LUNCHEON ADDRESS OF ALBERT SHANKER
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AT THE AFT'S CONFERENCE ON RACISM

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Thank you very much, Lorretta.

I'd like to start by thanking you and Barbara Van Blake and your committee for the fine job that you've done in organizing this conference. I regret that I was not able to be with you but I have spoken to quite a few people who have been here and I've heard only very good things. So I'm glad it's a fine conference and that I can spend a little bit of time with you.

To me, it's quite a tragedy that here we are in 1989 and no one can really get up and say, "Isn't it crazy to have a conference dealing with fighting racism?" All of us who've been around for some time, going back many years, in 1954 the AFT was the only organization in American education that went before the Supreme Court with civil rights groups to support the notion that school segregation should be declared unconstitutional. Within a few years after that, the AFT expelled all of its segregated locals with a very substantial loss of membership. Basically, it wiped us out in the South for a very, very long time. And we knew it wouldn't be easy, but I must say that with all the difficulties we knew we would be facing in those days, there was a kind of a sense of optimism. I don't think that anybody believed that it would take all of these years and that after all these years -- nobody in 1960, for instance, would have predicted that you could have a conference on racism in 1989 without it being some crazy

thing; that is, we all felt that, yes, the problems were big, they were immense, but we also felt that we were about to turn a very big corner and that that would happen rather quickly.

Well, I'm not saying all of that to say that there has not been any progress. That would be nonsense and it would be wrong. The laws that were in place in this country for so many years which legally enforced racism have been smashed and the big conflicts that are taking place now are really not efforts to reestablish that; they're important but they're largely skirmishes around the edges. You can tell in a society like ours, which is a commercial society based on markets and money, how far blacks and other minorities have come in this society when you look at TV commercials, newspaper ads and things like that. When you see that blacks within our society are for the first time being treated as a large part of the consuming public, that's a very important sign because one of the very early discussions during the time of the marches -- every civil rights leader at that time was saying, "All right, now we have the right to sit at the lunch counter, but how many will have the money to sit at the lunch counter?" The issues very quickly moved from issues of law to issues of economics.

The progress can be seen in terms of the number of minority mayors and congressmen and judges and school superintendents and school board members and local officials all across the country. So that at the same time we bemoan and deplore and feel miserable about the fact that it's still relevant to have a conference dealing with combatting racism, it would be wrong and foolish not

to celebrate and to realize the tremendous amount of progress that's been made.

But nevertheless there's that other side, those who feel that, well, we've made so much progress that that's enough, we can go slowly, everything's going to take care of itself, we no longer need to make special efforts. If we look at the problems that we have today, especially in terms of the underclass, what has happened to our big cities, I would say that there was a lot more of a hopeful attitude in the 1950s and 1960s in our cities than there is in many of our cities today, especially since so many have made it and have moved out, leaving behind a system which William Julius Wilson described so well both to our executive council and to our convention when he pointed out that even families who are down and out, if they're living nextdoor to other families where somebody is working, the family that is working can lend a helping hand and say, "Well, Johnny, maybe you can come and be the watchman in my place or maybe you can be the driver or maybe you can do something else." That is, in most communities there's some kind of a network of assistance that exists, whereas in some of our underclass areas today there is nobody around who's had a legitimate job for a long time, there's no helping hand, there are no role models into the full life of our society. And it's a problem that we have not experienced before and it's a problem that we really don't know how to handle.

Side by side with that problem of the underclass and what's happened to our cities is what's happened to many of our schools. I went before the Congress when we were fighting tuition tax

credits and argued against helping private school education on the basis of the ideal of what schools in the United States are supposed to be like. They're supposed to be places where people of all religions and all races and all classes, whatever the categories among people -- the rationale for public education and the basic argument against helping private education is the notion that the basis of our being able to live together as adults is started in our schools where children from all different kinds of families and homes and income strata are brought together. Well, very few of those schools that I just talked about as the ideal really exist in public schools any more. It's harder and harder to go before the Congress and say, "Protect this public school system where kids of all religions and races and economic groups go to school together." They don't, in so many places. There may very well be fewer such schools today than there were thirty, forty, fifty or sixty years ago.

It is not possible to say that there is less racial isolation in our schools today. And it's certainly not possible to say that there is less economic class separation in our schools today. So that's another one of the huge problems that we have.

