; there were some small houses among the tenements, like Archie Bunkers, but poor Archie Bunkers. That area was made up of Italian, Irish, and German Americans but no Blacks, no Hispanics, and no Jews. There wasn't an anti-Semitic atmosphere, and people would not be as careful with their language as they are today, but there was no discrimination.

GA: In a different part of Queens, Al Shanker did experience some terrible anti-Semitic actions, with kids grabbing him in what has been described as a make-believe hanging, a make-believe lynching. I assume it was make-believe, no one can say one way or the other, but that was part of his history and had a strong influence on him. But in my neighborhood, we were right by the river, around by 31st Avenue and Vernon Boulevard, I didn't run across it. What's important though, is that when I went to Brooklyn Tech – let's say I was 13, 14, 15, 16 – a whole world opened up. Not just in the academics, which were great: great teachers, no complaints there. But what was wonderful was for the first time I had Jewish friends. It was amazing. It was like two worlds.

GA: My commute to Brooklyn Tech was a long trip, but my best friend was Stanley Applebaum.[8] What were important were the discussions he and I had across the street in the park and in the school itself. Before Tech, I was a smart neighborhood kid. After being in Brooklyn Tech, I could start calling myself

[8] Applebaum was class of '48, Altomare class of '49.

(like I did at the time) an intellectual in what I believed in, how I thought, what I knew, what I wanted to know.

GA: With Brooklyn Tech, I have to add, 50, 60, 70 percent of the students were Eastern European Jewish. It was, to me, almost the beginning of a new life—almost, because of the rich discussions there. It really opened up a whole vista, and that continued when I went from Tech to City College. You got into City College by a competitive score. If you didn't get in there, you went to work in a factory: those were my choices.

GA: So I went to City College in the spring of 1949, and what was happening? A referendum for a student strike.[9] So my education from Brooklyn Tech days now confronted me: what was the strike about? Well, there were two professors, (William) Knickerbocker and (William) Davis, who were accused of anti-Semitism and racism. (I wrote a version of the old labor folk song "We Shall Not Be Moved" for the strike, "Knickerbocker and Davis: They Shall Be Removed.") Knickerbocker was the head of the language department and had never in his 30-year career given a foreign language award to anyone who was Jewish.

LC: At a time when the vast majority of the students in City College were Jewish.

GA: Yes, absolutely. Davis was in charge of a City College dormitory, Army Hall, a big building that used to be an orphanage. The army used it during war, and then it was turned back to City College. And City College students could live there, as I did for a couple of semesters, just to get away from my family's apartment, where it was hard to study with all the noise. Davis assigned the rooms, and he segregated them by race.

[9] The strike at City College, which ran for five school days in April 1949, is thought to be the first student strike against an institution of higher education in the U.S. The *New York Times*, which played a controversial role with its reporting on the strike, posted a retrospective by strike participants thirty-five years later: Walter Goodman, "CCNY Alumni Remember 1949 Strike" in April 16, 1984 *New York Times*. Barry Goldberg's "'That Jewish Crowd': The 1949 CCNY Student Strike and the Politics of Fair Education Law in New York, 1945–1950." (*New York History*, vol. 95, no. 4. 2014.) explains the historical context for the strike in the collaboration of Jewish organizations, primarily the American Jewish Congress, and African-American organizations, primarily the NAACP, in anti-discrimination efforts in New York.

GA: So, there was a referendum, and the students decided to strike. The strike was covered in the *New York Times*, and it was my first view of how a reputable newspaper could be as wrong as hell. They had communists in the headlines. Communists take over the strike in City College, blah blah blah.[10] And that wasn't the truth, the strike was called by a referendum. And I volunteered right away, I was 17, and it was probably the beginning of my own political activity. I said, "I'll sign up, what should I do?" They said, "all right kid, until you know the ropes, you're in charge of the food. Put one slice of bread, one slice of baloney, one slice of bread, a little mustard, and that's it."

GA: I like to kid my friends today, I've been giving out baloney ever since. But the strike was a tremendous experience, because before that, I was mostly engaged in textbooks, discussions in class, and so on. Here it was activity. And also, it showed me that even the holy *New York Times* can get it wrong. (Bill) Fortunato was the head of the student council and led the strike, and he sued the *New York Times*.[11] And the courts went on and we all forgot about what happened to the suit. Later, when I was teaching, lo and behold, the headline was the City College students won and that money went to a student fund and so it had a happy ending.

LC: In the lore of the New York intellectuals, City College was famous for the various alcoves in the student cafeteria, especially the ideological and political battles between the communists in Alcove 2 and the anti-Stalinist leftists such as the Socialists and the Trotskyists in Alcove 1.[12] Other alcoves were focused

[10] The *New York Times*' front page news article of April 12, 1949, "City College Students Clash with Police in 'Bias' Strike," highlighted a police attack on the picket lines and the use of mounted police to break up a student rally, actions which resulted in the arrests of seventeen students. It claimed that the picket lines used "techniques in Communist or Communist-led strikes," quoted the CCNY president that it would be "lynch justice" to remove Knickerbocker and Davis, quoted the CCNY Dean of Students that there was a group involved that used methods that were "characteristic" of communists, and quoted Knickerbocker himself that "if it were not for the Communists, there would be no strike." A *Times'* editorial of April 13, 1949 contained the accusation that the strike was of "Communist inspiration" and repeated the charge of "lynch justice." While communists, along with socialists and others on the left, supported the strike, there is no evidence in the historical record of communist control.

[11] William Fortunato v. *New York Times*. The Times appealed rulings against it before finally settling the case.

[12] For accounts of the City College alcoves, see Seymour Martin Lipset, "Out of the Alcoves" in *The Wilson Quarterly*. Vol. 23, No. 1 (Winter 1999); Irving Kristol, "Memoirs of a Trotskyist" in January 23, 1977 *New York* →

on art, literature, social clubs and so on. Was that still going on when you got there?

GA: Absolutely. From ’49 to ‘53, that was still going on. But I don’t know what made me impervious to the communists. I had a very good friend—his name was Saul Bernstein and he was a playwright, and he quit school so he could go across the country and organize everyone—and he constantly tried to recruit me to his communist cell. I said, “I’m a socialist, but I’m not a communist.” And he’d say, “How can you be a socialist if you’re not a communist, because of the old argument that the Soviet Union was a worker’s state.” But I knew what was happening in the Soviet Union, with Stalin and everything. The communists never tried to deny what Stalin was doing in the discussions in the alcoves, but the argument was that you have to use these repressive measures in order to have a worker’s state. And I didn’t buy it, you know.

GA: Later, a couple of years after, I did run for the student council, and won a seat on it. And there, the issue of the Korean War creeps in. At that time, I was somewhat in between—I was for peace, but at the same time, I knew that there was an invasion, and that China was involved. So, at that point, I have to admit that I was not so firm. There was an organization of students for world peace that was opposed to the war, and I don’t know if I joined or not. I went to some of their meetings and they were saying good things, but again, when it came to involvement with communists, with the whole Stalin thing, I was opposed. What’s the difference between communists and fascists? That was an experience that didn’t exactly show me the right way, but it did show me that the right way is hard to find.

LC: So, were there any professors at City College that had a particular influence on you?

GA: I didn’t know him personally, but there was a Hans Kohn, who was a very good writer of history. I would go to his extra lectures and so forth. There was someone in the English department who turned me on to poetry. I don’t remember his name. But he did help me to appreciate literature and poetry,

Times; Alan Wald, *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left from the 1930s to the 1980s*. and Joseph Dorman, *Arguing the World: The New York Intellectuals in their Own Words*.

and I started writing my own. And there was a Professor (Aaron) Noland who taught intellectual history. It's funny how you start thinking of things when you talk. But, no, my biggest influences were from the students. There's no question.

GA: And the debates. They pushed and tugged to try to get people for their cause, I was obviously a good person to recruit, because I was thinking values. I'm not trying to make myself look so good, but I wasn't able to say, this is "the answer." I said, "This is the answer, but…" and then go on. I think the best part of my education was because of the many alcoves. And I went to some of them that were involved with literature and drama. And music. One of the music majors there got me into the City College chorus. I sort of sneaked in, because you had to read music to get into this very famous chorus. Fritz Jahoda was the director; he was world known. I always sang, and during the student days, I would bring my guitar, and we'd go places and sing labor songs, and so on. But I did wind up going to where they had Brahms and Bach.

GA: And so, I reached over, I said, how can I get in? My best friend, Donato 'Don' Fornuto, told me, look, you have a good ear. I'll tell you what they test you on and you'll memorize it. So, I did that, and I was in the chorus for almost two years. And so, it helped my love of music. But it did not deter me from folk music and labor music, which is why, unfortunately, you have had to listen to me sing for the rest of your days.

LC: When you graduated City College, had you always thought you would go into teaching, or was it more, now I'm graduating, what do I do next?

GA: Well, it happened in stages. Initially, going to Brooklyn Tech, it was you can be an engineer, and you'll get a job. Engineers are mostly employed. As a kid growing up at the end of the Depression era, I want to be employed. But then, there is the value of experiencing different directions at City College. So, then the next phase was, well, if don't have to be an engineer to get a job, what do you like? Well, I loved history. And the social sciences. And for one of the courses, I had to do some public work or social work, something where I had to help social workers—everyone had to have something like that for sociology. And I was assigned to help a community center in what was, at that

time, the first public housing in New York, which had been built as part of the New Deal. It was around the Queens Plaza area. And so, I had to go there a few times a week, and there were kids in wheelchairs that had special needs; I was helping them. There were other kids who just needed help with their homework. And I realized I liked that I could make some difference for a kid. It was the first time that I had given time and guidance to kids. So that was an experience, to answer your question, which steered me into doing something in social service, social work. But that did not take away the love of history and political science, and that led to teaching. And so that's where I went.

LC: And here your mother and her friends come into the picture, right?

GA: Yes. Right next to my mother in the shop was a sewing machine operator, someone who I knew as my mother's friend, Mamie Shanker. At the end of my senior year at City College, Mamie Shanker said to me "what are you going to do?" And I said, "I'm going to teach, I'm going to get more schooling and to be a teacher." She said, "Oh, my son's going to be a teacher. Where are you going to go?" I said Junior High School 126 (in Astoria, Queens); that was my first job. She said, "That's where my Albert [Al Shanker] is teaching."

GA: So, we had to promise, both Al and I, that we'd be friends like our parents. There was another connection there; both Al and I started teaching in September 1953, along with Dan Sanders and a few others. We ate lunch together and the biggest problem in our life now became how do we do our jobs, be good teachers and at the same time obey this assistant principal who was the boss of all bosses. So, we sat down for lunch and told stories about what happened for the day. It's hard to depict this without acting it out, whoever said it first, me maybe, I said the principal said that all classes should be organized into committees.[13] We didn't even have one set of textbooks each, so we had to go to committees. This was the style of that time, 1953.

GA: So in the first week of being a teacher, a full time teacher, I'm there doing my thing, the committees are working, the kids are together, six different committees, and the door flings open and in plops Assistant Principal Abe

[13] In today's education parlance, this would be known as cooperative or group learning.

Greenberg. He shouts at me in front of the kids. Even as a beginning teacher I knew that you don't criticize teachers in front of their kids. And so I said, "Let's step outside Mr. Greenberg." He said, "You're telling me what to do?" And he went into a tirade against me. So that was my story for our lunch, as we sat there eating from our brown greasy bags. So I said to the other teachers, "What's your story?" And Al Shanker said, "I had the same experience with Greenberg." (Al was mostly teaching Math.) "I'm there, he flings open the door, and he looks down at the floor and points his finger and arm toward the floor. I didn't know what he wanted. He kept pointing and pointing. Finally he says, Mr. Shanker, pick that piece of paper up." Obviously, a power trip, I am the boss, and we couldn't believe it. And Dan Sanders had another similar story.

GA: So right then and there, we decided we have to have a union, we have to have representation. We're not going to have this going on for our entire careers. And that's the God's honest truth. That's the conversation we had. Then we said, well what union do we join? We had heard about the Teachers Union, it sounded like the thing we needed, but it was communist dominated, most people agreed. Not whether that was good or bad, but that was what we thought was the fact. Then there was a whole bunch of organizations, like the Queen's Teachers, the Jewish Teachers, the Italian Teachers, and a whole bunch of these 50¢ a year organizations.

GA: Then there was this one, the Teachers Guild. We found that this one was a part of labor and the only one that was associated as an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT); that was the New York City Teachers Guild. So we decided that's what we would do. We sent Dan Sanders down, because you have to have sponsors, and we joined five at a time, and that boosted the moral of the Guild because at that time I doubt if they had more than a thousand members out of fifty thousand teachers in New York City.

LC: When you and Shanker and Sanders become involved in the Guild, there is a whole crew of people who have been active in teacher unionism for quite some time. And I want to ask you, which ones of those figures do you remember and what were your impressions of them? So obviously, Charlie Cogen was an important figure, as President of the Guild, then the UFT and later the AFT.

GA: Yes, and there was also Abe Lefkowitz. He was very important. Matter of fact, when Al and I and Dan first walked into the Teachers Guild headquarters, which was on 2 East 23rd Street, it couldn't have been much more than the main room. Two rooms, one small office and one room you had meetings in.

LC: Like a converted loft?

GA: Yeah, it was a loft. A lot of wood around it, when you walk up the steps, you'd hear the squeaks, you know. And there were rats running around and...

LC: Places that would have been sweatshops.

GA: And so, we were there, and Abe Lefkowitz was talking about something that they should do with the legislature, because he was the legislative representative. And was very effective at it. And people wonder sometimes, what did you do during those times to be more popular with your membership? Most of the time, our membership hovered between 1000 to 1200. And so, how did he keep those members, but not only them, how did he get all of the others to join in, when you had a salary rally around City Hall, which you were allowed to do at that time.

GA: The Guild acted like a union. And I should say, in 1953, Dan Sanders, Al Shanker, I, and of course, Ely Trachtenberg, were the heart of pushing things, new things, toward a more active unionism. We could identify with young members and so on. But what was unique about the Guild were the services. Here's where someone very important for what would happen later with collective bargaining and contracts came in: Ben Mazen, who was a teacher of Math at Bronx HS of Science.[14] Mazen was a lawyer, and through the Guild, he

[14] Ben Mazen, a graduate of Columbia University Law School, became a New York City school teacher in 1931, at the height of the Great Depression. Initially an elementary school teacher, Mazen taught at James Monroe High School in the 1940s, Walton High School in the 1950s, and ended his career at the Bronx High School of Science. He joined the Teachers Union early in his career and provided expertise and leadership to its Legal Aid and Grievance Committee. In 1938, the Communist dominated administration of the TU removed Mazen from his leadership post after he had joined the anti-Stalinist left caucus opposing the Communists. In 1941, when the TU was expelled from the AFT, Mazen joined the Socialists, Lovestoneites, Trotskyists and independent leftists who left en masse and joined the Teachers Guild. Mazen would lead the Guild's legal and grievance work up through the founding of the UFT. He authored a "Handbook of Teachers' Rights" which provided parts of the foundation for the UFT's →

provided teachers with what were free legal services in job related matters. The Guild got credit for all of these cases.

