

INTRODUCTION OF AL SHANKER FOLLOWED BY HIS ADDRESS TO
THE APRIL 22-23, 1972 HOUSE OF DELEGATES OF THE
NEW YORK STATE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION

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MRS. CORTESE: Thank you Mr. Chairman. If a man's actions are the measure of his philosophy and comitment, there can be no denying that Mr. Albert Shanker is both a teacher advocate and a teacher leader.

This teacher leader was educated in the New York City Public School system and attended the University of Illinois, where he received a Bachelor's Degree with honors in philosophy.

At Columbia University he pursued graduate work and finished all of his course credits with a Ph.D. in philosophy, but because of his teaching career, he found no time to write his doctoral thesis. He has written many articles for such publications as the Urban Review, Saturday Review and the Phi Delta Kappa.

He taught mathematics at two junior high schools New York City starting in 1952. He was a member of his union's delegate assembly in the late 1950's and soon thereafter was elected to the Executive Board. In 1962 he was editor of the union newspaper. After several years as a national union field representative in New York City he returned to the classroom.

Later, he was elected Secretary of the union and appointed chief assistant to the President. He was elected union President in 1964 and re-elected in 1966 and 1968. In December, 1967, he served a 15-day jail term for leading a teachers strike.

He led another strike in 1968. In October 1971, he was elected President of the United Teachers of New York. Fellow delegates, it is my pleasure and honor to present to you one of the outstanding teacher leaders of our nation, Albert Shanker. [APPLAUSE]

MR. SHANKER: Mr. Chairman, officers, members of the house, I want to express my appreciation for this opportunity. Although, I have two separate speeches here because I'm still not sure if I was invited to a wedding or the first part of a know-your-enemy program.

I think we all know why this is item no. 1 on the agenda. It's item No. 1 because through the 1960's all of us whether in unions or in associations made great progress and unprecedented gains. For years we did not enjoy the rights of collective bargaining or negotiations.

We didn't have written agreements, we did not have very effect grievance procedures. The 40's and the 50's were a very bad time in terms of economic gain. Then, in the 1960's things changed. All of us became more militant.

Laws were changed throughout the country so that the majority of teachers now are represented by organizations of their choice and engaged in formal and effective collective bargaining activities.

And we saw year after year our negotiating committees coming back from the bargaining tables with better salaries, better working conditions, things that improved our own life as teachers, and many which have improved conditions for children and for the school system.

And so, there was a great feeling of optimism in that decade. A feeling that each year we would do better and better. And while we were always somewhat disappointed in any one time that we didn't get all of the things that we wanted, or should have gotten. Nor did we catch up as fast as we should have.

Still, each year new benefits and things got better. And then the last few years came and reversed that feeling of optimism and of hope. For the first time we found ourselves in many places fighting hard and fighting desperately not to make gains but to hold on to what we had before.

To stand still. And, we found that at the local level, as the money situation grew more and more critical and continues to grow worse and worse, we find ourselves in the toughest negotiations, everywhere, throughout the state and throughout the country, the toughest negotiations that we have ever been in.

And, then we looked at the legislature last year and this year and instead of getting one and two goodies from the legislature as we're accustomed to, we found tenure watered down, sabbatical leaves frozen.

We find a financial crisis in terms of state aid every few months and the depth and nature of that crisis is no where better revealed than in the fact that right now the legislature is getting ready to adjourn with state aid formulae and figures which will result in cut-back throughout the state of New York.

And, teachers have been through so many fights within the last year and a half that somehow we haven't had the energy to muster to get into this one. At least not on a very public or strong basis.

The very strong possibility that all new teachers and public employees will be put into a new retirement system, one which is inferior to the one we now enjoy, so that our struggle for the next decade will be not to improve our own benefits, but rather to bring up to the level that we now enjoy, the benefits of the newcomers who will be coming into the system this following year and the one after that.

Legislation on performance contracting which would mean our contracts would be reduced to nothingness because the school board would then turn around and subcontract our work to others not certified, not qualified, and not working under the terms and conditions of our negotiations, or negotiated agreements.

Legislation for performance certification which would do away with formal educational requirements for teaching, again, in order to reduce money and expenditures and reduce salaries.

Amendments to the Taylor Law almost passed last year in the works again over this week-end, which would wipe out almost everything we've negotiated in our agreements except for the salary schedule, which would prevent us from negotiating on such things as class size and other things which are benefits both to teachers and to students.

And then of course we face right within this state a feasibility study of a voucher study which, if it comes into effect, will mean moneys given to each parent to allow their children to leave the public schools.

And then nationally we face the freeze. That's a partial list. I could go on for a long time and you could to. But that's what we're facing. We're not just facing a struggle. We're all used to that. We're not just facing an uphill battle. We're used to that.

We are literally at the point where it is not exaggeration to say that 5 or 6 or 7 years from now there may not be very much left of public education in this state or in this country.

There may not be a school system. And there may not be public education. And it is in that context that your leadership and ours came together. Not out of the history of cooperation, which has not been there. Not out of love or affection, which has also not been there. But out of plain, common, brutal necessity.

