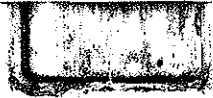


OPTIONS IN EDUCATION

takes listeners to the core of the issues



A co-production of
National Public Radio
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Educational Leadership of the
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Late? / after 1974, because it
lists Shaker as ~~some~~
former president

p. 4 - O-B - good

→ his basic civil
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NPR Tom 414-2060

June 30, 1980

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Program No. 206:

"PROFILE - ALBERT SHANKER"

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"PROFILES - ALBERT SHANKER"

I think Albert Shanker is a menace to American society. He misuses his power --

SHANKER: I can't think of any time when we weren't facing ten horrible dragons out there, and they were very close, and it's frightening and it's a tough fight, but I do have a feeling that I've been in the middle of almost every major educational and union and social battle now for a period of over 20 years, and that's very exciting.

REINHARDT: You don't have to turn to Albert Shanker's enemies to hear him denounced. Even his friends and allies say he's egocentric, abrasive and short sighted.

MERROW: On the other hand, some of his harshest critics also say he's brilliant, sensitive, shy and dedicated.

REINHARDT: Friends and enemies alike acknowledge that Shanker more than anyone else has made teachers militant. I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow for NPR's Options in Education. We're looking at people who have a strong impact on the way we educate ourselves and our children.

REINHARDT: And Shanker qualifies. He's President of a national teachers' union, the American Federation of Teachers, and he's also President of the largest local union of any kind, the United Federation of Teachers in New York City.

MERROW: New York City is Shanker's power base. He began there in 1952 as a junior high math teacher and went to work for the teachers' union in 1959.

REINHARDT: Shanker rose to national prominence when he led New York City teachers in long strikes in 1967 and 1968.

MERROW: Shanker went to jail and the union made headlines for weeks on end. The idea of teachers on strike shocked the public.

REINHARDT: The strike Shanker led also brought about changes in the rival National Education Association, the NEA. At that time the NEA was dominated by school administrators who tended to treat teachers paternalistically. But teachers saw the salary increases Shanker's union was winning and began deserting the NEA.

MERROW: That forced NEA to get its own house in order. Teachers took control, and soon NEA strikes were in the news as well.

REINHARDT: In 1974 Albert Shanker was elected to the Presidency of the American Federation of Teachers, the AFT.

MERROW: The AFT and the much larger NEA disagree on many issues,

and the two leaders, Shanker and the NEA's Terry Herndon, are personal rivals.

REINHARDT: We asked Herndon what he thinks of Shanker.

TERRY HERNDON, PRESIDENT OF NEA

HERNDON: Well, I find him in many respects inscrutable. He likes to pose as a great civil libertarian, but we find him opposing us on affirmative action in the Bakke case and the Difunes case. We find him disaffiliating from the NEA because of his opposition to our minority involvement program. I have a hard time following things like that. I absolutely can't understand a person that poses as a militant trade union leader for most of his life, advocating that collective bargaining be suspended in New York City for the duration of the fiscal crisis. So I have trouble understanding those things, but I recognize that he's a very facile politician and that he has a great ability to collect, to build and to manage power.

REINHARDT: How Shanker uses his considerable power may be the central question. Nat Hentoff is a New York journalist who's been writing about education for 15 years. For Hentoff, one recent incident sums up Shanker's use of power.

MERROW: Hentoff tells it this way. Two years ago the Chancellor of the city's schools, Frank Machiarova, pushed through two reforms, special classes for children having academic problems in the elementary school, and smaller classes in 1st and 2nd grade. But in the last two years the school system has withdrawn most of the reforms because of financial problems.

REINHARDT: Hentoff tells the rest of the story.

NAT HENTOFF, N.Y. JOURNALIST

HENTOFF: Both those programs have been severely vitiated and almost destroyed I think by fairly recently yet a new round of cuts. Not a word from Shanker. Now, this is a union that has one of the best press departments I have ever seen. This is a union that can start a demonstration, a large demonstration, whenever it wants to. This is a union that talks about making alliances with the Public Education Association and other parents' groups. Nothing. Not a word. Because he figured, I guess, it wasn't worth the trouble. It wasn't really threatening any teachers' jobs. It just had to do with the kids.