LC: So even before collective bargaining, there's tenure under New York state law, and once a teacher is tenured, there has to be due process if she is going to be subject to major discipline or fired. The Guild would play an important in securing that due process.

GA: Yes. We had a book. And my last copy may be in second floor UFT museum.[15] It was the red book on teacher rights, or something to that effect. Ben Mazen was the one who really put that book together. But it's amazing how many things you can do using rights that were developed as customs in some cases, or just precedents. And then, legally, using what's there in legislation and what's there from the New Deal labor law, and so on. And we excelled at that. The Teachers' Union professed to do that but didn't really do it.

GA: The Teachers' Union was a tragedy. They would hate that I'd say that, but I have had discussions with some who were involved in it and told them that directly, so I'm not afraid to say it. It was a tragedy because of the wasted ability, wasted knowledge, even wasted values of its members. Some values, that is. Not the values that can be used to justify fascism: I'll use the word fascism here to describe the authoritarian practices of the Communist Party, because it should be used. The Teachers Union members weren't all members of the Communist Party, but the union as a whole was pro-communist. I remember old-timers like Dave Wittes and others who would tell me about the Teachers Union and the Hitler-Stalin pact: one day all of the communists in the Teachers Union were for war preparation against fascism, and so on, and then all the sudden, there's the Hitler-Stalin pact, and now the communists are all against war preparation against fascism. And they had the union change its position, just like that. And these "about faces" were overnight. So what Wittes said impressed me and all of us.

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first collective bargaining agreement. In 1963, he unsuccessfully opposed Al Shanker for President of the UFT in a battle to determine the successor to founding president Charlie Cogen, who was moving to the AFT Presidency. Mazen died in 1969.

[15] The second floor of the UFT headquarters has a large exhibit of memorabilia from UFT history.

LC: My impression of Charlie Cogen was that he was professorial and a learned intellectual. Perhaps not as rough-and-tumble as others...

GA: You know, that's what you would say if you just saw him. But when you worked with him, you would find out he was the toughest guy in town. In 1960, when the UFT struck for the first time, he had 35 years of service as a New York City educator invested in his pension and going on strike could have cost him all of it. The Condon-Wadlin Act said, if you strike, you're fired.[16] Period. So he was risking his whole life's fortune, and he was not young enough to start over. People like Al Shanker and I had 5 or 10 years in and we were only hitting 30, so we were not in the same position. But Cogen and others had decades of service, like Si Beagle, Dave Wittes, Jules Kolodny and Reuben Mitchell—they were the ones who had the most at risk.

GA: But when the decision came on whether to strike—and we would not have gone on strike if Cogen had opposed it—he didn't dictate his views. Just the opposite: he was the ultimate democrat, and he let the majority decide. He believed in democracy so much that he even shared the little prerogatives of office. When in 1964 the UFT gave Martin Luther King Jr. its highest award, the John Dewey Award, instead of introducing King himself, Charlie said to me, "George, you did all this work, you introduce him." And I discovered later that there's a photo I have where Martin Luther King is looking at me, and I'm introducing him. Cogen was the ultimate democrat. And even though he didn't look as tough and sound as tough as others, when it came down to it, he was always there when we needed him.

GA: And without Dave Selden, nothing would have happened. I'm afraid even to begin talking about Dave Selden, because he was our only full-time person after the AFL-CIO gave the AFT some money for two organizers. One was for the west of the Mississippi and one, Selden, was for the east of the

[16] The Condon-Wadlin Act was a New York State law governing civil service and public sector workers. It was passed in 1947, following a high profile teacher strike in Buffalo, NY. This was the same year as the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act was adopted by Congress, and it shared Taft-Hartley's animus against labor. It prohibited strikes in the public sector and allowed state and local governments to fire employees who participated in one. As a consequence of the strikes by the UFT and the Transport Workers Union in the early 1960s that successfully defied Condon-Wadlin, it came to be seen as ineffective, and was replaced in 1967 with the Taylor Law.

Mississippi. I consider Dave Selden the greatest unionist that we could ever have found for that time and that place. He was a socialist in the Norman Thomas tradition. Some might think he was more to the left than I think he was, but he was always a unionist first and an organizer first. He taught me how to use every organizing instinct that I had that was good, and he made them better. And the instincts I had that weren't so good, he was able to, not proselytize to me, but deal with it. I can't praise Dave Selden enough. His later days, unfortunately, it didn't end that well when he was president of the AFT, but he was hired to organize for the Guild in 1953 when Al and Sanders and myself started.[17]

GA: Before Cogen was president of the Guild, it was Rebecca Simonson, who was a fantastic woman. By the time I was involved in the Guild, she had retired, but she was good. She was an anchor, the consummate professional in appearance and in her voice. She was originally in the Teachers Union before the split in 1935 which formed the Guild. She went with the Henry Linville and Abe Lefkowitz group that formed the Guild.

GA: Some would say, well, why couldn't they stay in the Teachers Union and fight it out. Get more people on their side and win that way. But whatever else you can say about the communists, they were willing to sacrifice more of their private life than others, staying at meetings late into the night when everyone else had gone home and running through their resolutions then, so winning was never just a question of who had more support. Linville and Lefkowitz had majority support when they left.

GA: This raises the question of the prohibition against allowing communists and fascists to be members of the Guild—a prohibition that Simonson strongly supported. My feeling was, well, I didn't like the ban. I wasn't part of the original decision to have a prohibition—it happened before I became active—but it would come up again and again for debate. Today, a ban sounds worse than it did in the '40s and '50s. And if you are a civil libertarian, you could not accept this prohibition on principle. But if you were a pragmatic person, who wanted to see a union of teachers and other educators in his lifetime, then

[17] By 1972, a rift over issues such as the Vietnam War and relations with the AFL-CIO had developed between the mentor, Dave Selden, then president of the AFT, and his onetime young protégé, Al Shanker, then president of the UFT. Shanker ran against Selden for the AFT presidency in 1972 and defeated him.

you would accept some compromises of principle to achieve that. Now, the debate is, how much compromise can you accept? We would go back and forth on that.

LC: In the historical record, Lefkowitz comes across as very fiery, someone who did not suffer people who disagreed with him easily.

GA: And that's why he was in the best job for us, because if he were the president or the chair of something, the Guild would not have merged to form the UFT. The merger itself to create the UFT wasn't just a question of becoming bigger, it was a question of how to think outside the box. People ask, you were in the Guild from 1953, you had Dave Selden, he was the only full-time staff member, but he was fantastic. You had Charlie Cogen, who was a great leader, and you had others like Si Beagle, Dave Wittes, and Jules Kolodny. But we needed to think differently. We had some good people who, unlike Cogen and the others, couldn't make the jump when we had that strike. There was even a leader of the Young Socialists who scabbed in that strike.

LC: Yes, there was Joseph Jablonower, who was on the Board of Examiners, and had gone all the way back to the beginning of the Teacher's Union during World War I. He had been one of the young socialist teachers that had been punished for not being supportive of the war, and left the school system to teach in the Ethical Culture School for many years. And he actually resigns from the UFT because it went on strike in 1960.

LC: What do you remember of Jules Kolodny?

GA: Jules was there from the beginning of my involvement in the Teachers Guild. He had been through the wars, as I recall, that led to the split of the Teachers Union in 1935, and he would recount them. Every meeting of the Teachers Union before the split was chaotic, because there were all these political issues coming in – the politics of Russia, of Europe, of the various communist groups, of the Socialists. Jules Kolodny was very careful. He was for the pledge that a Guild member could not be a communist, fascist or totalitarian. He was for that, no question. He was a hawk on a lot of things.

LC: He was an old socialist.

GA: Yeah, he was an old socialist, no question. He was a good person as a model for the young ones to follow. But I have to say this about Jules, he was not a person to inspire you, if you wanted to give up part of your life to organize. He was learned, a scholar with a law degree and a doctorate, not a firebrand. He was not only a high school teacher at Sheepshead Bay High School and other places, but he became assistant principal. At that time, that was allowed in the union. Anyone who was in the schools could join.[18]

LC: Charlie Cogen was also a supervisor, and Abe Lefkowitz was a principal.

GA: Yes. The good thing about being a chairman of department like Charlie and Jules was you had to teach, and so he never stopped teaching. But with someone like Jules Kolodny, even after he became a professor at NYU, he always came through; his first loyalty was to the union. I have to give him credit, Jules Kolodny. When we finally had a strike vote in violation of the law, he could have lost his license to be a lawyer, to be an attorney, by participating. He risked all of that, and so he gets total credit for doing that, and for not being a scab. He had a lot to lose. He had his whole pension to lose as well, just like Charlie Cogen.

GA: Jules was against my initial attempts to get the UFT created. Later he came on board. There's a lot of conjecture on why he was opposed, and we could go around and around talking about that. But some of it was he was in the movement for 30 or 40 years, whatever it was, and there's this young whipper snapper, what is he trying to do, and so on. But I can justify what I was doing as well. Jules Kolodny ended up backing my plan for merger after all. He did end up doing that. He was on the merger committee, and I give him full credit for that.

LC: What was your experience of Alice Marsh?

[18] After collective bargaining was begun, the UFT decided that supervisors should not be in the same unions as those who would be filing grievances against them, which required supervisors to leave. At this point, supervisors established their own union, the Council of Supervisors and Administrators (CSA).

GA: Alice Marsh was fantastic, but it's hard to explain why she was so crucial. She was almost the poster person of why we should have teachers—elementary school teachers, junior high school teachers, high school teachers, academic and vocational teachers—all in one union, because she taught in elementary school and she taught in a junior high school, but had a way about her that no one could really insult her. No one could not listen to her. She was dynamic in a quiet way. We needed people like that. As a matter of fact, when we were conducting secret meetings at my apartment in Queens, discussing the potential for the merger that founded the UFT, the only person I trusted that could represent the feelings of the elementary school teachers was Alice Marsh. I said, "Alice, I have some plans. If we don't tackle the high school differential issue, we will never be organized." And she agreed.

GA: She was from elementary school. I said, "At some point, I'm going to need you to represent the elementary school teachers in this process, to figure out why we should and could be together as one organization." The Guild had high school teachers, and I was a high school teacher. But it was a question of the High School Teachers Association. It was only a $10 dues outfit, but they had the largest membership. They had about 4000 members at one point. She agreed, and she was almost—not quite at the beginning, but almost from the beginning—part of the meetings and the secret meetings to create a way to get past the major obstacle of the high school differential. She was great. She became our legislature representative succeeding Lefkowitz, and she was fantastic. If you ever went up to Albany with her, she would know which office to go in to hang your coat, where to go elsewhere, and she knew every legislator who you met if you were out there lobbying. Everyone respected and admired her.

LC: What are your memories of Fanny Simon?

GA: Fanny Simon was on the executive board. She was never president or a top position like that. But she was formidable. Remember, our discussions at delegate assemblies were very important, because they were real debates. Fanny Simon was in there with practical direction. She also did a lot of traveling, as I recall.

LC: To Latin America. She was a scholar of labor and socialism, especially in Latin America.[19]

GA: Yeah. She went to Mexico a lot. I think she was in an elementary school level…

LC: High school.

GA: I don't remember which school she was at.

LC: James Monroe High School in the Bronx.

GA: That's right. Absolutely. Good memory. James Monroe was a large Guild chapter.

LC: It had three very important people, one of whom had to transfer out. It had Fanny Simon. It had Lena Tulchin.

GA: Reuben Mitchell was there, wasn't he?

LC: Reuben Mitchell was there as well? I didn't know that.

GA: I'm not sure.

LC: And it had Layle Lane. Lane had to transfer out because she got in a battle with this tyrannical principal over the treatment of a guest speaker, the prominent Jewish pacifist and progressive Judah Magnes. So she moved to Benjamin Franklin High School.

GA: Yes, she was at Monroe. I remember that much, but she was retired by the time I was active in the Guild.

LC: Lena Tulchin, Layle Lane and Fanny Simon were very close comrades and friends.

[19] With co-author Marjorie Clark, Fanny Simon was the author of *The Labor Movement in America*. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1938.) By herself, Simon wrote *Teaching Methods and Techniques in Labor Education: A Manual on How to Teach for the Use of the Teacher*, which was published by the Latin American federation of trade unions, ORIT, in Mexico in 1966.

LC: Your memories of Si Beagle?

GA: I add him to the list that if he wasn't around, we probably would not have gotten to the compromise that formed the UFT. He didn't invent it, but he was someone you could trust. After Al Shanker, the only person that I could trust 100% ... Well, Charlie Cogen… Charlie Cogen, we'd trust, but if he disagreed with you, he would hold his position, so it would be harder. He was crucial, but not in the very beginning of the process. I'm trying to think who else would be important.

LC: Your memories of Dave Wittes?

GA: Yeah, David Wittes, we always thought, he would argue and his face would get red, and we thought he was going to…

LC: Have a stroke.

GA: His life was like a history of the left part of the United States politically. He was a high school teacher at Seward Park High School. But he was formidable when he was on your side. Even when he wasn't, he understood that you had to do things, you had to break eggs to make an omelet. He was very important in the beginning of process to form UFT. Someone like Jules Kolodny, they would eventually come along. But Dave Wittes understood, he threw himself in from the start. He knew how important it was to have unity and you had to do what you had to do. He helped tremendously. As a matter of fact, for a while I was the chair of the... We had a treasurer, but the chair of the Financial Committee, and he said, "You got to do that, you have to control the money if there's a split or anything like that." But Dave Wittes was a big supporter of what we had to do to get to the UFT.

LC: Some of them come out of the Socialist Party, like Charlie Cogen. Most of them do, actually. Alice Marsh, Fanny Simon, Jules Kolodny, Layle Lane, Lena Tulchin, Dave Selden, Dick Parrish, Jeanette DiLorenzo and, of course, Shanker himself: all socialists.

GA: And Si Beagle.

LC: Well, Si Beagle was originally a Lovestoneite, as was Dave Wittes and Reuben Mitchell.[20]

GA: He never changed after that?

LC: I think many of the Lovestoneites joined the Socialist Party sometime after their own organization dissolved in 1941, but I am not sure exactly when. Some also became active in the Liberal Party, which former Lovestoneite and one time New York City teacher Ben Davidson headed up for three decades. Beagle stood as the Liberal Party candidate in municipal elections.

