"THE STATE OF OUR UNION"

AN ADDRESS BY ALBERT SHANKER, PRESIDENT OF THE AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS, AFL-CIO, BEFORE THE SIXTY-THIRD ANNUAL CONVENTION OF SAN FRANCISCO, CALIFORNIA ON TUESDAY, JULY 3, 1979

I am privileged to speak to you, the delegates to this convention of the American Federation of Teachers, on the problems that face us and our programs for the future. I can think of no better point in the program for me to make those remarks than after the presentation which was just made. There is no question that we are going into a period that is very different and very new.

Where did we come from? For many years, a period of teacher dormancy and inactivity; and then in the sixties we had the great union growth, militancy, a commitment on the part of the Federal Government to the elimination of poverty and to providing equal educational opportunity, a period of hope and of optimism.
And then the seventies, when that optimism and growth came to a very rapid halt and when we all came to realize, as we never had before, that what happens to us as educational employees at schools is very related to what happens in the rest of our economy; and as we faced recession and unemployment and people not paying taxes, but instead being supported by them, we began to feel that squeeze on the schools and we began to see and feel a different attitude in negotiations.

And now we enter a period which adds to the problems of the last one because if in the seventies we had a kind of leveling off of the growth that we previously enjoyed, we will now begin, or have begun, a period of decline as it was defined in the presentation that you just saw.

There are fewer students and those who will be entering school in the next five years have already been born and can be counted and we know that there will be, at least for that period, few students.

We also have with us the problem of energy which, unfortunately, most people think is merely a problem of whether we are going to have to line up for gasoline and how long we will have to be on line and we may have to
suffer the discomfort of smaller cars and slightly cooler homes and offices.

That is not the problem at all. There is nothing that we consume that does not use energy -- food, clothing, buildings, and everything. As the price of energy goes up and as OPEC sits there and raises the price, what we are doing is saying that everything that we buy is going to be higher and higher and higher and more of that money of ours, real money, is going to leave the country or is going to go into more important forms of energy production in this country. What that means is that for the first time in 200-plus years in the United States of America we will experience a number of problems related to energy.

I do not yet know for how many years we will be faced with this. However, we will experience a number of years in which, each year, the American people will have a lower standard of living than they did the year before. No more every year better and better, more and more. No more of the optimistic psychology where you buy a house knowing that, in a few years, the payments will seem very small, or the credit-card mentality. And as people have to start living on less, they are going to have to start making choices. What do we give up? And there is going to be a long list.
What do we give up? And there is going to be a long list.
I don't mean anyone is going to sit down and make a list of what do I give up, but with or without a list in front of them, when you've got less you've got to decide what it is you are not going to have next year. And on that list, of course, will be automobiles, homes and vacations, clothes and food; on that list will also be education and parks and public services. When people start living on less and less, one of the things that they are going to turn to more and more is to say that we can maintain a good part of our standard of living if we just reduce taxes and get rid of some of these educational frills. They say why do these people need so much college education anyway? Why pay for kindergarten? There is no proof, they will say, that small size classes do anything. You know it all. We have had those arguments before as we were all getting richer and richer each year. Just imagine how these arguments will intensify as we are faced with the problem of doing with less.

Now, if the '70's was a period when we realized that we as teachers, workers in schools, had to be concerned with inflation, with unemployment, with interest rates—this is a period of time when we will more and more realize that what happens to us is not just solvable problems within the borders of our own country. What happens elsewhere affects us. Look at the effect of Iran. What happens elsewhere will have more and more of an impact on what happens to us in this country and, of course, in education as well. There
is no doubt that there will be more international involvement as a result of this crisis, and there is also no doubt that during this period when millions and millions of American people are saying how could this happen to us -- Iran, Afghanistan, and Mozambique -- when is this going to stop? There is no doubt that this will also be a period in which in spite of the fact that we have less and we have got to give up many things, it is going to be a period of some increases in military expenditures, and the big argument in SALT, if you notice, it is that the group that favors SALT says: Pass it. Adopt it and we will spend lots of money developing other types of weapons. The group that says defeat it says: Defeat it so we can continue building more of these. But that is the mood of the country at the present time.

Now, that is the setting and so we have already experienced the general attack on collective bargaining. More and more articles and books are coming out that say collective bargaining is an undemocratic thing because it means that elected public officials, the Board of Education, sits down with a union, usually behind closed doors, and makes decisions on how the money is spent, decisions on management, decisions on educational policy, decisions which should not be made in a room in which the public is not present. These attacks are leading more and more to proposals to either halt the movement in legislation for collective bargaining.
of proposals to amend the legislation that now exists to include many other parties in the collective bargaining process in a way that would make a process which is already extremely difficult, totally impossible.