There is a phrase that the United Federation of Teachers uses when it goes out on strike, which is that, "Teachers want what children need." And it would be rather poignant and almost inspiring, maybe, except it's so ludicrous, in terms of the New York City experience. And the fact that he wouldn't fight for that, that he has not really ever fought to any extent for the kind of structural change that the Machiarova plans are just a surface indication of what could be done, indicates that his concern is not education, primarily, and he could say, if he were straight about it, "Well, that shouldn't be

my concern. I'm a labor leader." Okay, but then a labor leader who has as much power over what actually happens in the classroom and does not happen to Shanker is a force in education, and I think -- I don't say he's a malevolent man, quite the opposite. I think he's a very decent fellow, personally, but he has, I think, a malignant influence.

REINHARDT: Journalist Nat Hentoff talking with David Tuller.

INTERVIEW WITH ALBERT SHANKER

SHANKER: The major purpose of a union is to protect the interests of its members. No-one asks the auto workers what they've done to improve automobiles.

REINHARDT: Albert Shanker.

SHANKER: No-one asks the steel workers what they've done to improve the steel industry, or any other group of employees. I don't think --

MERROW: You don't think you're required to.

SHANKER: Well, let me say that I think we have. That isn't the purpose -- that isn't the initial purpose of any union. The initial purpose is -- look, no-one expects -- no-one expects any self-interest group in this country to have as its major purpose anything but the pursuit of the self-interest of that particular group. Now, that happens to be true whether it's a Chamber of Commerce, whether it's a union, whether it's the American Medical Association, whether it's a trade group, whether it's a business. These groups are primarily there to do things for the interest of that group.

Now, it so happens that we have done things to improve education, because -- well, first of all, it's in our own self-interest to do that too. If we don't improve it we're not going to have a public education system in this country.

MERROW: But those of us in the public should not look to you or to the NEA to improve what goes on in schools. That's what you're saying?

SHANKER: I don't think that you should blame us if that isn't our major function. That's one thing. You know, the school boards association, the administrators, the teachers, each of these groups have certain missions that are central, and then they have many other things that they do that are good.

MERROW: You mentioned Ocean Hill, Brownsville in 1968. Your critics say that Al Shanker came to a turning point in his own personal life right there in that New York City struggle over school decentralization. The issue was local control of schools, and in some parts of the city anyway that would mean black control. Now, you took a single incident in one part of a city and escalated that, or did a great deal to escalate that into a city-wide confrontation, a school

~~strike that lasted, I think, 36 days. The strike created a rift between blacks and your largely Jewish membership in the UFT. Some people say that rift has never really healed and they also say that Al Shanker -- that Al Shanker took a turn there away from his original purposes as a young committed socialist, dedicated to improving the world and acted politically opportunistically and has never gotten back on track.~~

~~SHANKER: Well, I know that some people say that, but I think the people who say that haven't really taken a look at either me or the issues of the union. Ocean Hill Brownsville was consistent with anything that I've ever done in the field of civil rights, and I started being active in this when I was in college. I was one of the very early members of CORE in the late 1940s. I engaged in sit-ins, interracial sit-ins, at the University of Illinois. I picketed the Palisades swimming pool in New Jersey when that was racially restricted, and so forth. And my view was always very simple. I did not believe that anyone should be discriminated against because of their color or religion or any other such condition. Anyone, black or white. And therefore, when the freedom marches came and freedom schools down south, I was there, and we were there with money and with manpower for Dr. King, and most of the staff people that we have in our union, both locally and nationally, had some background and history in the civil rights movement.~~

Now, you know, I felt in New York City that it was just as wrong for a group of black extremists to fire white teachers without due process as it was for white extremists to fire black teachers without due process. I always felt that and I still feel it. And you know, I find it very interesting that when one single college professor is fired from a post because of his Communist views, that the whole intellectual and civil libertarian world feels that if you allow one Communist professor to be dismissed for his views that this could be the end of freedom in America, and it's McCarthy-ism and it's going to scare everyone. But when 19 teachers are dismissed in one part of New York, these same liberals just don't give a damn, because these aren't teachers who are fighting for some ideology. They're just fighting for the right to teach in their schools, not on the basis of race or ideology or anything else, but to do a good job teaching. It's all the same thing. It's all ugly to me. It's all extreme. And what I did was continuous with what I believed before, and I've continued to do the same thing, and I didn't see anything opportunistic about it. It's exactly what a union stands for.