LC: And then there's people that come out of the Trotskyist movement, like Ely Trachtenberg, who was a Shachtmanite.[21] Do those political differences have much meaning by the 1950s?

[20] The Lovestoneites were a dissident communist faction, led by Jay Lovestone, which was expelled from the U.S. Communist Party in 1929 because of their connections to the 'Right Opposition' in the Soviet Union led by Nikolai Bukharin. Most of the original communist faction in the Teachers Union – Bertram Wolfe, Ben Mandel, Ben Davidson, and Dave Wittes – were Lovestoneites, and after they were expelled from the Communist Party, they ran their own "Progressive Caucus" in opposition both to the union leadership and the communists. During the 1930s, the Lovestoneite "Progressive Caucus" had bitter fights inside the Teachers Union with the Stalinist "Rank and File Caucus." This intra-communist feuding was one of the reasons for the split that led to the formation of the Teachers Guild, as many felt that the union was being held hostage to the battles among communists. Over a decade and a half, the Lovestoneites gradually evolved from dissident communists into democratic socialists and social democrats. Unable to agree on their approach to World War II, they dissolved in early 1941.

[21] The Trotskyists were a dissident communist faction, expelled from the U.S. Communist Party in 1928 because of their connections to the 'Left Opposition' in the Soviet Union led by Leon Trotsky. The organization of U.S. Trotskyists, the Socialist Workers Party, suffered a major split in 1940, as a faction led by Max Shachtman took a position much more critical of the Soviet Union in the wake of the Moscow Trials, the subsequent executions of Stalin's opposition in the USSR, and the Hitler-Stalin Pact. The Trotskyists had been expelled from the Communist Party when Lovestone was its leader, and for many years there was no love lost between the Lovestoneites and the Trotskyists. Like the Lovestoneites, the Shachtmanites gradually evolved into democratic socialists and social democrats.

There were only a handful of Trotskyists involved in the Teachers Union and Teachers Guild during the 1930s and 1940s. But beginning in the 1950s, a significant number of Shachtmanites, starting with Ely Trachtenberg and Israel Kugler, became active in the Guild and then the UFT, as well as other locals of the AFT. Sandy Feldman, who succeeded Shanker as UFT and AFT President; Rachelle Horowitz, for many years the director of the AFT's political action work; Velma Hill, who led the organization of New York City's paraprofessionals into the UFT; and Eugenia "Genie" Kemble, the first executive director of the Albert Shanker Institute, were all part of Shachtman's circle in the Socialist Party. Shachtman's wife, Yetta Barsh, was for many years Shanker's secretary at the UFT. While never a formal member of the Socialist Party or Social Democrats USA while president of the UFT and the AFT, Shanker himself was politically close to the Shachtmanites in the leadership of those political organizations.

GA: To some extent, they did. But I would say they all had one good thing in common: they knew that if we didn't do something different, we would just die on the vine somewhere. They knew that we had to have something different. If you multiplied the years they had put into the movement, all the hours of the day, they would have all been quite senior people. It could hurt their own lives, but all of them, if there was a meeting, they'd come.

LC: Dave Selden and Ely Trachtenberg wrote this influential position paper in 1958 called "Little Guild, Big Guild," which was making a case for why the Guild had to change.[22] What's interesting to me is that both of them had some history with the UAW. When Ely Trachtenberg graduated from City College, he went to Buffalo to work in a factory as the Shachtmanites sought to build a base in the UAW.[23]

LC: Dave Selden came out of Michigan, a stronghold of the UAW. What the two of them seemed to be saying is that we need to build a real mass union, which is different than just having what the Guild was, which was more of a debating society of people who have similar political views.

GA: There were some who were satisfied with that.

LC: But was the UAW a model for the sort of union you wanted to build?

GA: To some extent, yes. Trachtenberg talked about the Reuther brothers.[24] He talked about what made a union become a real force. Trachtenberg became

[22] United Federation of Teachers Records (WAG 022), Series I: Teachers Guild/Teachers Union Records, Subseries I-B Teacher Guild Records, Box 5, Folder 44 in the Tamiment Library Collection, New York University.

[23] While the City College Trotskyists are well known for their later role in the New York intellectuals, there was also a substantial cohort then went into the union movement. Among the Shachtmanites that worked in Buffalo with Trachtenberg and stayed in organized labor were Eddie Gray, Donnie Slaiman and Dick Wilson; Herb Levine went on to become the head of the Rutgers' school of labor studies. Israel Kugler and Herman Benson, founder of the Association for Union Democracy, were also Shachtmanite alumni of City College Trotskyism with long careers in organized labor. The novelist Harvey Swados also participated in the Buffalo Shachtmanite group, and he wrote a novel, Standing Fast, which drew upon his experiences in it. In *Standing Fast*, the character Sy Glantzman is based on the life of Ely Trachtenberg.

[24] Walter Reuther was the long time President of the United Auto Workers, as well as head of the CIO when it merged with the AFL in 1955, and his brothers Roy and Victor were leaders in the UAW in their own right. All →

an assistant principal; he had to, just to make more money. But that didn't stop him from being involved in the Guild and coming to our meetings. I used to drive him from our Guild meetings at 23rd Street back to Queensview housing in Astoria, which was the middle income housing where he lived, so we had a lot of time to talk. He didn't talk much about the auto workers. For some reason, he didn't use them and say, "We did this, we did that." But what he did get out of that experience was that, "We have to have chapters that are strong, that are dedicated. It's the chapters that are going to make everything."

GA: That's why the UFT has the Trachtenberg Awards, which honors active chapters, in celebration of Ely's vision. I knew of his background organizationally, that he was a Trotskyist, but he never tried to get me to join anything outside of the union. He didn't use the Teachers Guild to do that. He was a great speaker, very direct, nothing fancy. He exuded a sincerity that you knew you should listen to him, and he was eloquent. But not fancy as a good speaker, but on his ideas. He was a good debater, but not just to win the debate. He died when he was in his...

LC: Early 40s, right?

GA: Yes. I remember the last time I was with him, it was snowing, and we were' picketing the Board of Education, 110 Livingston Street at that time. It's a shame, because he didn't live to see the UFT realized. He wanted it to come. And he was the head of the organizing committee, where I succeeded him. There's no question, if you asked anyone in leadership that at that time, "Who's going to be the next president, or should be the next president of the Guild?" It was Ely Trachtenberg. There was no question about it.

LC: He had a massive heart attack and passed away.

GA: I'll never forget it. The snow was coming down. One day, we were together on the picket line, and then he was gone.

three had been prominent socialists in the 1930s and 1940s. The support of Reuther and the UAW would be very helpful to the UFT in winning the election for collective bargaining.

LC: Let's move on to the organizing of the UFT.

GA: People would ask from 1953 on, why if you're so good and you know what to do and so on, why aren't you bigger? And the reason was: there was no unity. There are all these different teacher organizations in New York City, scores of them. And teachers would say, "Figure it out, and when you have one organization, then I'll join."

GA: What were the challenges to unity? Before my time, up to 1950, the high school teachers of New York City made 30% more than elementary school teachers.[25] So, when you're trying to organize elementary school teachers, they would ask, are you against or for that differential. And you're stuck. If you say that you're against the gap, high school teachers think you will hurt them in the pocket. And if you don't have answer for elementary school teachers on how to address the gap, they say I won't join until you have taken a position. It was a real problem we needed to address.

GA: This is part of the reason why I moved from the junior high schools to the high school. Dave Selden and Al Shanker were saying I was the only one among the young leadership with a high school license. And it could take as long as four years to get a license, given how infrequently the exams were held, and more time to be appointed in a high school. And Al had a lot of time to convince me to take it, because we both worked during the summer in Camp Hillcroft, which you could make a study itself. There were other teacher unionists and socialists working there, like Iz (Israel) Kugler, who was head of the college division of the Guild and then the UFT and became one of the main founders of the PSC, Professional Staff Congress, which is the AFT union local for the City University of New York. We had lot of time in the summer where we could discuss these questions. Hillcroft was owned and run by a refugee, a top socialist from Austria before the Anschluss, before the Nazis moved in at the start of World War II. His name was Joseph Buttinger, and his wife's name was

[25] Part of the historical logic of this dynamic is that elementary school teachers were overwhelmingly female, while high school teachers were predominantly male.

Muriel (Gardner Buttinger).[26] It was a little camp, only 200 kids, and a lot of kids from abroad. They didn't run it to make profit. They just broke even. But it became a little island near Poughkeepsie where a lot of stuff was germinated. And it was where Al convinced me to become a high school teacher. I said, okay, I'll do it, and there was a job in Franklin K. Lane High School that I took. This was around 1956.

LC: There were these "young Turks" like you, Shanker, Trachtenberg and Sanders. You were trying to figure out how do you break out of this niche organization that the Guild was and create a union that includes all teachers. And there were some interesting developments in the high schools.

GA: It was in the evening high schools. While we were trying to organize, the thing that haunted us within the Teachers Guild was how to handle the high school differential. There was gunpowder there, but it needed a match to strike it. Also, athletes sometimes say, "You make your luck." Well, if it's luck, how could you make it? Making your luck means you're doing the right thing, and when the opportunity comes along, you take it. In my school at that time, Franklin K. Lane, there were no members of the Guild when I was first assigned. Sometimes they use the expression "salt" in organizing and I was a "salt" in the high schools. What I did was incremental, but added up to a lot. I'd come in and say, "I have three new members from Lane," and the executive board would have to vote them in. The reason you had to vote them in was because of the split of the Teachers Union and the Guild, members needed to be approved.

LC: This is pre-collective bargaining, before you would become a member by being in the bargaining unit…

[26] The Buttingers were patrons of many causes of the democratic left, such as *Dissent Magazine*. Muriel Gardner Buttinger had been active in the Austrian underground opposition to the Nazis and wrote about that experience in her book *Code Name Mary: Memoirs of an American Woman in the Austrian Underground*. Buttinger believed that her life story was the basis for the character Julia in Lillian Hellman's *Pentimento*, which inspired the 1977 Oscar winning film *Julia*. While Hellman disputed Buttinger's contention and argued that the portrait was based on an unnamed friend, there was a paucity of evidence to support Hellman's assertion. The issue became caught up in a feud between Hellman, who had been closely allied with the communists, and the anti-Stalinist New York intellectual Mary McCarthy, who accused Hellman of being a pathological liar. "Every word she writes is a lie," McCarthy opined, "including 'and' and 'the'."

GA: Yes, pre-collective bargaining. We were trying to build the chapters, and we did, and service teachers, which we did. We were doing all the right things, but again, our membership growth was slow and incremental. In February of 1959, a bitter winter, we saw that we weren't making much headway. Teachers had to work extra jobs, summer camps, afternoons, and evening schools—there were 18 evening schools. (Unfortunately, Mayor Bloomberg got rid of all of them.) There were some evening schools that actually gave a diploma for that school, but most of them allowed students to earn credits. If someone needed a couple of credits, they could accelerate their high school diploma.

LC: Or if they failed a class, they could make it up in the evening.

GA: Yes. It was actually economical because you could graduate someone faster. So the night schools were thriving, but were based on cheap labor, because even in 1959, teachers were only paid $12.50 a night. What did they have to do for that? Now a regular day school job, you teach five periods and then you have duties, and there's five periods. What did you have to do to earn another 12.50? Forget overtime, where you were paid time and a half. You had a separate job, with four teaching periods. It was blood money. Anyone who worked in night school, they needed to pay the rent. They needed to pay mortgage. They needed tuition for their kid's college. They were desperate. So at that time, on my own, I started to talk to people in the High School Teachers Association (HSTA). I found they had good politics, good values and so on.

GA: But the HSTA people were initially focused on the past. They thought that high school teachers had lost the differential that paid them 40% more than elementary school teachers in 1947. They hadn't really lost it. They just didn't get the 30% that the elementary school teachers received. But their situation was really bad. The high school teachers, more men than women at that time, were ready. You could see, they were ready. They were educated. Many of them were veterans who had fought in World War II or the Korean War. The kindling was there, but no one was striking the match. But finally two night school guys had a conversation. I was there. I didn't teach. I had other jobs, and I didn't teach night school at that time. But I was trying to organize. They were saying, "Look, we should do something." One was John Bailey, and his

name is on the UFT wall downstairs as a founder. I don't remember the name of the other person, but he looked at Bailey and says "What are we going to do? Even with the high school differential problem, what are we going to do? We should strike." But if they struck, they could lose their regular day jobs. So Bailey says "We should resign. If we resign, they can't say it's a violation of the Condon-Wadlin Act. That is key."

GA: He said, "Well, let's talk to some others." So he talked to other people who were there. Lots of people thought Roger Parente initiated the idea to use resignations to strike. But he comes in later. At this particular point, it was not Parente or Sam Hochberg (another high school teacher and HSTA leader who later becomes important). They were not there in the beginning. It was the rank and file high school teachers who started the initiative. We got people together, we had some secret meetings with John Bailey and others, and there was interest in the idea of mass resignation.

GA: But there was the problem of how to make an individual act—resignation—into collective action. "How are you going to start? Well, someone has to resign. But I don't want to resign if I don't know others will." What we did was to devise a sheet. It was long. At the top, it had some kind of verbiage, and then it had two columns, and one column said, "We intend to resign," and the other column said, "We resign." The whole idea was once enough people signed their intention, we would have a critical mass to resign. We held a couple of public meetings, at Washington Irving High School and elsewhere, and we were ready to go.

GA: That's when Roger Parente (you have to give him credit for this) endorsed, as an officer of the HSTA. A lot of people condemned it. "Hey, we're professionals. We don't strike." So you had contending views. But the people who had all the extra jobs, they won out. When the strike developed, some people in the Guild were not ready to support it. But Dave Selden, Al Shanker, Charlie Cogen and I said, "No. You don't scab. That's what it would be if we took their jobs. We have to support that strike, that mass resignation." So we did. We were out there on the picket line. Shanker had his Volkswagen bus that we used for a coffee truck. It was bitterly cold. But all the 18 evening

schools were involved, and for the most part, it was a huge success, because we had these signatures.

GA: To make it short, we won the strike. The pay went up from $12.50 a night to $24.50. Now of course, a lot of that paid for itself in the short run because the teachers didn't get paid for the time they were on strike, but it made the point. And over the long run, it was a big victory, to virtually double the pay. Out of the strike, a movement developed. When John Bailey and I were together on that cold picket line, we were saying, "When the time is right, we'll make our luck. You have to make your luck." And we started meeting quietly, secretly, at my apartment in the Queensview co-ops. We said, "Well, how do we move forward?" Because we still have the high school differential to deal with.