But there are some terrific opportunities, and the opportunities are very, very unique. In the last five years, I have been going to I think at least one conference run by businessmen almost every other week. Earlier this week, I spoke to the National Alliance of Business. They had a big, 3-1/2-day conference here in Washington. The Committee for Economic Development, you've seen their reports. The Chamber of Commerce

has put out materials. There are now about fifteen of these groups nationally, and one of the top one or two or three or four items on the agenda of every one of these groups is the whole question of education for minorities especially. And with some of them, it's broader than that; it deals with starting before school to make sure that the children that go to school are really able to learn and are prepared to.

The opportunity doesn't come because people have all of a sudden become kind and gentle. They haven't listened to the President's slogan. It is not that they've all of a sudden read some book or seen some movie and seen the evil of their ways in the past. And it doesn't necessarily have anything to do with any changed racial feelings or attitudes. Maybe it does, or maybe it will over time, but I don't believe that it does at this moment. It comes out of simple necessity, and you saw that, I'm sure, in the session that you had on demographics. The fact that we are entering a period of great labor shortage and that most of the people who will be coming into the workforce in the years to come are not going to be white males, and there will be a larger and larger number of minorities -- and a large number of women, as well, many of whom have already come into the workforce in recent years.

This country is very interesting in that way. Yesterday we got passage of a child care bill. By the way, the House passed the version that we wanted, without the aid to religion, and now there will be a conference on that and I think we're going to come out all right. But when I refer to that, we once had pretty

extensive child care in this country. During World War II, we wanted women to go to work in war plants. So all of a sudden, all over the place we set up child care facilities. The minute the war was over, unfortunately we folded them up and that was it. But, in a way, it was understandable because most people after World War II thought we were going to go back to massive unemployment like we had during the Depression. After all, we had all those years when 25 percent of the people in the country were out of work. People thought that was about to happen again. So I think one thing they did was give the GI bill to veterans so that they wouldn't be looking for jobs. And then they dismantled the day care and child care facilities so the women would go back. It didn't quite work out that way. But when this country finds that there is a need, it does things differently. And the fact is that there is this great opportunity.

First of all, there is the support from the business community. You hear businessmen -- and I must say that with Brad Butler of the Committee for Economic Development, any of you who have heard him -- and many of you have, at the AFT convention or elsewhere -- will know that for Brad Butler, while he uses a lot of business arguments, he's a very committed person individually to the cause. He puts all these strong economic arguments into it so that he can convince other businessmen, but he's very passionately involved on the human aspects of this issue. But the fact is that for the first time in our history, we are really able to turn to black and Hispanic and other minority youngsters and say to them, "If you get the education, you can get a damn good

job, not because they love you and not because they've changed their views and not because everyone has lost all racist attitudes, but you can get it because they need you and they can't do without you."

That is a very unique time, indeed. And it is very important that that message go out to youngsters and their families. And here I want to spend a minute or two talking about the word "racism" and how it's been used in our society in the last twenty years or so.

If you go back, I guess the single report that used "racism" as a word and made it kind of a centerpiece was the Kerner(?) report, which, in the aftermath of the Watts riots and other violence in the mid-1960s, came out and said the basis of everything is racism. Well, in a very strong sense that's true. But putting the focus on racism, in a sense it did something that was very good and it did something that was very terrible at the very same time. What was good is that it outlined the fact that there indeed is racism within our society and it's a very potent force and it would be wrong to make believe that just because civil rights laws were passed that racism is gone and doesn't operate. That's the good part.

The bad part is that to constantly emphasize racism sends a message to minority youngsters saying, "No matter what you do, they've got it in for you; there's nothing you can do about it, so you might as well give up." Now, it's hard enough to get kids to work hard -- or even to get adults to work hard. I mean, work is something that we constantly have to figure out -- whether it's

getting them involved in the union, or getting kids involved in their work. When you give people excuses not to work hard, they take them. So the negative part of the emphasis on that is at the time we wanted to tell white society, "Look, you've got a lot of changes to make because there still is racism," it's difficult to send that message without at the same time sending a message to minority youngsters saying, "Gee, if our society is that racist that no matter what I do and no matter how hard I work and no matter what I achieve, the rules are such that there's nothing," then the immediate answer is: Well, why try?

During this particular period that we face -- and it's going to be a long one -- it is especially important -- I'm not saying that we should tell kids that racism is over and not there any more; we should tell them that in spite of the fact that racism still exists, they need you and you can make it and what you do and what you do with your education is going to make a difference. That is a very major change.

Now I'd like to deal with several issues that are at the forefront of the union's activity, and they're also at the heart of what I've been doing in the last couple of years and what I intend to keep doing for a while until we get these changes. I'd like to start by talking about the restructuring issue.