~~REINHARDT: 1968 in the strike over Ocean Hill Brownsville and school decentralization led to charges that Shanker is an opportunist and racist. Those charges have followed him since.~~

~~MERROW: William Simons is an AFT veteran who has worked with and fought against Albert Shanker over the years. He's President of the Washington local of the AFT and he's black. I asked him for his interpretation of the Ocean Hill Brownsville incident.~~

WILLIAMS SIMONS, PRESIDENT OF THE AFT, WASHINGTON LOCAL

~~SIMONS: I think he did miss a golden opportunity to really bring about a more cohesive union with the community in New York. By taking the position that the UFT did, that certainly did not help the situation. There were a number of incidents that occurred during that strike. Some of them were attributed to the UFT itself, and that is the UFT being responsible for the distribution of antisemitic literature and cartoons and blaming it on the black community. And that certainly does not help the situation.~~

~~Yes, I would not, you know, have any hesitation about characterizing Shanker as moving more to the right in the last few years, and I think that in doing so it causes the union to appear to be more conservative than it once was.~~

~~MERROW: You didn't answer that question of whether Shanker's a racist.~~

~~SIMONS: Well, I don't think that I want to get into that kind of dialogue on the question of whether he is or whether he isn't. So no, I won't answer that because I don't think that that will add anything, really, to this interview.~~

~~REINHARDT: William Simons, President of the Washington Federation of Teachers.~~

~~MERROW: In 1975, Shanker and his union came to the aid of New York City when it was on the verge of bankruptcy. He invested union pension funds in city bonds, and he persuaded the teachers to accept a new contract calling for much less than they'd hoped for. Shanker's critics say he sold out to business interests. But he defends his actions.~~

~~SHANKER: I don't see -- we weren't doing this because all of a sudden we had become management. We were doing this because the employer -- we work for that employer. If that employer goes out of business, we don't have jobs, we don't have security. Aside from all the social impact of what would happen to America in terms of liberalism if they were to point to New York City and say now, look, that's a city that was more generous with its hospitals and with its schools and with its child care programs and with its museums and everything else, and look what happened to them, they went under. Therefore this country should not enact these liberal programs or the country will go down the same way. I think that we had quite a stake in saving the city.~~

~~I think you're going to find that the UAW's going to do what it can to save Chrysler. Does that make them a conservative union? I don't know of a union when it sees the employer going down and has the jobs of its members at stake, I don't know of a union that wouldn't do everything it possibly could to help the employer.~~

~~REINHARDT: Ironically, one of Shanker's hardest critics, David Seldon, says Shanker did the right thing by helping New York City in 1975, but Seldon, who hired Shanker into the AFT 20 years ago,~~

says that Shanker has missed opportunities every step of the way.

DAVID SELDON, FORMER PRESIDENT OF AFT

SELDON: I think it's a tragedy. The tragedy of Albert Shanker is that he never fulfilled his original intentions. He in his struggle to achieve power in the labor movement, and vis a vis the politicians, particularly in New York City and New York State, he compromised again and again until his original purposes were completely lost sight of and anything which will further his career or his power seems to be legitimate. He very frequently contradicts himself, as a matter of fact.

GRIFFEN: How about this, would the AFT be better off without him?

SELDON: Oh, yes, no question about it. He has misled the AFT. He is mainly responsible for the lack of unity among teachers. There should be one single organization of teachers in the United States. We don't blame the NEA and the association, considering their sources or roots, for not being strong for unity. They never were. They were a paternalistic organization right from the very inception, and we never really held out much hope for them. But the AFT came on as a liberal organization standing for teacher unity, and we had a chance to make it in 1973. But it was due mainly to Albert Shanker that teachers are disunited today.

GRIFFEN: Is that when you got out?

SELDON: Yes, that's right. Well, I was defeated by Shanker in the convention in August of 1974.

GRIFFEN: The clash with Shanker in '68, the break in 1972, do you harbor any animosity?

SELDON: Oh, yes, sure I do, but the main thing, I think, is a bitterness of an opportunity missed. We had a chance to take the teachers of America into -- onto a new plane. I always said that the AFT had three purposes. First it was a union to achieve benefits for its members. Secondly, it was an educational organization with the desire and motivation to reform the school system in the United States, it badly needs reforming. And third, I said that the AFT was a social movement, that we should join with other liberal organizations to achieve a better society in America. I said this over and over again. I feel that Shanker stopped after step one. He has done a pretty good job on gaining benefits. But he really doesn't know anything about educational policy. He never had much interest in that sort of thing. And so far as social policy is concerned, his social policy has been disastrous. He still supports the Vietnam war as far as I know.