GA: I came across what I thought was a good idea. "Why not have another differential, call it the second differential, but have it open to all teachers?" You wouldn't have to be a high school teacher to be eligible for the second differential; it could be for a M.A. or the equivalent with course credits, so an elementary school teacher that met those requirements could also receive it. Many high school teachers would be eligible, because more of them had the M.A. degree or the course credits. But the High School Teacher Association insisted that there should be a differential for high school teachers only. It was that difference that we pounded on, saying, "No, we need a single salary schedule, but not one that discriminates against the elementary school teachers. Let elementary school teachers be eligible for the same differentials as high schools, so long as they had the same degrees or credits." That the agreement that was worked out, in secret at first, that would make unity with the high school teachers possible.

GA: Then we had the job of selling this agreement. The group that met in my apartment to plan this included Al Shanker, Dave Selden, Si Beagle, Alice Marsh (who was very important), and myself. I tell my daughter sometimes, "You were there at the beginning. There were two births at the same time, yours and a new organization, the UFT."

GA: When we presented this plan to the Executive Board, Jules Kolodny railed against it. "How could you do that in secret, such an important thing." Jules,

this is the **only way** we could do it. There were times like the Gordian knot of Greek mythology. Alexander the Great was there and they said that if you can untie the knot, you become the king. Alexander the Great didn't try to untangle it, he took out a sword and chopped it in half. To get the approval of the Executive Board of the Guild, we had to present them with a finished agreement: there was no other way. We know we went around normal procedure, but there was no other way.

GA: Someone like Abe Levine comes into the picture at this point. Abe is a great person. He's still with us as one of the founders like myself who are still alive. Abe was like a "one man" frontal assault.[27] "Give me what I have to do, and I'll do it," he would say, and he did some magnificent things. For example, a petition with tens of thousands of signatures to have the freedom to have a duty-free lunch. That was huge, especially for elementary school teachers, and that's Abe Levine. I talked to Abe at length about the idea of the second differential, and he was not an easy sell, but I said, "Abe, it will end up with everyone getting the same salary scale. It will just be in different sequences," and he went along with it. There's no question that if he opposed it, we would have been in serious trouble. There were still a lot of people who were not there with us. If Jules Kolodny was president, we wouldn't have been successful in starting the UFT. Nothing against Jules, but the normal way of doing things would be to just keep doing what we were already doing. To make your luck, to grab it when it comes along, you've got to do something different. Dave Selden, of course, he was with me from day one. Nothing good happened without Dave Selden.

LC: So, then you decide, also somewhat in secret, you had to plan to create unity between the High School Teachers Association (HSTA) and the Guild.

GA: Yes, but what happened was the HSTA president (he was my French teacher at Brooklyn Tech), Emil Tron, insisted that high school teachers should get more than the other teachers. That was their platform. We were able to beat

[27] Abe Levine passed away shortly after this interview, in July 2019. An oral history with him is part of this Shanker Institute collection.

them. They started signing up with the NEA, which hardly existed in New York City.[28]

GA: To get a good compromise, you have to be fair to everyone. So the Delegate Assembly of the Guild adopted the second differential for all teachers. But now who would the Guild merge with? We knew the Teacher's Guild was a legal entity and organizational entity, so we could vote to merge. The old guard of the HSTA would not agree to the second differential, so we could not merge with them, and we needed an organization to merge with. That's when we created the Committee for Action through Unity (CATU), as a vehicle for the militants in HSTA—Parente, Hochberg, and so on—to merge into a new organization. That's how the UFT was born. If you look at the minutes, the first order of business right after the merger was to prepare for a strike to win collective bargaining, and that was the strike of November 7, 1960. We struck one day before election day, when John F. Kennedy was elected President. Since we were still under the Condon-Wadlin Act, it was announced we were all fired on television, but of course they had to take that back.

LC: What was your role in that first strike?

GA: I was the head of high school teachers, but that was not the important thing. We knew the school chapters were crucial to any organizing, a point that was always essential to our "young Turks" group of Selden, Trachtenberg, Shanker and me. Now there were 900, almost 1000, schools in New York City. The new-born UFT had active, large chapters in only 11 out of 90 high schools, so

[28] In the late 1950s, the National Education Association (NEA) was a national professional organization of K-12 educators and teacher educators. It dated back to 1857 and had a Congressional charter. Although the NEA had very little presence in New York City at this time, it saw the American Federation of Teachers and its local unions as competitors, and was looking for opportunities to gain a foothold in the largest school district in the country. Initially, the NEA, as well as HSTA (which had merged with another high school group to form a secondary school association), opposed collective bargaining. But after the 1960 strike of the UFT forced that question and collective bargaining appeared inevitable, they changed their position to support, and assembled a coalition, the Teachers Bargaining Organization (TBO), to compete with the UFT. The NEA poured money into the TBO campaign, but it was matched by a contribution from AFL-CIO's Industrial Union Department, under the leadership of Walter Reuther, and a loan from the Amalgamated Bank, a labor bank owned by the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union. In the December 1961 election for teachers to decide who should be their collective bargaining agent, the young UFT won decisively, with more than twice the votes of the TBO, and the Teachers Union trailing in a distant third. In response to the UFT and AFT successfully winning collective bargaining elections across the country during the 1960s, the NEA increasingly transformed itself into a union.

we couldn't just rely on them. The Board of Education had a little red book, about an inch and a half thick, which listed every single public school building in New York City, together with their addresses. Before the strike, I used the information from that little red book to create an organizing tool for the strike, using the Delaney cards system that were used for keeping student attendance and grades in high school classes. That system was founded by a teacher at De Witt Clinton High School; it had 8½ by 11 sheets, with these pockets where you could slip in little cards, one for each student. It allowed you to keep track of hundreds of students, all in one book. Al and I, we found out where the little shop that Delaney used to make the cards was; it was right across the street from Washington Irving High School. So we went and saw Delaney, and we said, "Could you make cards that would fit our needs?" He said, "Yes, I can make whatever you want." We devised this Delaney system, which would take up one whole wall of our small headquarters, at 2 East 23rd Street. When you think about it, it's was like Windows in a primitive way. Each card would have the name of the school, the address, how many entrances and so on. On the back of it were the names of who would picket it. To cover as many schools as possible with pickets, people would often picket a school other than their own. The judgment of how many pickets you need to close the school, or make a dent in it, all of that was on this one card. We organized the slots by the districts for New York City public schools—District 1, District 2, all the way up to District 37 (the number of districts in 1960). For each district, I had the name of a district chairman. Today, people would know them as district representatives, but in those days, they were called district chairmen. They were not paid. We couldn't even pay their phone bills at first. We had that whole Delaney system set up before we even voted to strike. Our office, 2 East 23rd Street, closed at 11 o'clock at night, but what often happened, when I worked on this, was that I had to give the night guy five dollars to stay another hour, because we sent that late. There were no cell phones, so we had candy stores. A lot of candy stores or drug stores with phones, so we could stay in touch. We called this whole system the organizing network. I was the chair. People often don't understand how to win. Winning comes not just from fiery speeches. It comes from this nuts and bolts organizing, if you're dedicated enough to spend the time on it.

GA: Remember that among the 900-1000 schools, there were some where we didn't have a single member. With the merger, we had maybe 3,000 members

out of a total teacher workforce of 50,000. We knew that in a strike, our numbers would be concentrated in certain schools with strong chapters. We ended up with about 5600 teachers who went out on strike and walked the picket lines, and another 2000 who just called in and said, "I'm sick." I got these numbers from the *New York Times*. So, the total was about 7600 out of 50,000, but with concentrations. Without the concentrations, we would not have won.

LC: So in the initial 1060 strike, you're not able to pull out the whole city, but you pull out enough people that a pro-labor Democratic Mayor Wagner is compelled set up this committee to advise him on what to do, which everybody knows will support collective bargaining because it consists of three leading New York City labor leaders. After a year of maneuvering, there is finally an election in December 1961, with the UFT, a Teacher Bargaining Organization (a coalition of old line teacher organizations supported by the NEA) and the Teachers Union.

GA: We won the strike, and we had assurance from the mayor's three person committee— Harry Van Arsdale, who was the head of the New York City Central Labor Council, Jacob Potofsky, who was the president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and David Dubinsky who was president of the Garment Workers—that they would support collective bargaining. You could see that once we had their backing, that it would be hard not to give us collective bargaining. But it wasn't automatic. The Board of Education didn't want it to look like they were losing. Finally, the election was announced.

LC: You played this pivotal role in the 1960 strike for recognition, and then, once collective bargaining is won, you are elected as the first UFT Vice President for Academic High Schools, are you not? How did that decision get made?

GA: When the Guild merged with the Committee for Action for Unity, I was in both parts and became the first elected Vice President for Academic High Schools. Until 1962, we did not have a system of caucuses in the union.[29] One

[29] Caucuses are the equivalent of political parties in a union. During its existence, the Teachers Guild prohibited caucuses, blaming them for the factionalism that had beset the Teachers Union. In this, it was much like the Founders of the U.S. Constitution who thought that political parties should be avoided. But this was not a sustainable position, either in the American political system or in the union, as organized parties are an →

arose by 1962, or thereabouts. When we merged, there was an agreed slate of officers as part of the agreement and I was on that slate, given my role in the merger. I don't recall how the slate was developed exactly.

LC: So the caucus system emerged when some of the former HSTA leaders who had come into the UFT through the merger with CATU—specifically Roger Parente and Sam Hochberg. They went into the opposition, and ran against Cogen for president.

GA: As part of the merger agreement, Roger Parente and Sam Hochberg were officers of the new UFT. The agreement was that the officers would be two-thirds from the Guild and one-third from the CATU. Cogen was president and Hochberg, a math teacher from Bayside High School, was deputy president. Almost everyone who was alive at that time, if you said that Charlie Cogen was no longer president, would say that it should be Roger Parente. He was strong and confident, had a tremendous way of speaking, and people listened to him. He had been the HSTA Vice President, although he broke with it only when it was safe. He didn't break early, as a lot of people did at the time, but waited. He was careful. When he saw that the evening school strike was going to win, he and Hochberg joined in.

LC: Wasn't Cogen, who was older, preparing to transition to Parente as UFT president? But then Parente jumped the gun and forced the question by criticizing what Cogen had done with the contract.

GA: An interesting point. We didn't have anyone who was anti-union, but we had those, such as Hochberg, who was deputy president, who wanted the UFT to look more like a professional organization than a union. He didn't say he was against unions, but you could see that he was not pushing for a union identity. By contrast, people like Al and I, our vision was that we wanted the UFT to be part of a strong AFT and to be part of the newly merged AFL-CIO. Our scheme was that, once you have a strong union, you can take care of professional problems. We really were hogs about it. We got both. We wanted both and I think we got both.

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unavoidable and necessary part of a representative democracy of any size. Once collective bargaining was won, the union could not be selective in its membership, as the old Guild had been, but had to accept anyone in the bargaining unit who wanted to join. In that context, caucuses were inevitable.

LC: So Cogen wins that election, beating Parente, but when Cogen decided shortly thereafter to step down as head of the UFT and become president of the AFT. And Shanker is elected as UFT president.

GA: If you didn't know Al, especially in the beginning, his manner of speaking and his intelligence could be intimidating and might even scare some people. I'm wearing rimless glasses now. Al was one of the first to wear rimless glasses, and he looked like an international spy or something like that. It put some people off. I had to say, "Al, I'm your advisor. You've got to have different glasses." He said, "Like what?" It turned out Woody Allen at that time was wearing glasses with thick black rims, and so Al switched to them, and they became his characteristic trademark. After that, in his 1973 movie Sleeper, Woody Allen has a character who says Al got hold of a nuclear bomb and blew up the world. But they had the same glasses, thanks to me.

GA: In his time, Al was the best. He almost finished a Philosophy Ph.D. from Columbia. Everyone knew that he was a highly educated person—no one was more professional than Al—but he also understood organizing, and always put a priority on it. When the time came, I said, "Al has to be the person." The development of an opposition meant that we weren't a totally united organization, but actually it helped us in many ways because it kept people honest and motivated.

LC: Can you talk a bit about what the UFT attempted to accomplish in its first contract, George?

GA: A lot. In it, were improved salaries, of course. There was the recognition that all teachers could earn the extra second salary differential which we have already discussed. The grievance procedure, with arbitration, was crucial; it was necessary to make sure the contract would be followed, and that teachers would have "due process" if they were disciplined. Interestingly enough, rotation by seniority in teachers' programs was very important, because that's what you live with every day when you're teaching in a

classroom.[30] Time to prepare for classes was important, as were the duties you could be assigned as part of your regular workday and the duties that could only be assigned if you were relieved of some of your teaching load, such as supervising the student cafeteria during lunch periods, or paid, such as covering an absent teacher's class. We had a whole section on "per session" activities: how teachers would be selected, how they would be paid, and the role of seniority in that process.[31] There were regulations on sabbaticals: how long you needed to teach to be eligible for one, how they would be awarded, and so on. The general idea was to make sure supervisors couldn't play favorites and use patronage as the basis for making decisions and selecting teachers for different positions; rather, decisions had to be impartial, fair and regularized, so everyone knew what to expect. While we raised the issue of reducing class sizes in the first contract negotiations, it was not until the second contract, in 1963, that we won that demand.

GA: There were differences over the first contract. Ben Mazen, who had done so much important work in securing 'due process' for teachers over the years, objected to the inclusion of a "no strike" clause. Most people didn't even note it was in the contract, although it wasn't a secret. Mazen said "I'm not for this contract if it has a no strike clause, and I can't be a part of it." Mazen would run against Shanker for president on this basis, and we would lose him for a couple of years.

LC: A "no-strike" clause didn't seem like such a huge concession, given that strikes were already against the law. If you were prepared to engage in civil disobedience to go on strike, a clause in the contract would hardly stop you. I know in the private sector, it might be a big issue to have a no strike clause in

[30] A teacher's program is shorthand for the roster of classes she or he will teach. For an elementary school teacher, who generally teaches one class for the entire school day, it most often focuses on the grade that is taught, such as Kindergarten or the 4th grade. For a secondary school teacher, who generally teaches five different classes of 45 minutes, it often focuses on the subject and grade levels of those classes, such as 9th grade Global Studies or 12th grade AP American History. Programs can also specify classes for students with 'special needs' or English languages learners, and where classes are tracked by ability, the different levels. Rotation meant that a teacher could not be continually assigned the most difficult or the most sought after classes, but that teachers would take turns.

[31] Per session activities involve paid work above and beyond a teacher's normal duties, which takes place before or after the regular school day. Examples of per session work would be coaching an athletic team or a debate team and supervising a school newspaper or directing a school play.

the contract, because private sector strikes are not against the law. But this looks different.

GA: That's the exact logic we used: to strike you had to break the law with penalties of being fired under the Condon-Wadlin Act. Still there were many who were for that position, not enough to be the majority, but still many. It certainly didn't keep the UFT from striking a number of times in the following years. In the first contract, it just didn't bother most of us that there was a no strike clause, but it was a big issue at the time.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about the UFT's relationship with the civil rights movement, early 1960s, and something about the role Dick Parish played in that? Also what you yourself did?