Whenever any changes are attempted, civil rights groups and minority groups naturally and properly ask the question: How's it going to affect us, and how is it going to affect our kids?" Because whatever one does in our society, race has been such an important issue in differentiating things that sometimes whenever

some new law is put into effect or some new system, whatever it is, those systems and those laws and those changes do not equally affect minorities and the majority alike. Therefore, the question "How does it affect us?" is a very legitimate and very understandable question.

One of the questions that I've been asked as I go around the country is, "How is restructuring going to affect minorities?" Just as people have asked, "Well, how is the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards going to affect minorities?" With just about anything that one talks about in education, that question is raised, and it's raised legitimately. And I'm very much afraid that one of the difficulties we'll have when we start moving on restructuring is that many in the minority community are going to say, "Well, that education that you've got over there, that old-fashioned education, seems to be good enough for everybody else. Why are you trying to change things for us?"

Well, I'm not trying to change things for "us." I'm trying to change them for everybody, because it's my view that not only are minorities doing poorly in our schools -- minorities are catching up very quickly -- the time is in sight, within I think not many years -- you know, half the gap between blacks and Hispanics on the one hand and whites on the other that was there in 1970 has now been made up. In other words, blacks and Hispanics were here and whites were here, and now blacks and Hispanics are here [indicating], and half of that distance -- it might take another ten or twenty years, or it might take less than that, but that gap is being closed, and it's being closed rapidly.

The big problem is not with minorities in education alone; that is a special problem, being behind. But the problem is really for everybody, namely, that the overall level of education for everybody in our society right now -- the outcomes are miserable. And they are miserable because we never really needed many educated people up until very recently. In 1940, 80 percent of the kids in this country dropped out of school. Most of those kids were not black kids. But there wasn't even a word called "dropout." The first year in which a majority of kids graduated from high school in this country was 1953. We didn't need many educated people then. The 20 percent were plenty. There was no shortage of doctors, lawyers, engineers or teachers. As a matter of fact, in 1940, in cities like New York and others, you could stand in line for a couple of years and wait for a teaching job. There was no shortage. When 20 percent graduated from high school and 5 percent went on to college, we had too many educated people in this country. Lawyers used to be called ambulance chasers. I mean, that's where it came from, that period of time. They were so hard up for work that every time they heard the ambulance -- I mean, that was not a joke; it was a reality. It sounds like a joke now. Most of these guys are doing very, very well, and making a lot of money, but that was not a joke then. That was part of reality. So we didn't need many educated people.

Now when you don't need many educated people, what do you do? Well, what you do is set up a school system and say, "Hey, here's a school system, and if you happen to fit this system and if you do well in it and if you can squiggle through and jump and go

through all the hurdles we've got there, and you're one of the 20 percent that gets out, that's fine. We don't need any more. You don't have to bother with the ones who almost made it. You don't have to bother giving help to those who found it very difficult because you don't need them to come through. That's their problem. They can go out and get jobs in factories, farms or other places."

In a sense, what I'm saying is that schools as they exist now and as they have always existed up until now, are systems of weeding out -- and I've used the analogy "like a garden." There are a couple of ways of doing a garden. One of them is you go out and you see a lot of things growing on this piece of land there, and you don't plant anything or do anything, you just go out and pick out the things that you don't like and you call them weeds, and you throw them away, and you leave the other things there, which grow up, and you say, "What a beautiful garden. See those five flowers I've got there?"

On the other hand, there's another way of doing a garden. You can go out and look at those things that look like weeds right now and you can replant them and you can specially cultivate them and you can prune them and do all sorts of things, and a little while later those things that might have grown up into weeds if they weren't taken care of, or might have been pulled out because you wanted a nice garden -- you can make some pretty nice looking plants if you work on it. I mean, look at Japanese gardens to see what the Japanese do with some ordinary trees and plants.

In other words, we think of a school as a place where the kid

goes through, and if the kid passes the subject, sits there and passes the exam, et cetera -- the kid has to fit the institution. And if he can't jump the hurdles, then it's too bad. Oh, yes, we'd give him a little remedial this and remedial that to help him once or twice, but that's it. Nobody has turned around and said, "Hey, we want almost all the kids, or all the kids, to be able to get through; how do we change these hurdles? How do we change them in such a way that just about everybody can make it?"

I guess another way, to use computer terms, is nobody has figured out how to make a user-friendly school. And it's a lot like that. When the first computers came out, they were made for engineers and mathematicians, and they didn't care if it was hard. If you're an engineer or mathematician, you'll sit there and work at it. You need that for your job. But now that they want to sell computers to everybody, they're trying to figure out how to make a computer so the thing tells you what to do and you don't have to become an engineer to use it. Well, that's what the restructuring issue is about.