Then we have the big fight coming up on tuition tax credits. The tuition tax credits, of course, is not a dead issue. It is not a live issue this year in the Congress, but next year it will be a major issue. Those who came very close to passing tuition tax credits through the Congress of the United States will be present as delegates at both the Republican and Democratic conventions next year. They will seek in those conventions to get party platforms favoring tuition tax credits and, furthermore, they will meet with every presidential candidate to threaten a loss of votes in the primaries unless there is a commitment on the part of the candidates to say that they will support tuition tax credits.
Had we not had the support of the Carter Administration and his strong statement that he would veto any such bill, had there been a president in the White House last year who was either neutral or in favor of tuition tax credits, the legislation would have passed. The coalition that we had would not have been able to do it alone. And so, one of the issues that we will have to follow very carefully next year is the conventions and the position of every single member of Congress who is running on this issue, because the other side is going to be asking questions of every single candidate.

And now, of course, we are faced with a voucher question.

I would like to spend a few minutes on the voucher question because it is going to be with us for a while, and there is no doubt that should vouchers become the accepted method of financing public education in America, that there will be no public education in America.

And I would go a step further: If we end up with schools that teach in other languages, that do not have certified teachers and can teach any ideology that anybody wants, and where their only purpose is to make
money because they are advertising on the radio and television and giving away goodies in order to get student customers, it is the end of more than public education in America, it is the end of America itself because if we don't have an educated population, we don't have a country.

Now, the people who talk about vouchers make it sound very, very nice. What a nice way of packaging it to call it "family choice."

Who is against family?
And who is against choice?

It is something like the slogan, "the right to work." You know, which does not give anyone a job, which gives you the right to work without the protection of a union, under substandard conditions.

And this of course gives you family choice.
What does it mean?

The kind of image which the supporters of vouchers try to conjure up in the minds of the public is to say: "Don't worry. There will always be a public school system, and there will be the public school teachers. What this does is just to give you a choice. You can take this voucher, and whenever you are unhappy, just go across the
street or down the block or down the road and go to some other school, and then if you don't like that one and it turns out that you really did like the public school and it was better, well, that is simple. Next year, just take your voucher and go right back to the public school."

It is, they could say, an experiment. What do we have to lose? Try it out. After all, if these private schools are better, we will find out soon enough and everybody will love them and they will stay there.

On the other hand, if all the terrible things that you tell us about these schools are true, they won't last very long.

Well, the trouble with that image and the trouble with that analogy is that there are several types of experiments. There are some experiments that are reversible and there are others that are not reversible. You experiment, you try a new type of food. You don't like it; you don't try that food again. You have lost nothing except that you didn't enjoy that meal. But if you experiment with drugs, it is not so easy to change your mind. You may very well be on a road where experiment has very well determined your
future. And similarly with vouchers. This is an experiment which is both destructive and irreversible.

Let's take a look at how vouchers would work. Let's take any big city or state. Take New York or Chicago, or take the state of California. Let's suppose that vouchers are enacted so every single parent gets a check, a voucher, not for $500, as under tuition tax credits, but for $2000 or $2500 for the full amount that is spent for public education in that particular community or that particular state.

And let us say -- and I will use New York City as an example -- let us say that only ten percent of the parents decide to take their students out of public schools. Well, with 900,000 students, that means that almost 100,000 students would be taken out of public schools. Now, 100,000 students would be taken out a time when a city, not just that city but all cities, are in great financial need.

Can we expect that the taxpayers of New York City would keep 950 schools open with fewer students in those schools? I doubt it very much.
And so, we could expect that ninety-five schools would be closed, even though the presentation we have just seen shows that that is not an easy thing to do.

If we close those ninety-five schools, can we expect that the public would say that those schools should sit there and wait for the children to return? Or would there be an effort to say: "Look, these buildings are worth millions of dollars, let's sell them."

I don't think there is any doubt as to what would happen. Ninety-five buildings, worth between two and four or five or six million dollars each or more, for the city to be sitting there waiting for students to return. No, they would be sold.

And because they would be sold, there would be no such schools for those students to return to in the future if they should ever make that decision.

And that would happen a second year if another five or ten percent left, and a third year if another group left.