GA: First of all, the UFT was on record over and over again as being "all in" for the civil rights movement… we supported the Montgomery bus boycott, the Freedom Rides, the lunch counter sit-ins, the Selma to Montgomery march, and so on. The UFT's organizing/strike network became deeply involved with the civil rights movement, because whatever was happening, we needed to raise funds to support it, and we would do so through the network. For example, during the Selma to Montgomery march, Martin Luther King had told us they needed station wagons for transport, big ones that could hold nine passengers, almost like today's vans. The network collected donations in the schools of over $10,000, enough money to buy 5 large station wagons, in a very short period of time.[32] I volunteered to take the station wagons down to Selma, but they said I was needed to keep raising more money, so Max Brimberg and a few others brought the station wagons down to Selma. The UFT also organized and sent buses to the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

GA: In 1964, the UFT voted to give Martin Luther King our highest award, the John Dewey award. I was honored to pick up Martin Luther King from the airport and drive him to the Sheraton hotel in midtown Manhattan, where he could rest up in a room. I'm very proud that the UFT gave this award: this was right before King received the Nobel Peace Prize. In those days, labor issues were

[32] In 2020 dollars, this would be slightly over $80,000.

often civil rights issues, and civil rights issues were labor issues. King died supporting striking sanitation workers.

LC: I want to ask you about the 1964 New York City school boycott for integrated schools, since it has been suggested by a few historians that the UFT was not supportive and did not help Bayard Rustin in organizing this effort.[33]

GA: The UFT Delegate Assembly voted to support the boycott; there was never any question about that, or our support for integrated schools. But there was a very contentious debate about whether we should go out on strike ourselves. I wish we had those debates on tape, because they were extraordinary. Those who didn't want to go on strike were afraid that teachers would be fired under the Condon-Wadlin Act, that not enough teachers would be willing to strike to have a successful strike that would make firings impossible. (The Taylor Law was not yet adopted.) When it looked like a motion to go on strike ourselves would not pass, I argued that at the very least we should have a position that we would support teachers who walked out as a part of the boycott. They could picket in front of the schools, just as if there were a strike. If the Board of Education attempted to discipline them for going out, or if they were arrested, we would defend them. It was a compromise which allowed the UFT to be supportive, and that's what we voted.

GA: Then we had to organize to help the boycott be successful. Bayard Rustin was the main organizer of this particular boycott, and Rachelle Horowitz was also centrally involved. I believe Sandy Feldman was involved as well.[34] Both

[33] This is the position taken by the Clarence Taylor in *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools*. pp. 137-138 and 188.

[34] Rachelle Horowitz and Sandy Feldman were part of a cadre of young Socialists who had been deeply involved in the civil rights movement, especially in supporting the organizing work of Bayard Rustin. Other important members of this group were Norman Hill, Tom Kahn and Michael Harrington. In 1964, Horowitz, Feldman, Hill, Kahn and Harrington were all part of Max Shachtman's political tendency within the Socialist Party, where he remained quite influential in semi-retirement. Horowitz and Feldman were part of a significant cohort of younger Socialists influenced by Shachtman, including Genie Kemble, who went on to play central roles in the UFT and AFT starting in the 1960s. Hill played a central role in the AFL-CIO's A. Philip Randolph Institute, and Kahn played a major role at the AFL-CIO, as speechwriter for and assistant to President George Meany and head of its international affairs work. (An overview of the cadre of young Socialists who were active in the civil rights movement, playfully nicknamed "The Bayard Rustin Marching and Chowder Society" by Harrington, can be found in Paul Le Blanc and Michael Yates, *A Freedom Budget for all Americans: Recapturing the Promise of the Civil* →

Rachelle and Sandy had helped Bayard when he organized the 1963 March on Washington, and the UFT had a very strong relationship with him because of our work for the civil rights movement. What was important about Bayard Rustin's role in the boycott was that he brought master organizing skills to it. Everyone was worried that it would be chaotic, people here but not there, and if you didn't have a picket the parents and students would come in and the boycott would be lost. I went down to meet with Bayard and Rachelle at Reverend Galamison's Brooklyn church, which was the headquarters of the boycott. Rachelle asked me to come because she knew of my role in organizing the UFT strikes. This was shortly before the day of the boycott, and there were still real holes in the plan. No one slept that night because we were behind. I said "I'll use the UFT organizing/strike network. I'll help take care of the holes." I hadn't exactly been authorized by the Delegate Assembly to do that, because nothing had been said about using the union's organizing/strike network, but (laughing) it's beyond seven years and I can't get arrested or impeached or anything, so I'll admit it now. And Al was definitely supportive of helping out wherever we could.

GA: Do you know what an addressograph was in those days? It allowed you to print out addresses and other information. I used one to print out the cards for each school from my organizing/strike network, with all of the information about the school, and put them in the same system of pockets we had been using for the UFT strikes for the boycott. Bayard understood how useful this could be to organize hundreds of schools. We had a system in place fast, and we figured out how to make it work. We did it in a way that instead of chaos, we could ensure that there would be so many pickets at all of the target schools. That boycott, in terms of sheer numbers, was effective.

LC: Can you talk a little bit about Dick Parish, who plays an important role in the union's civil rights work? [35]

Rights Movement in the Struggle for Economic Justice Today. Tom Kahn's civil rights work is covered in depth in Rachelle Horowitz's account of his life, "Tom Kahn and the Fight for Democracy," which can be read here; Harrington's civil rights work is covered in detail in Maurice Isserman's *The Other American: The Life of Michael Harrington*.

[35] A protégé of A. Philip Randolph, Layle Lane, and the African-American socialist and trade unionist Frank Crosswaith, Richard 'Dick' Parrish first played a significant role in the civil rights movement as part of the →

GA: Dick Parish was a very good speaker, eloquent but low key; he wasn't a screamer. His work with A. Philip Randolph, the great civil rights and trade union leader, went back years. Parrish was the head of what was called in those days the Negro Labor Committee, which brought together African-American unionists in New York City, and the UFT backed that work. His first office was up on 125th Street in Harlem with A. Philip Randolph's office. The first time I ever met A. Philip Randolph was at a meeting of the Negro Labor Committee. Parrish was the leader of our civil rights work, first in the Guild and then in the UFT. When the 1963 March on Washington was organized, he was involved, and he led the UFT's participation.

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first March on Washington movement in 1941. When Randolph organized the March to press the Franklin Roosevelt administration for action against race discrimination in defense industries and the armed forces, Parrish was a student in City College, where he headed up the Socialist group and was president of the Federation of Colored College Students; from this position, he organized students into the first March on Washington movement. (In an oral history, Bayard Rustin states that while he was in the Young Communist League and a student at City College, he and Parrish would clash, but by the time of the March on Washington movement, Rustin had left the Communist Party and he and Parrish were working together in support of it. Both Parrish and Rustin were critical of Randolph's decision to call of the march in return from a promise by President Franklin Roosevelt to end racial employment discrimination in defense industries.)

In 1949, Parrish became a New York City school teacher and a member of the Guild. He would become an officer of the Guild and then a Vice President of the AFT, as Layle Lane groomed him to continue her civil rights work in the national union. Under Parrish's leadership, the work of Lane that ultimately led to the expulsion of segregated Southern locals from the AFT was completed. Parrish led the AFT and UFT participation in the organization and staffing of the first "freedom schools" in Virginia's Prince Edward County, opened in 1963 to teach African-American students after local segregationists closed all of the public schools, replacing them with whites only private segregationist academies in resistance to the Brown v. Board of Education desegregation mandate. He also led AFT and UFT participation in the planning and organization of the better known "freedom schools" of Mississippi Freedom Summer in 1964. In a summer that saw the Ku Klux Klan murders of Freedom Summer civil rights workers James Chaney, Andrew Goodman and Micky Schwerner, Parrish fearlessly travelled Mississippi's backroads in his station wagon with New York license plates to support UFT and AFT teachers working in the Freedom Schools.

In addition to his role in the Negro Labor Committee mentioned by Altomare, Parrish was involved in a national organization of African-American unionists founded by A. Philip Randolph, the Negro American Labor Council, which was pivotal in the organization of the 1963 March on Washington. Parrish also initiated the first organization of African-American teachers in New York City public schools, the Community Teachers Association.

In the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville strikes, Parrish initially supported the UFT's defense of "due process," but thought a strike was not the way to vindicate it. He became increasingly worried about the alienation of the UFT and the African-American community, which was fraying his relationships with African-Americans in the community and in other unions. He eventually decided to publicly oppose the UFT. It turned out to be a decision with painful personal consequences, as he found himself on the opposite side of the issue from his old mentors A. Philip Randolph and Layle Lane, his collaborator Bayard Rustin, and his own protégé Ponsie Hillman, who succeeded him as UFT Assistant Treasurer. It marked the effective end of Parrish's career in teacher unionism. Parrish's view of the '68 strikes can be found in an essay he wrote, "The New York City Teacher Strikes." (*Labor Today*. Vol. VIII, No. 3. May 1969.)

GA: We did all the things Parrish asked us to do, and he had us supporting every aspect of the civil rights movement. Dick epitomized the noble life of someone who was involved in labor movement and the civil rights movement and was for civil liberties. He was involved, not just in the civil rights movement, but also in the Civil Liberties Union. And he was respected and loved by everyone, because organizationally he did work—he just didn't occupy offices. And he was one of the first AFT vice presidents from the UFT.

GA: But differences developed over the course of the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville strikes. Dick was opposed. He did not scab—that's number one in any strike. He argued his position, but he didn't call people names, or call anyone a bigot, like so many did. So he was to be given full credit for that. I had told him, "Dick, you had your say in the UFT executive board when we voted to have the strike, we had an honest vote, and the majority voted to strike. You're not scabbing, and you don't have to publicly oppose the strike." I almost begged him not to. He said, "Well, I'm not going to teach." And I said, "No interviews?" And he didn't give an answer. Then he started giving interviews, saying he was opposed to the strike. Not as a proselytizer, but when the media asked him…

LC: He was in a tough spot being an African American leader of the union, right? The media was going to come to him and ask him questions.

GA: Yeah. At the point he had to make a decision, he should have taken advice I gave him, and just said "no comment." I didn't think he needed to go public with his opposition. I said to him, "You can keep your honor; no one is saying you have to be in the forefront of the strike. And as a supporter of civil liberties and civil rights, you understand the importance of due process more than anybody." And he was just hoping that it would be over, but it went on for so long, you know. So he finally came out in opposition to the strike.

LC: It strikes me that for Parrish, this is a really tragic development that shatters his life's work.

GA: Yes, it was.

LC: All of the people he'd been so close to— A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, Layle Lane, and Ponsie Hillman—were on the opposite side of the barricades from him. Randolph and Rustin worked to remain on friendly terms with him after 1968. They wrote him condolence letters when his mother died, but clearly they had chosen a different path.

LC: Let's talk about the 1968 Ocean Hill-Brownsville strikes and what was at stake.

GA: The UFT had voted to strike in 1968 because the due process rights of union activist teachers in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district were being violated, and the union would soon be in deep trouble if it couldn't defend its activists from arbitrary discipline and firing.[36] Most people don't know that, before the strikes, the UFT was very supportive of the decentralization experiment in Ocean Hill-Brownsville.[37] There was a tripartite arrangement with the Board of Education, the parents and the community people and the teachers all participating in the experiment. The Ford Foundation, which was then run by (President) McGeorge Bundy and (Program Officer for Ocean Hill Brownsville experiment) Mario Fantini, was providing financial support, so it was a passive partner.

GA: I can't prove my own theory of what went wrong, but I can explain it. I believe that what happened was that there was a successful coalition for change

[36] The teachers targeted by the Ocean Hill Brownsville district for dismissal had been union leaders and activists in its 1967 strike. After that strike and without any hearings, the district sent them a notice that read "The governing board of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville Demonstration School District has voted to end your employment in the schools of the District. This action was taken on the recommendation of the Personnel Committee. This termination of employment is to take effect immediately." A retired African-American judge, Francis Rivers, who was hired by the Board of Education to review the district's dismissals found that ex post facto charges that the teachers were incompetent and/or racially prejudiced were not credible. The UFT believed that this initial group was a test case, with the objective of creating a precedent that would allow the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board (and the rest of the New York City Board of Education) to establish 'at will' employment in which they could dismiss any teacher for any reason. If the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board was successful, the UFT believed, many more firings would follow; Rev. C. Herbert Oliver, head of the board, had explicitly spoken of targeting hundreds of teachers in the district.

[37] Al Shanker appointed Sandy Feldman, then a young UFT staffer with experience in the civil rights movement as a Bayard Rustin protégé, as the union's liaison to the community control districts. For Feldman's account of the evolution of that work and how it ended in the '68 strikes, see Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, editors, *Voices of Freedom*. (Chapter 26: Ocean Hill-Brownsville, 1967-68.) Feldman would later become President of the UFT and then the AFT.

emerging, with the civil rights movement and labor working together. McGeorge Bundy represented the corporate elite; he had been National Security Advisor to President Kennedy and a strong supporter of the Vietnam War. The corporate elite were fine with minor changes, around the edges, as long as they were still in control. But when a coalition for major economic change was developing, when you have the labor movement involved—and this is what was happening—they were no longer supportive. I think that's why they generated antagonism between the community and the union.[38]

GA: Mayor Lindsay, a Republican from the wealthy Upper East Side neighborhood of Yorkville, also played a negative role, combining hostility to labor and unions with what he saw as support for African-Americans. Between Lindsay's anti-labor's bias and the Ford Foundation itself, they really broke up the experiment and splintered the coalition. If Lindsay had wanted to, he could've worked with the Board of Education and the union, and we could have found a way through the conflict. The UFT was not against decentralization; it was against violating the due process rights of teachers.

LC: I think that the role of the corporate elite is an important issue here, and to get to the core of the issue, I want to go back a little bit, and talk about the 1967 strike first and the importance of UFT's demands for the More Effective Schools (MES) program in that strike. What was the MES program? How did it come into being?

GA: In a series of contract negotiations after we won collective bargaining in 1960, we were trying to figure out what we could do to break new ground, to further racial integration and to improve schools in communities with a lot of poverty. For example, lower class size would be important, but it cost money. If you put one fewer student in a class that would be nice, but as Al used to say often, "one fewer student, how much would that do?" We needed a more thorough program to have a solution. On class size, we needed real reductions, such as 22 rather than 35 students in a high school class. And much more. Sometimes we would despair about making progress.

[38] Karen Ferguson's *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism* investigates the role of the Ford Foundation in the 1968 Ocean Hill Brownsville strikes.