REINHARDT: David Seldon, the man Shanker ousted from the AFT Presidency in 1974.

MERROW: It was Seldon's desire for a merger of the two teacher unions that led to his ouster. Such a merger is even less likely today

than it was five years ago. Shanker and the AFT insist on membership in the AFofL-CIO, which the NEA opposes. NEA, on the other hand, insists on guaranteed minority representation which the AFT rejects, and the NEA can't stand Shanker.

REINHARDT: Albert Shanker is firmly in power in New York City. Even his enemies acknowledge that, and that New York power base guarantees that he'll continue to dominate the AFT. That means he's likely to be a force in public education for some time.

MERROW: Shanker and I talked about a wide range of issues, including the report card he'd give President Carter.

SHANKER: Oh, on education I'd say B-plus, and as far as the Presidency in general, I would say he may already have failed. He may have reached the point where the overwhelming majority of the American people have lost confidence and are no longer watching or listening. We may be at the point where they've made up their minds that he should not be President.

MERROW: And that some certain person should be or just that he should not be?

SHANKER: No, I don't think they've made up their minds that somebody else should be. I think every other candidate would be -- you know, there's nobody that's just going to walk through and get support, whether it's Kennedy or Connolly or Reagan or Alexander Haig or Baker or anybody. None of those is in a position now to say, well clearly I'm going to be the next President of the United States. None of them -- I guess Kennedy could probably get the nomination if he wants it. But no, I think the decision is just one that people feel that Carter is a nice guy, a lot of them feel that, and that he's tried, and I also think that they're a lot more sophisticated than he thinks they are. They're not blaming the oil crisis on him or inflation. They know that any President's going to be a human being and that we can't solve all the problems of the world. No President's going to be able to solve them all. I think that they're really rating him on whether they feel that he did an adequate job, or as adequate a job as they believe a human being could do in handling those problems. And I think that when you get polls that say that 70 percent of the American people do not believe that he should be President, that's what they're saying.

MERROW: Corporal punishment. Teachers would maintain perhaps that that's in their interest. You can certainly argue that it is not in the kids' interest.

SHANKER: I would bet that the percentage of teachers who favor corporal punishment is the same as the percentage of parents, and I think it's a minority of both.

MERROW: But you favor it, yes?

SHANKER: No, I don't favor corporal punishment. I just do not believe that the Constitution of the United States says anything against

it. Now, that was the issue before the Supreme Court of the United States. The issue was does the cruel and inhuman punishment -- are there clauses of the Constitution of the United States which prohibit corporal punishment, and I say that's not so. Now, as you know, I'm fairly influential in New York City and New York State, and we do have -- we've always had laws against corporal punishment there, and the union has never introduced any position which would favor corporal punishment. So I don't know how I get saddled with that. I just don't happen to believe that the Constitution of the United States has everything in it that good people believe in, and I think if every time we go to the Supreme Court and want them to find something that isn't there, then we have no Constitution. We're really asking them to rewrite the whole thing.

MERROW: Test score decline. They're going down again. Why?

SHANKER: There are many, many reasons. Part of it is the breakdown of the family. Part of it is television. Part of it is student rebelliousness. Part of it is the fact that we don't accept authority in any field anymore. It used to be that teachers said this is the curriculum, learn it. Now the kids say you know where to go. It's not relevant. I don't want to. I'll do something else. And part of it also is our teachers. Teachers are affected by these things. Any teacher who gave the same kind of work -- any teacher who walked in today and assigned X number of Shakespearean plays and "Silas Marner," and, "A Tale of Two Cities," and gave an hour and a half of homework every day and flunked all the students who didn't get that, I think would be in pretty deep trouble, because they would not be supported. Parents would say why are you the only one.

Now, parents in general would like things to be a little tougher. But if you really start tightening up the students rebel against it. I just think it's -- I think that there's some blame to be shared all around. The schools should have part of it.

MERROW: Desegregation and court ordered bussing. Is that a threat to public education? There seems to be an awful lot of public opinion against it.

SHANKER: The fact is that instant bussing programs, even though they are now the law of the land, have not produced integration in very many places. Boston is a more segregated school system today, after bussing, than it was before. Los Angeles, which never had any big private school population, has lost a substantial proportion of the whites who remained in it, and private schools are building like mad, and what we may get very well is a voucher system which will end up in increasing the amount of segregation in the entire state of California, fueled by the bussing fight. And I just -- you know, I'm a pragmatist. I don't think that -- I don't think any means is a bad means. I don't think bussing is an evil means. But how do you judge it?