Now, schools as they are now structured, favor those groups whose parents did well in school. Just take a look at it. If you've got two parents who went to college, on the one hand, as against if you've got two parents who were dropouts or if you've got two parents who only went to high school and didn't graduate, you look at these different categories and then look at the success rate in schools, and you'll have a chart that will fit perfectly. The two parents who were dropouts, their kid isn't going to get anywhere in school. Maybe one in a thousand will or

one in five hundred, but the chances are very small. Go the next one, the one who graduated from elementary school and went to high school for a year or two, what you will see is that for the most part, with little bits of variation -- sure, occasionally there's the kid who jumps from bottom to top and occasionally the one who falls from top to bottom, but for the most part when you're taking all the big numbers in this country into account, the 40 million kids who are in school -- basically, children repeat the educational pattern of their parents to a very, very large extent.

You see, you could have several interpretations of that. You could say, well, of course, smart folks went to college thirty years ago and they had smart kids and dumb folks -- you could play that sort of a game. I think that's nonsense. I think what happened was that we had a school that had certain obstacles that the parents figured out and were able to do, and they can help their kids figure out the same obstacles, and they help their kids figure out the same obstacles, and it doesn't at all mean that the others are dumb because a lot of people who don't make it in school, you can tell they're damn smart. They go out and make a lot more money than the ones who got the better grades, and they invent things. Getting high grades in school is not correlated with success in the world very much.

So what it is that the restructuring movement is about is, is it so important that a kid learn all that stuff within those same months? Look what happens. If a kid gets all that stuff from September to June, we say he's smart. But suppose that kid could learn it in two more months, a little bit slower that year; well,

he failed because he only learned this much and now he's got to take it over again. I mean, we are setting up the rules in such a way that more and more kids feel that they're failures.

The restructuring issue is an issue for all of our kids in this country, for all those who can't sit still and keep quiet for five or six hours a day, those who aren't so good at remembering all the words that come out of the teacher's mouth, those who might be able to learn by watching a movie or by manipulating some objects or by talking to each other or by doing it a hundred different ways. It really says let's figure out how to get to the kids because they're all smart and there is some way of reaching every single one of them. And if we don't tell them they've got to do it in only one way, the way that only a handful can do, they can all get it and they can all do it. Some of them will do it a little faster, a little slower, a little differently, but they can all do it. And our job, the job of education, is not to have a rigid structure that makes a lot of kids feel miserable and failures, but to have enough of a flexible structure so that every kid can be reached.

While this is an issue for all of our youngsters who aren't making it now, it is especially a minority issue because the schools as they are, as they exist today, are not suited for the overwhelming majority of those whose parents have not had great educational attainment. And while that's true of huge numbers of white folks, it is in percentage terms more an issue for minorities. Although in numbers there are more whites who are failing in school.

So I think one of the things that we as educators need to do is to go out there and do a lot of talking, not about shaping up the schools as they exist now, but I think that we're going to need community support as we change the schools. One of my nightmares is that we get agreement -- Carole Graves came up, I happened to bump into her superintendent a couple of months ago, and we were talking about a discussion I had with him and some of the things that they may be able to do in Newark. I'm worried about a New York City or a Newark or a Washington or lots of other places where the union and the school board and the superintendent get together, and they decide to do some great new things, and a bunch of parents march in and say, "That's doesn't look like school to me. That's not like the school I went to." You know, even if the parent didn't learn a thing. I dream of an illiterate parent walking in demanding that the school be just like the wonderful school that he went to. Because people tend to blame themselves. So that's something that we really need to work with.

There's a second issue that I want to share with you, and it comes out of what I said at QuEST, but here, too, minorities may have a special problem with this, although I think it offers a special benefit to minorities. One of the things I talked about at QuEST was that in almost every other country in the world kids work hard in school, even kids who are not doing that well or kids who aren't going to go to college. The reason they work hard is that everything they do in school helps them either to get a job faster or to get a better job. That is, in every other country, when you graduate from school the boss wants your transcript, and

he wants to know what your attendance record was, he wants letters of reference from the teachers, how was this kid in school; and if you took three years of math you're going to get a job faster than somebody who only took one year of math in high school. If you were able to pass, in a place like New York, a Regent's exam or some other student achievement exam -- in England, they have A and O levels; if you're able to pass a national exam in some difficult subject, the boss says, gee, all right, so you're not going to college but, hey, you worked real hard as a student; you were good at math, or English or something else. In other words, working harder and accomplishing more counts. In the United States, it doesn't count because the boss never even asks for your transcript. He just wants to know whether you're a dropout.