GA: Si Beagle was very instrumental in developing a comprehensive program. He was the real founder of MES, and he led an effort through the AFT to make it into a national model.[39] Al, myself, other vice presidents and officers: we all said, "Why don't we have models?" So with Si in the lead, we developed a MES model. We wanted to show what could be done if you invested real resources, so we started with just 10 demonstration schools. In these schools, we reduced class sizes to 22 students in grades 3 to 6, and even lower in earlier grades. We had team teaching, with three teachers for two classes. We had pre-K before it was widespread. We brought in more guidance counselors, social workers, psychologists, attendance teachers, and speech improvement teachers. We had after-school tutoring. We had community relations staff and money to support the development of parent organization and involvement in the school. The Board of Education agreed to this, it was part of our contract, and the teachers and parents were involved. It was our little educational nirvana.

GA: And it was working. One other thing was very important. How can you have racial integration, if white parents take their students out of schools?[40] We invited teachers in MES schools to enroll their own kids, pointing to all the

[39] Together with Layle Lane and Principal Leonard Covello (a member of the Guild and a Socialist), Si Beagle had been a central figure and organizer in East Harlem's Benjamin Franklin High School, the first real 'community school' in New York City. Franklin HS incorporated the insights and methods of the settlement house movements, found in Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago and Lillian Wald's Henry Street Settlement on New York City's Lower East Side: it made the school into the center of the community. It made itself into a vehicle for its students and their families to become an active force for change in the community: it published an East Harlem community newspaper, fought for better housing and the improvement of slum conditions, ran voter registration campaigns and during the Great Depression, opened little community centers in unused storefronts. It provided students and their families with social services and adult education they could not find elsewhere. Franklin HS pioneered anti-racist education in New York City public schools. Beagle's approach was to take the lessons of Benjamin Franklin High School and incorporate as many as possible into the MES program. As noted above, Beagle was a socialist, originally part of the Lovestoneite group. (On Benjamin Franklin High School, see Michael Johanek and John Puckett, *Leonard Covello and the Making of Benjamin Franklin High School: Education As If Citizenship Mattered*.)

[40] By the early 1960s, 'white flight' was proving to be a real obstacle to racial integration in cities both northern, such as New York, and southern, such as Atlanta. MES operated off the premise, understood well by its socialist advocates within the UFT leadership, that to racially integrate schools one needed to address the interplay between race and class in education by creating good schools that parents of all races and classes would want to send their children. If students were racially integrated in struggling schools that had been denied their share of resources, parents with financial means (which given the racial inequalities of the American political economy, were predominantly white) would look for a better alternative for their children. Racial integration under those conditions was a temporary and Pyrrhic victory. The deep economic inequalities that is at the center of institutional racism in the U.S. needed to be addressed to achieve racial integration. For a case study of the 'white flight' phenomenon, see Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism*.

schools could provide. And the teachers were then even more invested in the schools. Today, we talk about community schools: MES was the original community school model. Once it was established, we pushed for MES schools. One of the central issues in the 1967 strike was expanding the number of MES schools to 40.

LC: Looking at the historical record, it seems that MES was particularly important to the socialists in the UFT leadership, people like yourself, Dick Parrish, Dave Selden, Si Beagle and Shanker himself, who sent his son to a MES pre-school.

GA: Yes. No question.

LC: The 1967 negotiations were difficult. There were the usual issues, such as salary increases and reductions in class sizes. But MES became an issue of contention between the Board of Education and the UFT because the Board saw it as an UFT program, and they thought that its growth meant that they would be losing their management prerogatives. It cost a lot of money to implement, especially if it was significantly expanded to the sixty schools the UFT was proposing, and that's money they couldn't spend elsewhere. Predominantly white, middle class neighborhoods who historically received the lion's share of education resources were unhappy with the more equitable distribution that MES was bringing. The Board decided to dig in its heels and a strike seemed unavoidable.

GA: In 1967, the Taylor Law was new, and we didn't know at that time if its penalties for striking would be fully enforced. The penalties for striking under the old Condon-Wadlin law had been so severe they proved unenforceable. The Taylor Law penalties were more reasonable by comparison. You didn't have to fire the teachers, you could just fine them two days pay for every day they were on strike. The strike network was in place; it was doing its work, tightening up everything. We used what we used for the evening school strike, with the two columns teachers would sign announcing their intention to resign. Al Shanker was president of the UFT. How I convinced him, I don't know. He was a little skeptical, because it was dangerous, you know.

GA: Then on the day before the strike, the Board of Education said, when you hand in the resignations, when you go on strike, we will hand to the federal

government the names of over five thousand young teachers who were exempt from the draft because they were teaching. That would make them eligible to be drafted. And I remember we huddled together, and we decided, we can't give them the names, but we have to do something. So we said we'll put them in a vault where they can't be accessed. But word still got around. The Board of Education was going to give names to the draft board.

GA: The '67 strike was much longer than our earlier strikes—fourteen days in total—because the Board and City did not want to give in on More Effective Schools. John Lindsay was the mayor at that time. I remember sleeping on the floor of Gracie Mansion, because no one wanted to say we're giving up on the negotiations. But we didn't care for the fact that Lindsay's people always acted as if they were upper class, aristocrats entitled to rule over us. And this might not be important for history, I don't know, but I know that as one of the officers, it was something that we didn't like at all.

LC: They looked down on you?

GA: There was a deputy mayor named Robert Sweet. We were at Gracie Mansion, sitting around the table like this, with Lindsay and Sweet. And Lindsay said, "You shouldn't be here. You're not thinking of the kids." And so on. They were fighting us over expanding More Effective Schools for the poorest kids, and he's telling us we don't are about the kids. Al had a red birthmark on his face, but after this lecturing went on for a while his face was so red you couldn't see the spot. So Al had had enough, he was getting ready to leave, and he said we are leaving because we are getting nowhere. In the middle of this, Sweet says, "How dare you raise your voice in the House of the Mayor." He used that phrase, I'll never forget it, "the House of the Mayor," like Lindsay owned the city. It was really a class war. So we got up and left.

GA: We were on strike for fourteen days in '67, but by the eighth day, we had the costly items such as salary taken care of. It was a decent raise. On class size, I don't think we had much movement. We did something for the elementary schools, extra prep periods that they didn't originally have. But MES and class sizes were the obstacles to getting to a contract. And MES did not put one

extra penny in our pockets. But it was important to us, so we kept on striking.[41]

LC: So one of the things that happened in the '67 strike, which set the stage for the '68 strike, is that schools throughout the rest of the city were shut down, but not in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, where the local board insisted on keeping them open. Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin are all public supporters of the strike and of the expansion of the MES program. In a telegram of support for the 1967 strike meant for publication, King wrote "I enthusiastically endorse the efforts of the teachers of NYC to improve their living and working conditions, and the quality of the education they dispense." But when Shanker goes to the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board in 1967 and asks for their support, explaining how important MES is for schools with high concentrations of poverty, the response is negative. As soon as Shanker leaves, District Administrator Rhody McCoy tells the board that he will quit if they support the strike. And then during the 1967 strike, you have Black Power activists like CORE's Floyd McKissick and SNCC's H. Rap Brown calling for strike breaking.[42]

[41] In *United They Teach* (p. 150), Philip Taft states that Altomare, Richard Parrish and John O'Neill opposed the 1967 contract. In email after this interview, Altomare denied that claim, and said that all that he opposed was the failure of the 1967 contract to make progress on the reduction of class size.

[42] By the latter half of the 1960s, the leadership of two civil rights organizations that had been in the forefront of the non-violent direct action campaigns of the 1950s and early 1960s – James Farmer and Norm Hill in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and Julian Bond, John Lewis and Bob Moses in the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) – had either left or been forced out, to be replaced by Black Power advocates such as Floyd McKissick and H. Rap Brown.

Antagonism toward the UFT was particularly intense from 'Black Power' separatists in Brooklyn CORE, most notably Sonny Carson (Mwlina Imiri Abubadika). Carson's own book, *The Education of Sonny Carson*, provides an account of his and Brooklyn CORE's role in the 1967 and 1968 strikes that is probably more revealing than he intended. Among the passages is his recounting of an incident where Shanker came to a community meeting at the request of Brooklyn CORE and Carson; when it was clear that no genuine dialogue would take place, Shanker got up to leave but was prevented from leaving the room against his will. The incident caused "a lot of laughter," Carson wrote, "from people who observed this great big honky union chief standing there, blotchy with apparent fright." (p. 146.)

In 1974, Carson and seven confederates were arrested and charged with kidnapping, attempted murder and murder in a vigilante shooting of two men who had stolen money and rare African lamps from a hotel owned by a friend of Carson. One of the men died and the other was left for dead but survived and named his assailants. Carson's defense was that he had told his seven co-defendants to effectuate a "citizen's arrest," not to shoot the two men. Carson was acquitted of murder and attempted murder, but found guilty of kidnapping, and sentenced to seven years in prison. He served 15 months.

LC: There was more going on there than just developments in New York City education politics. The divisions over the '67 strike between King, Randolph and Rustin, on the one side, and McCoy, McKissick and Brown, on the other side, reflected a growing rift in the African-American freedom movement. It is generally understood that the emerging Black Power current with which McCoy, McKissick and Brown identified was critical of the civil rights movement's commitment to non-violent direct action and its goal of racial integration, which were, of course, advocated by King, Randolph and Rustin. In its stead Black Power spokespersons advocated the use of violent tactics and Black nationalism, even separatism. What is perhaps less well understood is that this Black Power posture is accompanied by a retreat from addressing the class dimension of the African-American freedom struggle, both in terms of taking on the economic issues of jobs, housing, health care, etc. and in finding one's primary allies in the working class, particularly among organized labor. In very short order, CORE's McKissick goes from strike breaking in the '67 strike to signing onto (President Richard) Nixon's "black capitalism" agenda and supporting his re-election in 1972. The contrast with King is particularly instructive, as King was organizing an interracial 'Poor Peoples' March and supported the strike of Memphis sanitation workers where he was assassinated in 1968.

LC: As this class dimension of the African-American freedom struggle is lost by Black Power advocates, they come to see the city's teachers as enemies, and in an 'enemy of my enemies' logic, the city's elite—especially Mayor Lindsay and the Ford Foundation—as the closest they have to allies. In what was surely music to the ears of the power elite, one Black Power supporter of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board would write to the Ford Foundation that it was schools—and not the harmful impact of poverty and institutional racism, or even the school district bureaucracy—that was "the primary cause of poverty" in New York City.[43] It is impossible to read those words today without seeing a remarkable foreshadowing of the rhetoric of business model "education reformers" like Michelle Rhee and Joel Klein. When Black Power supporters of Ocean Hill-Brownsville are offered 'community control' in return for breaking with the UFT and not supporting MES schools, they jump at the bargain. So

[43] As quoted in Karen Ferguson, *Top-Down*. p. 128.

there are bad omens that appear for the first time in the '67 strike. Did these developments catch the UFT by surprise? Was it something you hadn't seen coming?

GA: Not completely, but to some degree. When you think of it, of all the unions in the labor movement, none had done more for the civil rights cause than the UFT and AFT. We were the first to expel segregated locals, and at a real cost in members and income. We were the only education organization that had filed an amicus brief in Brown v. Board of Education. We had organized the freedom schools for Prince Edward County. And so on. We had the support of the preeminent civil rights leaders because of our support for the civil rights movement. They supported the '67 strike. But that wasn't enough.

LC: It's important to understand what happened in the '67 strike because it leads directly into the '68 strikes. The teachers that were dismissed by the Ocean Hill Brownsville board—the central issue of the '68 strikes as far as the UFT is concerned—were targeted precisely because they were identified as UFT leaders and activists in the '67 strike, and when the board opted to strike break, they resisted. The union had no choice but to defend the due process rights of teachers under attack for union activism: it is an existential issue for the UFT.

GA: Absolutely. And that's why I emphasize that at the start of the experimental district in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, the union was supportive. We were working closely with the parents and even the Ford Foundation. Al Shanker assigned Sandy Feldman, who had been a CORE activist, arrested in freedom rides and did civil disobedience on the Triborough Bridge in a protest against ghetto conditions in New York City, to work with the district because we wanted it to succeed. We were for jobs and freedom, just like in the demands of the 1963 March on Washington. We were for community cooperation, community partnership, meaningful voice for parents… but it was turned into something else.[44]

[44] In July 1967, at the same time that the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board withdrew its request to have the district's schools participate in the More Effective Schools program, it announced its intention to hire Herman Ferguson as one of five new principals in the district. The board chose to go forward with Ferguson's name despite the fact →

LC: So, for the union the '68 strike, was the issue that you couldn't' dismiss a teacher or you couldn't discipline them in punitive ways, just because they we're active in the union? Dismissal and discipline should require due process; there must be a defensible, job-related reason that can be demonstrated in a fair, impartial hearing. And that's obviously a fundamental issue for any union. If management gets away with firing union activists without due process, then in very short order, you will have no union left. But how do you communicate that issue to the public? When the public hears" due process," whether it's from the American Civil Liberties Union or whatever, it's generally a concept that many people have some difficulty seeing as particularly important. Remember all the trouble that (Democratic Party nominee Michael) Dukakis got into in the 1988 Presidential debates—because he couldn't really explain why due process was important, right, when he was asked a question about what he would do if his wife was raped and murdered?

GA: Right.

LC: So unions and their members understood the importance of due process and traditional union allies in the civil rights movement, like Randolph and Rustin, understood it too. But the question is: upon reflection, was that really the right issue to lead with in making the case to the public? Here you have the Ocean Hill-Brownsville folks talking about children and their education, about children of color that are not getting a fair shake. Even if that's disingenuous on their part, doesn't it allow them to seize a certain moral high ground?

GA: That's a real dilemma, one that doesn't have a solution a lot of times. But it's a dilemma that can be dealt with. Most of the leaders in the civil rights movement—not all, but most such as the NAACP—appreciated the fact that

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that he had just been accused of membership in the clandestine Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and indicted for participation in a conspiracy to murder mainstream civil rights leaders Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and Whitney Young of the Urban League – charges for which Ferguson would eventually be found guilty. (When Ferguson was arrested, the police had found a small arms cache in his house: ten rifles, a machine gun, three carbines and four knives.) Dolores Torres, a member of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville board, defended the board's insistence on making Ferguson a principal: "He is not afraid of changes from the old methods of teaching, and he's the person to keep teachers in line." The combination of these two events was too much for the teachers that had been involved in the organizing project to create the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district: they withdrew their support from the project, and UFT ended its participation.

labor supported them. Not all of labor—unfortunately, we had building trades unions that even as late as the 1960s used father-son apprenticeships to keep Blacks out of their unions—but most of labor supported civil rights. Most of the civil rights organizations knew that, and they knew due process for workers was important.