This is not one of those experiments where you can justify it and change your mind. This is a decision which leads to a line of inevitable actions which ultimately lead to the closing of the public schools.
Now, who would buy those buildings?
Well then certainly would be easy customers after all, if 90,000 to 100,000 students leave the public schools, I don't know of any existing private or religious schools who could handle them. So the customers to buy those schools would be the brand new private voucher schools that are about to open.

They would undoubtedly also be customers for some of the textbooks and supplies which would now be in surplus. So what the voucher scheme really is --- a wholesale selling of public schools to the private sector. And there would be no opportunity for return.

Well that is what that is about.

Now I have talked about choice. And what I think I have just said is the choice will be gone very soon because the public schools will be closed. They will be sold. By the way the students are going to end up in the same schools. You know something, they are going to end up with the same teachers, because as teachers are dismissed in the public schools and start looking for jobs, by and large you are not going to -- there are some teachers out there, but you don't have a million or two or three million people out there waiting to become teachers -- by and large you will have the same schools with the same children with the same teachers with the same textbooks that will have been sold to the private sector. The only
thing that you will not have is the control, the democratic
control by the democratically elected representatives of
the people within our country. The whole thing will be
run by the same characters who ran nursing homes and things
like that.

That is what we are really doing. So the
choice will not be there.

Now the other word is "family." I suggest
to you that the purpose of public education in this country
is not to provide some little form of goodies for the
family. It is not a private good that we are doing to say
to Mr. and Mrs. Jones we are going to give you an education
for your child, now you go out and buy it in a supermarket.
Why do we spend public dollars to educate children in our
society? Because what happens to those children when they
grow up will not merely affect how much that child makes,
it is going to affect each and every one of us. How many
criminals will there be? How many drug addicts? How
many people who are capable of participating, of thinking,
of sharing decisions within a democracy?

We pay for it because the education of every
citizen is not a "good" for that one person alone. It is
a value to every single one of us within our society. If
we educate someone, we all reap the benefit. If someone
is not educated, we all pay the price over a period of time.
To turn this function over and say it is up to the parent, society will not determine what qualifications of a teacher are or what the curriculum is.

It is all right for the public to pay $2,500 a year for that segment of the population that wants a fascist education, let us say, or perhaps an education in terrorism, since there must be some very tiny part of the population that accepts that as a way of life. Well it is a very attractive proposal to some people, because as long as we have public schools and the public schools exhibit some shortcomings and some failures, then there will always be critics saying, look, we have to improve the schools, we have to improve what students are doing. And there is always pressure to get more for Title I, more for state aid to education, more for educating their children in one school system. They don't have a choice. They have to be there. And the only choice that we have as teachers and the citizens of our society have is that if we have a school system not doing well, we have to put more resources into it. And we have to improve that school system.

But now with vouchers that is not so.

Because when mother X or father Y complains that this school is no good, and my child didn't learn anything, the officials say: Well, you are the one who chose that school. Take your voucher to another one next
year. There is absolutely no pressure at all for the improvement of public education because the responsibility is now taken away from society as a whole, and the mother and father are told: You made the mistake. You don't like that brand. Go off and buy another and another and another. The responsibility is yours.

Well I want to say here, and I am sure I express the view of every person in this room, that as far as the American Federation of Teachers is concerned, this is a fight that we will take on, we will use every resource, and this is going to be the fight of the century.
Now, as we enter into this fight, you have seen some of the problems that we face. Decline in students also means there are fewer parents of the students. We are going from a situation where, in many communities, one time, sixty or seventy or eighty percent of the voters in a community had children in school, so they turned out and they voted. It was not easy even in those days.

But now with fewer and fewer parents who feel a direct stake in the schools, the proportion of the population that is directly concerned is declining very rapidly because at the same time that we have the decline in the number of students, we have the population living longer, and so the proportions are rapidly changing, and the forces of education within the country are suffering a very rapid decline in political power at the very time when we need more power because we are facing the greatest problems that we have ever faced.

Now what will this mean?

It means that unless we in education -- unless we can find others whom we can help because they need us and who in turn will help us, we will, in terms of numbers and in relative size, become smaller and weaker, and the problems will become more difficult and eventually
perhaps impossible to deal with.

So that leads me to an issue which I am
sure many of you have been discussing at this convention
and elsewhere: the organization of health care workers.
Some of our members are still puzzled, some are still
opposed to it: Why take an organization of teachers and
other school workers and bring in this other group that is
in a somewhat separate field?