MERROW: If it doesn't work --

SHANKER: You judge it by its consequences. The purpose of bussing is -- the purpose of bussing is not to provide transportation in this case. The purpose of bussing is to integrate schools, and I think that we've got to turn around and say does it do it. If it does it, fine.

MERROW: What you say, people listening to this may say, hey, I guess I'll take my kids out. I mean aren't you subtly supporting those people who are in fact taking their kids out of public school?

SHANKER: Those people have never heard me say this before. This is the first time I have talked on radio on the subject. Now, I am merely saying that this has happened now for a period of more than a decade, and I think there's very substantial evidence there are few cases where it's worked. But I think if you take the national experience in all the places that it's worked, I think it's time for us to stop playing philosophy, and I think unfortunately people are still very dishonest on racial matters. In any other field of -- you know, if I went to a doctor and he kept giving me pills to take care of some ailment and it didn't work the first time or the second time or the third time or the fourth time, I'd stop taking those pills and I would try -- I wouldn't give up trying to cure the ailment. I would try something else. And here we've got a cure that's supposed to cure segregation. I don't know of anybody who would stand up and say it's worked or that it's a success.

MERROW: But you would not.

SHANKER: If it isn't a success, well, there may be -- maybe we could look and say look, it's worked in the following 20 or 30 places. Let's find other places that are just like that and do it there. But it didn't work very well in Boston. It doesn't look like it's working -- going to work particularly well in Los Angeles. So where we have places like that, let's find some other way of doing it.

REINHARDT: The opinions of Albert Shanker, President of the American Federation of Teachers. The AFT has over 500,000 members, and Shanker is trying to expand his power base by actively recruiting members from outside education, health care workers, doctors, lawyers.

MERROW: Shanker is paid \$80,000.00 a year as AFT President, and the job keeps him away from his New York home two-thirds of the time. He told me that he's lucky if he gets four days in a row at home more than five or six times a year.

REINHARDT: Shanker has three teenaged children. He says they hardly know him, and that some of their problems are his fault.

SHANKER: Mostly the tool has been in terms of my relationships with my family. I have children who have grown up without my knowing them very well, and I know that there is some -- there has to be resentment there, and there is. And my wife, who is now working herself, but we -- and she was a member of the union and helped to start it and was active and has been very, very full of support. But meanwhile, all these years have gone by where I was -- had to be at

strikes and at conferences and at conventions and at meetings and at political caucuses, and I turn around and my family has had to suffer a good deal of neglect as a result of that. So it leads you to think after awhile. Certainly there's a realization that there's been some sacrifice.

MERROW: Do you ever think maybe it's not worth it?

SHANKER: Sure, everybody thinks that once in awhile, but I -- it's been very, very worthwhile and very exciting and you know, if I had to dream up a kind of life that I'd want to live over again, it's been filled with problems and -- I can't think of any time when we weren't facing ten horrible dragons out there, and they were very close, and it's frightening and it's a tough fight, but I do have a feeling that I've been in the middle of almost every major educational and union and social battle now for a period of over 20 years, and that's very exciting.

REINHARDT: Albert Shanker, the controversial President of the American Federation of Teachers. A printed copy of this profile is available. You may buy it for \$1.00. A cassette recording costs \$6.00.

MERROW: Write us at National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036.

REINHARDT: The printed transcript, \$1.00. The cassette recording, \$6.00.

MERROW: This is just one of a series on powerful people in education, and if you'd like a list of the others with a schedule of all our Options in Education programs, just ask. It's free.

REINHARDT: Our address again, National Public Radio - Education, Washington, D. C. 20036.

MERROW: And don't forget to tell us the call letters of your own NPR station when you write.

REINHARDT: Options in Education is a co-production of National Public Radio and the Institute for Educational Leadership of the George Washington University.

MERROW: Principal support is provided by the National Institute of Education. Other funds come to us from Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

REINHARDT: Options in Education is written and produced by John Merrow. Rebecca Goldfield is our Assistant Producer, with technical assistance by Jim Anderson and Craig Laird.

MERROW: Some of the material for this program came from Tony Griffen, WMUK, Kalamazoo, Michigan, and David Tuller in New York City.

REINHARDT: I'm Barbara Reinhardt.

MERROW: I'm John Merrow.

REINHARDT: This is NPR, National Public Radio.