GA: Solidarity was key: if we stuck together, labor and civil rights, if we didn't fight each other, we both could achieve more. It's obvious as an idea, but it is not so easy in practice. That's why it's important to understand the role of the Ford Foundation in the '68 strike. If teachers and the community were fighting each other, they couldn't challenge the real power in society. We needed solidarity.

GA: Some people looked at the '68 strike as an opportunity to be racial bigots. Fortunately, that was a small number. Most of the time we were able to focus on due process.

LC: So the '68 strikes are the most controversial moments in UFT history because they such an impact—on the union, in the community, on Black-Jewish relationships, on New York City politics. One could say that the UFT ultimately won the strikes, but at a huge cost. I have been doing a number of oral histories of people who were involved, in one way or another, in the '68 strike, and I have found that many people relate that they had a growing unease as the strikes went on—there's the first strike, the second strike, the third strike, and it seems like the strikes were spinning out of control. The issue of due process was being overtaken by ethnic divisions between Jews and African-Americans.

LC: I did an oral history with Genie Kemble, who held various staff positions in the UFT, AFT and AFL-CIO; she was my predecessor as executive director of the Shanker Institute. In 1968, she was writing for the UFT newspaper and married to Jervis Anderson, who was quite close to Bayard Rustin. She told me that Bayard, Jervis and she all had an increasingly bad feeling about the trajectory of the '68 strikes. I think it's fair to say that Bayard paid a very heavy price for his support of the UFT in '68. He's the person who convinced Shanker that he had to end the third strike, and Al listened to him where he might ignore others, precisely because he had been so loyal at such a cost. I

am interested in your view of what happened as the strikes went on, as people were hurling accusations back and forth of racism and anti-Semitism, and the city was caught up in turmoil. And I mean, what was your thinking as the strike developed?

GA: My own opinion before the strikes—and I discussed this with Sandy Feldman at the time—was that should we could take a softer, less confrontational approach, and give it another chance rather than going out on strike. Al listened, but he was dead set against that approach. I thought we could use pressure on elected officials, public meetings, and so on. That was in the summer, maybe July, of '67. But once the decision was made to strike, I was behind it, and I was running the network part of it. We had in the vicinity of 85-90% participation in that strike.

LC: It may have been the best turnout of any strike.

GA: Yes, I think so. There were people who opposed us, like Bella Abzug—she became our enemy for life.[45] She would go around forcing schools open, and then, because the custodians were for us, they would put a chain on the doors after she left. With that intensity of opposition, if you wanted to make sure that we had enough power to win, or at least have a draw on the issue, then you had to have Al's position on the strikes.

LC: One last question on the '68 strikes. They led to a number of broken friendships and relationships within the UFT. Dick Parish, John O'Neal, Maurice Bérubé: there was a group of UFT leaders, a small number but in leading positions, who left because they couldn't agree with what the union's stance was on the strike. What are your own views on what happened?

GA: We can talk about John O'Neill. John O'Neil was part of everything that led up to the '68 strike, particularly the issues that had developed in IS 201 in

[45] Bella Abzug was a lawyer from Manhattan's West Side who has been active in feminist, peace and left wing causes, including organizations close to the Communist Party. She opposed the '68 strikes. Shortly after the strikes, in 1970, she successfully challenged the incumbent Democratic Congressman for the Upper West Side of Manhattan. Abzug held that seat in Congress for the next six years. She lost a four person primary for Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate in 1976, and never held elected office again, running unsuccessfully for Mayor in 1977 and for Congress in 1978 and 1986.

Harlem.[46] He had helped lead the staff of that school when they rebelled against the Board of Education, which tried to replace a white principal with an African-American in response to pressure from some parents. His position then was the opposite of what it was on Ocean Hill-Brownsville. I don't want to castigate anyone, but he was someone who was rigid in his political orthodoxy. I am hard on him because he was always the first one who wanted to go on strike, but when it came to '68, he did a 180 degree turn around. John O'Neill was not a tragedy; he was a good guy, but he went beyond his abilities. Dick Parrish was a tragedy.

LC: Another issue that was emerging toward the end of the 1960s was the Vietnam War. After 1964, the opposition to the war was growing across the country generally, and it was certainly growing among teachers. In 1967, Martin Luther King came out in opposition to the war. Shanker took what to my mind is a hard line in insisting that neither the UFT nor the AFT could take a position against the war—and he holds to that position even when it was not to his political advantage, when he was giving his opposition inside the union an issue, as most teachers thought the war was wrong. Why did Al take that stance when it was causing him political problems inside the union? And how did you feel about the war and the union's position on it?

GA: I had my share of disagreements with Al, but the Vietnam War was the only instance where I absolutely opposed him, openly and actively. For me—I don't want to sound corny—but for me, it was a matter of life and death. I really saw it that way. I was really surprised at Al's position, because while we were

[46] As a result of the '68 strikes, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district has become synonymous with New York City's community control experiment in most observers' minds. But it was only one of three demonstration districts in that experiment: the other two were the 'Two Bridges' district on Manhattan's Lower East Side and the IS 201 district in East Harlem, which consisted of IS 201 and its three 'feeder' elementary schools. By 1968, IS 201 had had a brief but troubled history. The school building had been constructed in the early 1960s near the Triborough Bridge in the vain hope of attracting white students from Queens and the Bronx. In 1966, a controversy developed when a group of African-American and Puerto Rican parents demanded that the school's white principal, Stanley Lisser, be replaced with a person of color. Upon request, Lisser announced his resignation, and the Board of Education appointed an African-American Assistant Principal in the school, Beryl Banfield, as his replacement. But the entire staff, including African-American teachers and Banfield herself, rebelled against the process, forcing the Board of Education to retain Lisser as principal. The UFT, with then Vice President for Intermediate and Junior High Schools John O'Neill as point person, played a major role in supporting the staff of the school. This controversy had led to the inclusion of IS 201 in the community control experiment. In 1968, O'Neill became an opponent of the strikes, publishing an essay, "The Rise and Fall of the UFT," critical of the UFT and Shanker. (in Annette Rubinstein, editor. *Schools Against Children: The Case for Community Control* .)

at Camp Hillcroft and later, Al and I had had a lifetime of discussions about war and peace, and he and I seemed closer in our thinking then.[47] We even had some children from Vietnam, although they called it Indochina then, at the camp. I had been observing the build-up to the war since President Kennedy sent advisors, and by the mid-60s, I saw that it had become, bit by bit, a full-scale war. We sent in 50,000 troops, then another 100,000 troops, and then the soldiers started coming back in body bags. Those dead soldiers were just like the students in your classes.

GA: I was against the war. Geopolitical interests do not require this kind of sacrifice. But Al kept saying that we had to worry about the labor people—he didn't use the word socialist—that American unions and (AFL-CIO President George) Meany had been supporting Vietnam. "How can we leave them after we got them into this situation?" he would say.[48] I don't know anybody else who talked about this aspect of Al's views on Vietnam, but I know because I was in a sleeping bag next to Al at Camp Hillcroft and we talked about it. I understand that point of view. You got people into this situation where their lives are at risk. What's going to happen to them? So what do we do about it?

GA: Once Al became UFT President and then AFT President, everyone knew that Meany was for the war, and Al was for Meany. So Al wouldn't come out against the war. It sounds harsh, and people make all sorts of accusations against him. I never accused him of anything. I listened to Al, because I'm saying to myself I'm not smarter than Al. He knows geopolitics, but I know geopolitics, too, and it is not adding up for me. The French left Vietnam and

[47] In fact, Shanker's views on the Vietnam war did become more 'hawkish' over time, reflecting a turn in that direction by the Max Shachtman circle of the Socialist Party to which he was close, as Eric Chenoweth's definitive study on Shanker's international politics relates. (Eric Chenoweth, Democracy's Champion. pp. 26-28.)

[48] In the 1950s, when Altomare and Shanker first discussed the Vietnam War, Shanker would have been influenced by discussions on the anti-Stalinist left. After World War II, the leadership of the Vietnamese Trotskyists had been methodically assassinated by the Stalinists leading the Vietnamese Communist Party; among American Trotskyists, Socialists and pacifists, there were deep concerns about how their Vietnamese comrades would fare under the rule of Ho Chi Minh and the Vietnamese Communist Party. Shanker would most likely have been aware of these concerns, as they were widely discussed on the anti-Stalinist left after New York intellectual Dwight MacDonald wrote about the assassinations in his journal *Politics* in 1947.

In the 1960s, as Shanker assumed leadership roles in the UFT, AFT and AFL-CIO, he would become involved in work with international union federations, such as the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions, with which American unions were affiliated. In this capacity, he would meet and work with representatives of the largest independent Vietnamese labor union, the Vietnamese Confederation of Labor (CVT).

Indochina. They knew that this was a colonial situation they could not win. The same was true of the United States. You could send in more troops, you could do this and that, but you couldn't win.

LC: So how did Al respond to your open opposition to him?

GA: He didn't use the domino theory per se, but in a way he did, because he focused on the threat of communism.[49] Al travelled a lot, and on international issues, he sided with the socialists. He was a socialist internationally.[50] I think he was attached to individuals he knew in Vietnam. So I would be hearing these international arguments, but for me, it came down to life and death. We had gotten ourselves into a war we couldn't win, people were dying and we needed to get out. When everything was said and done, Al was wrong about the Vietnam War.

GA: By 1967, Al and I were really on opposite sides on the question of the war. There was a labor assembly for peace conference in Chicago, and I attended it.[51] If I remember correctly, at that time my position was that we should be neutral on the war, rather than support it, which was Al's position at that point. I don't know if it was actually stated that we were supporting the war, but in effect we were, especially as we backed Meany. So I am at this labor assembly for peace, and I had to keep saying "Look I'm here to oppose this war, not to interfere in what happens internally in unions and not for

[49] The domino theory was the dominant paradigm for justifying the Vietnam war. It held that if Vietnam were to come under communist control, other nations would follow subsequently, like falling dominoes, until the United States itself was under threat of communist takeover.

[50] The organizations on the left to which Shanker was close – the Socialist Party and after 1972, Social Democrats, USA – were affiliated with the Socialist International (SI), an international organization of labor, social democratic and socialist parties such as the British Labour Party, the German Social Democratic Party and the Swedish Social Democratic Party. There would have been a variety of views within the parties of the SI on the Vietnam War, some tending to be supportive and more clearly opposed, especially as the war lingered on. During his lifetime, Shanker felt particular kinship with the Israeli member party of the SI, the Labor Party

[51] The conference was called the National Labor Leadership Assembly for Peace. It was organized by four well-known progressive officers of AFL-CIO unions: Frank Rosenblum of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, Emil Mazey of the United Automobile Workers, Pat Gorman of the Amalgamated Meat Cutters and Butcher Workmen and Al Hartung of the International Woodworkers. Martin Luther King and Senator Eugene McCarthy, who would run against President Lyndon Johnson in 1968 on a peace platform, spoke at the conference.

communism, which I oppose." I was put on a panel to speak and someone asked, "What's your position on where labor should stand on the Vietnam War?" I said, "I want to change the AFL-CIO from supporting war, one way or the other, to neutrality." Neutrality would have been a winnable step forward. "No, that's a cop out," they responded. And then who gets up in the middle of that debate, but Harry Bridges, who was the leader of the West Coast longshoremen's union.[52] Bridges was an out and out communist, but a hero to the labor movement because of his militant leadership in the San Francisco General Strike (of 1934). Bridges gets to the floor and says, "I want you to listen to this young man, because it's progress when you move in a positive direction toward your views." So here I am being supported by Harry Bridges, the biggest communist around. He talked to me after the panel. I told him that "I'm not a communist, but I care about people dying for a lost cause." History showed me right. Everyone can be wrong, and Al was wrong on the Vietnam War.

LC: The issue of the war in Vietnam intersects with what was happening at the AFT, where Dave Selden succeeded Charlie Cogen as president in 1968. Dave had stuck by the UFT through the thick and thin of the '68 Ocean Hill-Brownsville strikes, but he wanted to take much more of an anti-war position than Al did. And that brings him into conflict with AFL-CIO President George Meany, a "hawk" who was intent on maintaining labor's support for the war. In 1972, Meany famously refused the AFL-CIO endorsement to (Democratic Presidential candidate George) McGovern, running on a peace platform, even though McGovern was opposing Richard Nixon, an old foe of unions. Meanwhile Selden engineered an AFT endorsement of McGovern.

LC: It was traditional in the AFL-CIO that presidents of the different unions, especially the larger and more important unions, were elected to the AFL-CIO

[52] Harry Bridges was one of the founders and longtime leader of the West Coast based International Longshore and Warehouse Union (ILWU). At one point the influential West Director of the CIO, Bridges' authority diminished as the power of the Communist Party within the CIO waned after World War II. In 1950, the ILWU was one of the unions expelled from the CIO for being under communist control; it was one of a handful in that group that survived as a union. Australian born, Bridges fought years of Congressional investigations and legal battles against efforts to deport him on the grounds first, that he was a member of the Communist Party, and then, that he had lied about his Communist Party membership on his naturalization papers applying for United States citizenship. Bridges won Supreme Court reprieves from lower court decisions against him in both instances.

Executive Council, but for the very first time, Meany deliberately passed over Selden and had Shanker elected to the Council. This move appeared to be choreographed as part of a process that ended with Al running against Dave for AFT President at the 1974 AFT convention and defeating him. For twelve years, Shanker served as president of both the UFT and AFT, before moving on to the AFT presidency alone in 1986. There are different accounts of this falling out between Selden and Shanker. Some people say that they thought that there were genuine issues about how effective Selden was as an AFT president. Others think it was all about political differences that had developed between the two former close colleagues. What is your read on this question?

GA: First of all, Dave Selden was my hero, because he did so much and continued to do so much starting with the organizing of the UFT. I didn't want to go to the 1974 Chicago convention where Shanker ran against Selden. If you go back to after we won collective bargaining in New York City, we had Charlie Cogen running for AFT President; it was 1964 and I was the campaign chairman of the Progressive Caucus at that time. At that point we said, "Dave, we have to go with Charlie Cogen," because we had the votes for Charlie, and we didn't win that election by much either—there was a different system of voting at that point. Dave Selden probably could have been AFT president at that time, if he insisted on it, but he agreed that our best chance was with Charlie. He put to the side his own ambitions to do what was best for the union. It was only four years later, in 1968, when Charlie retired and Dave stepped up and ran for AFT President.

GA: So what drove Al and Dave apart? I don't think the splitter issue was the Vietnam War. Rather, the splitter issue was that Dave wanted to have a merger with the NEA as fast as possible. Al was much more concerned about what the merged organization would look like. Dave thought that our views would win out in a merged organization, because we had a better vision for teacher unionism, so we shouldn't be too worried about the details of the organization. Al wasn't prepared to take it on faith that everything would work out.