Well, there are several reasons. One is that
the people in health care fields look at us and what we have
done for people in schools, and they look at their own
organizations, which have not been particularly effective,
and they are coming to us and saying: 'Look, we'd like
your help. You too are professionals, you know how to
organize, you have done something within a relatively short
period of time, you are a professional, success model as
a union. That is what we want. We don't think anybody
else will be able to organize us very well. We are coming
to you because you have something that you have done for
yourselves that you can do for us.'

Please help.

But there is another reason. And that is,
when we go out there to fight vouchers and tuition tax
credits and try to get support for public schools, people are going to ask: Well, how big? How many votes do you have? They are not going to ask: Are the people in your organization teachers or school secretaries or guidance counsellors or college professors or paraprofessionals? They are going to ask: How many votes do you have? And if they don't ask it, that is what they are going to be thinking, because I never knew a man who ran for public office who cared whether it was a teacher who voted for him or a brick-layer or a plumber or anybody else.

Now, we have been criticized by the National Education Association for taking in other groups of members. Well, I hope that the NEA continues with its present policy because, with a decline in student enrollment and a decline in the number of teachers, if the NEA continues its policy of teachers only, and if the AFT opens up its doors to other professionals that need our help, they will go down and down, and we will go up and up.
Well it is unfortunate that in this discussion I have to address myself to some problems of teacher rivalry with the NEA. It is unfortunate because what the AFT said many years ago, we can say today with more impact and more strength, that at a time when public education is under serious attack, it is a moral crime and sin for teachers not to be united in one organization within the labor movement to conduct all of these struggles.

(Applause.)

But let's take a look at what the big struggle is right now. At a time when education is declining in terms of numbers, the National Education Association has made it its top priority to separate education out from what is the biggest department in the government and to put it out all by itself so that in the years to come, each year it will have a smaller and smaller constituency. Instead of being in a large agency, which has a large constituency and will continue to have one, because in addition to administering education, it also administers Social Security and health care and welfare and so instead of choosing to be large and powerful and have the broadest powerful constituency, it has decided that the best thing is to go out there and stand alone in this period of decline.

I fail to understand the reasons for it. I
don't understand how they could have contributed money last year to two dozen members of Congress who voted to destroy public education in America by voting for tuition tax credits because they lost their commitment to vote for a separate Education Department. I can't understand how all of this effort for a separate Education Department wasn't used earlier to have these million and a half teachers lobby for labor law reform. If we had gotten that, we would have had a law which would have allowed workers in states where the machinery isn't working -- North Carolina, South Carolina, Texas, Mississippi, Alabama -- where instead of having to go only to northern industrial states to get some decent social programs and aid for education, the union movement would have been able to go down to those states and get elections and organize workers, and we would have had senators and congressmen in those states that we could have worked with which would have stood us in good stead for the next 50 or 100 years. And instead of putting an effort into that, the one single effort has been a separate Education Department.

\[\text{Why?}\]

Because it will add to the prestige of teachers You know what this is? This is really carrying on that old business of being a professional association and being perfectly willing to give up real power for a flower in your lapel on teacher recognition day.
(Applause.)

Well it has been a good year. It has been. Many of our cities that were on the verge of bankruptcy have moved one inch away from the verge of bankruptcy.

(Applause.)

And that is good news.

Many of our locals that have had to conduct long and painful strikes -- solid and militant and against the worst of odds -- were successful. And we won numerous collective bargaining elections this year. And I urge all of you to look at the Officers Report, which shows in a period when every school system is losing teachers, either by laying them off or by not replacing those who leave, for the organization to have grown somewhat around 20,000 at a time when people are leaving is really remarkable growth. I refer you, by the way, to that entire issue of Officers Reports which is a magnificent work that was done by Linda Chavez and her staff, and it is something I am sure all of you will be able to use all year.
We have had particular success in higher education. Not only did we stave off the raid against UUP in New York State, but we are very happy to welcome ASCUF, the entire state college system which left the NEA and has come into the AFT in the State of Pennsylvania.

Anyone who says that education doesn't really make you brighter, you can see that they are wrong, because we have more college people organized than the two rival organizations combined. That shows education does do something for you.

(Applause)

We had a successful year in legislation. You heard the Vice President. Yes, we had the cooperation of the Administration, but they would not have done it without us. The biggest increase in education since federal education came into being, and a magnificent opening in higher education, the largest increase in higher education since the enactment of the J.I. Bill of Rights. And we have had successful COPE operations throughout the country, which I am sure will continue because more and more we realize that what is bothering people is that there are, of course, things wrong in the schools. We are not doing things perfectly; We don't have the
resources.