So the kids are smart. They're asking the teachers every day, "Do I have to do that in order to graduate? What's the least I can do in order to get out of here?" That's what they're asking. Whereas, in these other countries, they kind of say, "Hey, I better do that, because if I have that on my record it's going to help me." So in all these countries, the kids are smart. They're doing what they need to do in order to get ahead.

What I have suggested is that American businesses should do the same thing. That is, they should let students know that from now on they're going to look at their transcript, attendance record, and they're going to ask for letters of reference from teachers. That way, teachers can say to kids, "Hey, look at your brother or sister. I was asked for a letter of reference. I was able to help this person get a job because this person was

terrific in school. I was able to write a wonderful letter." Parents will restore authority to many people in terms of motivating kids to do the right thing.

One of the problems in the United States is: When I talked to Brad Butler, formerly of Procter & Gamble, his law company doesn't worry. "We get good people," he said, "but we don't hire anybody until they get to be 24 or 25." In other words, the better companies let the poorer companies hire all the kids who are not going to college, and then all these kids start at very low salaries, in pretty crummy jobs, and then the best of these kids get picked off by the good corporations years later, because they want to see who has a good record, and so forth. Now, that's pretty smart for these big companies, in a way, but it's pretty dumb, because you know what that means? That means that the kids who really did a terrific job in school have no opportunity for a good job when they first get out, even if they were terrific students, because these other companies don't want them until they're 24 or 25.

I'd like to go to those other companies and say, "I want you to start hiring 18-year-old kids," or 17-year-olds, as soon as they get out of high school. "Hire the ones who got terrific marks, the ones whose teachers said they were great, the ones who did a good job in school, because that will have an effect on their working harder in school and learning more and becoming better students."

Now this has a double edge. The other side of this is, I think it's terrific, and I think it's especially terrific for

minority youngsters who don't necessarily have a helping hand, an uncle -- more and more, that will be true as more and more black middle-class professionals move into these businesses -- but still at this point it's very small. I think the motivating power of this will be very great, and I think the outreach by these companies to hire on the basis of students' efforts and achievements will be great.

But the downside of it is, a lot of people are going to say, "Well, if companies hire on the basis of higher grades, does that mean that black students will not be hired first? If initial salaries are on the basis of higher grades, does that mean that blacks, when they go into the workforce, are going to get lower salaries than white students?" I don't happen to think so. I think what is necessary is to convince especially minority students that there are jobs, and good jobs, and that working hard and doing the work that they need to do in school is going to make a difference. And they need to see that connection because the overwhelming majority, especially of minority youngsters, if you talk to them, they really don't fully believe that if they do all this hard work, a lot of which they're bored with, they don't see that connection of "If I do this, I'm going to get that," the same way that some doctor's kid can see that his father worked hard and look where he is. And the other person who's upper middle-class can see that. Large numbers of people who are economically poor, whether they're minority or not, have no roles in front of them to show what that connection is.

That's one we need to talk about. I think it could have a

very powerful motivating force. But there is that possible criticism: Will it have that effect? Will that effect be short run or will it be long run? Will the motivating effect be strong enough to overcome what the initial effect is? We need some discussion on that.

Now, I'd just like to conclude by saying that we can't wait on this because if we do not produce fairly soon high-quality workers, the jobs that are there now and about to be there and which could be jobs for minority youngsters and move them from lower classes quickly up -- quickly up, because of the number of openings -- if we don't provide an adequate supply of such workers in the near future, those jobs will go to other countries and will not come back here. So this is not something where we can say, "Well, twenty-five, thirty or forty years from now." We're talking about the next ten or fifteen years. So if the turnaround isn't made now, if the change isn't made now -- and that's why businesses-as-usual is no good -- if we try to tinker and fool around with the schools we have right now and expect any sort of major changes, they're not going to happen. They're going to be too small and too slow.

These are the things that I think we need to share with our colleagues. There is this great opportunity. It exists for the first time. It ought to give tremendous hope and encouragement to minority youngsters that for the first time there's a world out there that's willing and eager to take them, not out of benevolence but out of necessity, and that their efforts and good work and education will for the first time in our society be

rewarded. We're at the center of that. We can be proud of the role that we're playing. I don't know of another organization in this country that's doing as much rethinking about what we ought to be doing in education, and the rethinking that we're doing is a rethinking for all of our kids in all of our schools.

The greatest and most beneficial impact, if those changes are made, will be on minorities. I urge all of you to take these messages back and to begin programs in your own districts -- union, school board, business community, superintendent -- programs that will bring about a basic restructuring, because that is the answer.

Thank you very much.

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