LC: So you think the relationship to NEA was more important than the Vietnam War? In 1972, the Socialist Party was splitting over the war and related issues.

Shanker was close to the majority, which became Social Democrats USA (SDUSA), and socialists close to him in the UFT go with SDUSA. But Selden lined up with the minority group— Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee (DSOC)—which was organized by Michael Harrington. Was that playing a role in the split between Shanker and Selden?

GA: It's hard to judge. It depends upon whom you would talk to, and what side you were on in those battles. A lot of people, both friends and foes, thought it was almost sure that when Meany retired as AFL-CIO President, Al Shanker would take his place. If you thought Al wanted that position, he would need to be AFT President and have a more hawkish stance. Some thought that Meany's passing over Selden to appoint Shanker to the AFT Executive Council was a sign that he wanted Shanker to succeed him. Who knows where they got their information from, or if they were just engaging in speculation. Knowing the labor movement and how the AFL-CIO votes, I knew it was far from automatic that Al would win an election to succeed Meany.

LC: After the 1974 loss, Selden retired from the AFT. But in his twilight years, the UFT honored him. Do you want to talk about how that happened?

GA: Dave's health was in decline and his faculties were slipping, so I kept on asking Sandy Feldman, who was the UFT president at the time, to give him an award. I said, "If you don't do it now, Sandy, you might not have another chance." So she agreed; it was one of the best things she ever did.

LC: Sandy did a lot of things as UFT president that were important. Honoring Selden was magnanimous. Sandy was also very important in terms of rebuilding relationships with the African-American community, so the UFT could heal some of the wounds opened up by the '68 strike.

GA: Absolutely. Yes. And Velma Hill, who played an important role in organizing the paraprofessionals into the UFT, also did a lot to help us get past the divisions of the '68 strike.[53]

[53] Starting in the mid-1960s and fueled by an influx of federal anti-poverty funds, New York City public schools had seen increasing numbers of paraprofessionals who worked as assistants to teachers in the classroom. These paraprofessionals were overwhelmingly women of color who came from the communities that these schools →

LC: Yes, organizing the paras after the '68 strike was no easy task. Velma took an incredible amount of abuse. If people still hold onto their grievances over the '68 strike after 50 years, you can imagine how high passions ran a year or two later.

LC: So 1975 is another pivotal turning point in the UFT, as New York City developed a fiscal crisis which became a threat to the public schools and to teachers, and to public services and working people more generally.[54] Do you want to discuss, from your point of view and from the union's point of view, how you saw the fiscal crisis develop and how the union responded?

GA: Before 1975, I don't know anyone who was saying seriously that the city was going to go broke. There may have been some quiet talk, but it was not at all in the public consciousness. Suddenly, there are headlines that there were problems, but it still wasn't a question of being broke. It was more a question of whether the city was borrowing too much money. So at the start of the crisis, we were wondering whether this was a real crisis or was it a case of manipulation.

LC: A manufactured crisis?

GA: I still think that some manipulation was possible because I question whether the Ford Foundation and others in the New York City elite wanted to do certain things, but they weren't ready to pay for it. I would love to see someone look at that issue closely, because what I see in '75 is that when the

served. Against opposition in the UFT ranks from teachers who wanted the union to be organized on a craft basis, Shanker argued that it was important to organize paraprofessionals into the UFT, to increase their compensation and to provide a career ladder that would allow them to become teachers. In the campaign to organize the paraprofessionals, the UFT faced stiff competition from AFSCME's District Council 37, which thought that the para-professionals belonged in their ranks and was not above appealing to the grievances of the '68 strikes to accomplish that objective. (DC 37 had organized school cafeteria workers, school crossing guards and school aides who were not classroom-based.) But the UFT won the representation election, in no small part due to the fierce campaigning of Velma Hill. Hill was a civil rights movement veteran (she had met her husband Norman Hill in CORE), and was part of the Max Shachtman circle in the Socialist Party.

[54] Kim Phillips-Fein's analysis, *Fear City: New York's Fiscal Crisis and the Rise of Austerity Politics*, is the best analysis of the dynamics of the 1975 fiscal crisis.

city went broke, some people were hurt and other people benefitted—and it wasn't working people who benefitted.

GA: Felix Rohatyn, the financier who owned so much real estate and played such an important role in the '75 crisis, he was one of the people. The mayor, Abe Beame, was not up to the challenge and he had no real power. The Emergency Financial Control Board (EFCB) was set up by the (New York State) legislature, and they started making demands about slashing spending, cutting public services and city jobs, freezing salaries, raising bus and subway fares, closing hospitals, fire stations and libraries, and charging tuition for CUNY. The EFCB was negative for us until they put some of our people on it. So we're asking, "Why was this happening?" Maybe it's too predictable, but I thought it was a manufactured situation. If not manufactured, a tolerated situation by those who owned bonds.

LC: So as schools were set to open in the fall of 1975, the Board of Education announces massive cuts to the schools, with thousands of layoffs, just as a new contract was being negotiated. Could you talk about how the UFT responded, and the '75 strike?

GA: September 1975 was very difficult, because the city didn't have the money. We had negotiated a good contract under the circumstances, but when people were getting ready to go back to school and vote on the contract, they were given class rosters. And they had 60 and 75 students listed in their classes. That was on paper, and when school actually started after the strike, the class sizes were smaller—larger than in previous years because of the large number of layoffs, but still not 60 to 75. It had nothing to do with the contract we had negotiated, but teachers were fired up over it. The UFT officers, the executive board members, and district representatives were in schools, explaining how the cuts were not related to the contract, but were because of the city's finances. Members were concerned that they would actually get the salary increase in the contract—which was 9%, if I remember correctly. Given the city's finances, they were concerned about their pensions.

GA: Al had originally been opposed to going on strike; he didn't think that we had the leverage we needed to win a strike and get a better contract or reduce

the cuts and layoffs. But he also didn't want to speak against striking, because the situation in the schools was so bad. I said, "Al, I listened to you and took notes, and I want to use them in the debate." He said, "Use them, but I can't go out there and say that they should accept this." He said, "You do it."

GA: So I did it. Others did it. Some of the district representatives understood the situation and were helping. Others were not. But the Delegate Assembly was not in the mood to hear it. "We gotta do something," they said, and that something was to go on strike. So we did.

GA: The strike lasted five days. As far as the strike itself, we had the strike committee, the same strike network. We had people in the schools. The strike was a success in terms of closing down the schools. I don't remember the exact percentages of those on strike, but we closed the schools. But we couldn't make progress in negotiations, given the city's fiscal state. We were not able to roll back most of the cuts and layoffs. Shanker was right that we didn't have the leverage.

GA: The end of the strike wasn't the end of our problems. The EFCB was withholding approval of the contract. The banks wouldn't loan the city money. The federal government was refusing to provide aid to the city—there was the famous headline "Ford to City: DROP DEAD." The state government wasn't much better. There was a real danger that New York City would go bankrupt, and if it did, all bets were off. Our contract, our salaries, our pensions: they all could be unilaterally changed, if the city went bankrupt.

GA: One big issue for teachers (and others who were part of the city pension systems) was the security of their pensions. People were saying, "We have to keep our money. No one's going to take it from us." I was an UFT vice president then, and the leadership looked at the situation. "What is the best way to save pensions?" It became clear that there was no choice. Ironically, we decided that the best way was to give the city money by buying municipal bonds with funds from our pensions, which we did.[55]

[55] The bonds were from the Municipal Assistance Corporation (MAC), which had been established for the express purpose of getting the city through the fiscal crisis.

GA: The union couldn't vote directly on using our pension funds for this purpose, but we could recommend to the pension trustees that they do so. It wasn't an easy sell, but we were able to convince the trustees. At the stroke of midnight, right before the city would default, we invested $150 million from the pension system in those bonds.[56] When a member would say that we're giving away our money to a sinking ship, our answer—Al's answer, my answer, and so on—was, "We will have no ship, sinking or otherwise, if we don't lend the money. Where are you going to get your pension check if the city goes bankrupt?"

GA: And I'll never forget the night we made the decision to buy the city bonds. We were up almost all night at the UFT headquarters, maybe a couple of hours of sleep at best. So the next morning we were all still there, and these two guys from the Second Avenue Deli come in with this big square platter, with a decoration that says, "Thank you, from New York City." And what was it? Chopped liver. A big tray of chopped liver with crackers and wine and so on.

GA: As it turned out, the purchase of the city bonds was a good investment for the pension fund. And we did get our contract approved and our 9% raise; the raise was postponed, but when we got it, it was with interest. Jeanette DiLorenzo, the UFT treasurer, made sure everyone got everything we were due.

GA: So I would say, overall, when you look back, we were ultimately successful, given the conditions we faced. We stopped the bankruptcy, which would have been disastrous for us. We got back all of the pension money invested in the city bonds. And we got the 9% raise that the contract called for.

LC: One last question. As one of your successors as UFT vice president for academic high schools, I'm aware of the fact that high schools were always the stronghold of the opposition inside the UFT. Why that is the case we could probably discuss at some length, but after serving for over 20 years as UFT academic high school vice president, in 1985 you lost your re-election. So I

[56] In 2020 dollars, this would be a little more than $720 million. Mayor Beame was literally prepared for the city to declare bankruptcy, absent this investment by the New York City Teachers Retirement System in city bonds.

wanted to give you a chance to talk about what you think happened and what your feelings were about it.

GA: Well, you don't have to look too deep to see why I lost the election, why the Unity Caucus lost seats in the election.[57] Not just the academic high school vice president, but the high school seats and middle school seats on the UFT executive board. We lost about 13 seats in all. Why did that happen? It happened because the teachers always expected salary raises. There was a proposed citywide settlement which was 5%, 5% for two years, if I remember correctly.[58] That was acceptable to the other unions. If you needed cover, there it was, and that was in January.[59] It was offered. Al had me in his office, and he said, "What should we do? I'd like to have a really big amount." I know it was his last contract. He didn't say it, but I'm saying it, that he wanted to leave with a big contract for his legacy.

GA: I said, "Al, let's take the 5% because it's January." He said, "Well, I don't think we should. I'd like a bigger raise." And I'll never forget, I said, "Money in the pocket is better than money in the air." And he said, "Yeah, but we could do better. Our members expect more than just what the municipal labor committee gets."

[57] Unity is the caucus led by Shanker and his successors as UFT President. Altomare was running as the Unity candidate for academic high school vice president. There have also been a number of opposition caucuses over the course of the UFT's 60 year history, but Unity has been a constant in the union's internal political life.

[58] After the 1975 fiscal crisis, New York City amended its labor law and instituted a practice known as "pattern bargaining." In the context of NYC public sector collective bargaining, this practice meant that in cycles of contracts the wage settlement in the first agreement set a ceiling that would be imposed on subsequent contracts with other unions. To minimize wage increases, the city would then choose to first negotiate a settlement with a weaker or lesser militant union prepared to settle for a smaller amount. For close to fifty years, efforts by municipal unions to undo this policy have been unsuccessful.

In an early attempt to counter this 'divide and conquer' stratagem, a number of municipal unions—including the UFT—attempted to engage in "coalition bargaining" over wages with the City. But the uniformed services—firefighters, sanitation workers and especially the police—believed that the nature of their work gave them more leverage over the city than other unions, and they insisted on 'going it alone.' Moreover, there were enough differences among the unions willing to enter into coalition bargaining, from political feuds to different labor market contexts, that there was conflict within the coalition. In the end, these efforts were not successful. Today, only bargaining over health care is done by all of the municipal unions in concert, through the Municipal Labor Committee, as all municipal workers have the same City health care insurance. Shanker's 1985 decision to reject a wage settlement that other municipal unions were prepared to accept, which Altomare references here, was a sign that efforts at coalition bargaining had been abandoned.

[59] UFT elections are generally held later in the school year, in April or May.

GA: I knew the schools. There were, at that time, 100 big high schools, and I knew what they were thinking. I said, "Well, look. We'll do the best we can. But you don't have enough time to get you in all those schools," and he said, "We don't have to. I'll be in my office. You give me 10 to 15 chapter leaders at a time, and I'll talk to them." And I said, "Al, are you really going to be able to do that?" So, we went back and forth. Finally, he said, "Well, that's the way I'm going."

LC: And at this point, he was spending a lot of time at the AFT, because he was taking it from being a small organization to a major player in the education world.

GA: Yes. He was president of three organizations: one, the UFT; two, the AFT; and three, the International Federation of Free Teachers' Unions (IFFTU). I remember once, during that period of time, there was an important meeting in Texas at the same time there was a conference in Europe. He actually went to Europe, then travelled from the conference in Europe to Texas to make a big speech, and back again to Europe for the rest of the conference. Now how does he have time to go into schools? But he said, "I could talk to them 15 at a time." It didn't work out.

GA: He overestimated what he could do. I saw that we wouldn't be able to do it. But he wanted to gamble that he could get a better contract. He was more of a gambler than most people thought, and he lost more often than most people understood. He won a lot, but there were losses. So we did the best we could, and despite it all, we only lost that election by 73 votes. 73 votes.

GA: Then after we lost, he wanted to appeal the loss. I said, "You never win a do-over election after an appeal when you lose." But we appealed, and we lost the re-election. That was a minor mistake, but the big mistake was for Shanker to think he could do those three jobs and get away with it. He had a family, too.

LC: To both Sandy (Feldman)'s and Randi (Weingarten)'s credit, when they made the transition from UFT president to AFT president, they were both clear from the very beginning: "it is not a doable job to be president of both

organizations for any length of time," and they prepared the UFT for succession. The job of the AFT president is, precisely because of the way Shanker fashioned it, a national spokesperson for teachers and teacher unions. It's not sitting in Washington DC; it is being constantly on the road, speaking and talking with local leaders and members.

LC: Talking about Selden and Shanker, and all of the others we have discussed, it's interesting how soon people forget that teacher unions were built by socialists.

GA: Absolutely. The communists were good at promoting themselves and recruiting people, but the socialists were not. When I was in City College, the communists were good at doing what they could to get me to join them. And I would just say, "When you get rid of Stalin, we can talk." A very simple answer, you know. I used to go from one alcove to another at City College, and some of it was just with music and art and stuff like that, but I'll tell you, the socialists were never good at recruiting, at least not with me. I never had a City College socialist say, "You want to join?"

GA: I actually did join the Socialist Party when someone was giving out cards, in someone's apartment in Manhattan. I forget who it was. Penn somebody? Where they had their meeting in someone's parlor, I tried to go to those meetings. Who was it?

LC: Penn Kemble?

GA: Was there a Pennington as well?

LC: There was an Arch Puddington, but Penn Kemble was a more important figure in the Socialist Party in the 1960s, and after 1972, in the Social Democrats USA, so it was more likely it was him.

LC: Thank you for this interview, George.