Well, we have to come up with some new answer, and our professional programs and QuESTs have been outstanding, and of course our organizing. These buttons, "a million or more in '84" -- one delegate came up to me and he said: You know, I tried to figure out what that button means, "a million or more in '84." I spent a number of hours on it, "he said."

"Last night it just came to me. That is the finest and best salary program you have ever come up with."

(Laughter and applause)

I think that all of us at this convention, in our committees, in our caucuses, in the way in which we deliberated this morning, with a good deal of lack of debate on many issues -- some would decry that, and certainly there was the opportunity for debate but I think we all have a very good feeling. We are afraid of what is happening to the schools, the education, to our jobs, to the union, and we also know that we have something very good: we know that we are building an organization. We know that we are growing, and we know that we have great quality in our leadership throughout the country.
And so, we come here without some of the old need to fight each other and to engage in bitter controversy.

We come here more to share our thoughts and problems and to develop a renewed solidarity for the years to come.

I mentioned before that one of the areas of problem and interest and concern was the international area.

We have with us, sitting in this section, the largest group of teacher union delegates from around the world that we have ever had. First, I want to say, and we will be introducing them later in the convention, I want to extend to all of them and to the members of the executive committee of the International Federation of Free Teacher Unions our welcome and to tell you how happy we are that you could be with us.

(Applause)
First, of course, because of the feelings of camaraderie that we share, because we have the same problems. But also because there is a practical need for us to get together.

You may have read the summit results the other day that the major industrial nations of the world agreed that they would cut down the production of energy, by a certain date. They would go back to 1977 in terms of consumption of energy.

What does that mean in terms of jobs? What does that mean in terms of unemployment? What does that mean in terms of the availability of money for schools and for early childhood education and for lifelong learning?

What does it mean for the provision of decent health care?

That decision at that summit, if carried out, will have major impact on all of these.

And so we meet regularly with our colleagues from England and France and Germany and Belgium and The Netherlands, and I am sure I am going to leave something out, but the developed countries within the OECD, the Organization of Economic Cooperation Development, because they have got the same problems. And when we start talking about vouchers, the people from California have already been to England to try to sell it there. So we have been meeting to develop common strategies in these areas of concern.
Then, of course, there are many of our friends here from countries that are not yet industrial and not yet developed. And for them we provide assistance. Sometimes when an unfriendly government comes to power, we provide them with whatever protection we can. One of them here was in jail for awhile, and we did what we can do to get them out. I think it helped. He did get out of jail. Later you will meet him and he later was elected to the Congress of his country, but we provide whatever assistance we can.

Why should we do this? Is it merely an act of friendship?

Well just think, if there had been a teachers union in Iran a few years ago that we could have had a relationship with in terms of bringing them here and discussing what a real teachers union can do, and if our government had been able to pressure the Shah to not just develop the country, but to allow free trade unions, just think of the difference it would make in the world today if those teachers in Teheran had not marched down those streets as communist totalitarians on one hand and Moslem fanatics on the other, the world today would be changed. We expect to commit resources of the American Federation of Teachers to helping free teacher unions around the world so that eventually they can enjoy the same benefits that many of us do in the more developed countries.
And then when we can still be proud that in spite of the problems that we face, economically and politically, we can be proud that at a moment like this in history, when hundreds of thousands of refugees are being expelled on the basis of race and ethnicity, that the United States of America, that our labor movement, that the American Federation of Teachers, that we still stand for something, that we are not turning and saying we hardly have enough for ourselves, let them drown and let them die because they are not of us, and that we are opening our doors and that hundreds of thousands will be saved.

(Appraise.)

The problems that we face will be solved in our favor in one way only. We must increase our power. We increase our power by building our membership.

We will do everything we can to assist you and your locals and state federations. We hope that you will seek out every health care worker, every teacher, every person working in another professional field who is not already organized.

We hope that what we will be thinking of is not are those people teachers or non-teachers? You know if this union, the teachers of New York and California can help the teachers in Illinois who don't want to be put under
Social Security, if we can help each other from different places, if big locals can help small locals, and small locals can help big locals, I don't see that it is impossible for teachers to come to the assistance of health care workers and for health care workers to come to the assistance of teachers.

(Appause.)

That is the job we have. It will be won or lost by the numbers we organize and by our ability to have them act with solidarity, not only on the picket line, but also at the ballot box.

I want to thank you for the magnificent support which you have given me, not just last year but over the years and to pledge to you the continuation of my efforts to build this union.

Thank you.

(The delegates arose and applauded.)