And self-interest. The interest of teachers and of children and of public education. Because if we continue during this time to fight each other, there will be nothing to fight over within a very short period of time.

And so all of our past disagreements and our historic differences fade into insignificance when we look at the problem that's ahead of us. And let me say that there is no absolute guarantee that if we do unite and are much stronger, and bring all of our resources to bear to try to resolve and solve the problems that are facing us, there is no guarantee that we will succeed.

The forces against us are strong. But at least we will have a chance. Now the merger agreement represents, in my mind, several things. In the first place I think it is an excellent agreement.

And, it contains within it some of the strengths of your organization and some of the strengths of ours. And, if I had time I would stand here and defend it on its own merits. That even if there were no merger in the offing, many of the modifications and changes within that document would be well recommended to both organizations for adopting. To improve their own present structures.

But merger agreements, like collective bargaining contracts, are compromises. Whenever I have returned from the negotiating table to a membership meeting of our organization, I have always, at the very beginning, informed my members that I could have written a much better contract myself.

The trouble is that there were other people at the table and they didn't permit me to write it myself. And that is the situation that we face here too. I am sure that each and every one of us, and each of you there, can write a better one. I'm sure that I can. But that's not the one that will ever come before us, or you, for serious consideration.

And, if you look at this agreement, you will see that it represents some differences for you and some for us.

And, basically, what we have tried to do is preserve what is good in both organizations. Now, let's take a look at just a few of these.

At the present time you elect your directors from districts. They are all elected regionally. We elect our executive board completely at large. No one is elected from any district. Everyone is elected by everyone who comes to a convention, and while there does end up being a balance of different people from different areas, it's not required by the constitution, it just happens to work out that way.

Well, we happen to believe very strongly that people elected for office in a state organization should be responsible to the entire organization, and not merely the interests of a given area. Your arguments were that every area has a right to feel that there's somebody in there representing them and fighting for their interests.

Now who is wrong and who is right? I think this is obviously a situation in which both of us have strong and compelling arguments. And so the merger agreement is a compromise.

It says that two-thirds of the Board of Directors shall be elected as you now elect them and one-third will be elected at a house, although even those directors who are elected by everyone, one of them will come from every two elections districts combined so there is no possibility of having a whole block of people from one particular area.

Well, is that the only way to do it? No, I'm sure there are dozens of other ways of working that out. But I submit to you that going back and discussing it for another few months. Coming up with one-fourth or three-fourths, one-half, or should the others come from three election districts combined, rather than two.

All of the changes, combinations and permutations that we might bring back on this item, are not worth the additional discussion and the additional trouble. Basically, we have come through with a compromise. One that is closer to your basic structure than to ours.

We have a system in which the President of the organization may have a number of assistants. Why? Well take a situation like the current one where merger is a hot topic in your organization and ours.

And each of our organizations has one president. And that one president has responsibilities in the central office, and that one president has literally hundreds of local associations calling saying please come here and explain it to us.

There is only one of him. Well, there will never be more than one. But we have always felt that there ought to be a few who can speak for him. And, who are recognized as being the voice of the president. Who are not with the organization under contract. Who very much like cabinet members of the United States government.

Or very much like commissioners in state or local government, are part of an administration, help to make it work. And when that administration goes out of office, they leave, they don't stay on. The next president has a right to have several people assisting him.

And you have a system whereby you have top level personnel. Executives, secretaries, editors of papers and heads of public relations departments, and heads of regional offices and so forth who are under contract.

Under our system we do not believe top level people ought to be under contract. So we had differences there. We argued them out. And what did we end up with?

Well we ended up with pasting our structure and your structure together and the Executive Secretary remains in the constitution, under contract. As do the other people. And so your structure remains intact. And in addition to that we did state that ~~with~~ the approval of the Board of Directors the president could have a number of assistants.

We accepted ours and yours and put them together. And we hope it'll work. If it doesn't, we'll be present at future house meetings and there'll be an opportunity to change anything which doesn't.

Now we also have a very strong belief, that there should be no limitation on the term of office of the president. There isn't a limitation, your superintendent of schools stays for a pretty long time, and principals stay for a pretty long time, and governors in this state tend to stay along for a pretty long time.

And unless we have an organization where the president is constantly a learner, by the time he learns to deal and to operate and be recognized off he goes. And the next person is put onstage. You cannot really be effective without producing leadership which is recognized as experienced and having the support of the members.

You can't do it with a system of rotation. Now, of course the membership should have the right to get rid of leadership if they want to. That's part of the democratic process, but they should n't be compelled to. Well we didn't win out on that one. And your constitution prevails. And the constitution which will befores you does contain a limitation for term of office.

I don't like it, but in a democratic organization, if we do merge, we'll have the right to come back and I serve notice that I'll try to modify that, if you'll try to modify other things within this constitution.

Well, there isn't time to go through all of this. And I have a few more things to say. And since I think you invited me, not merely to entertain, but because there is a crucial issue before all of us. I hope that you will forgive me if I deal in a specific and a concrete way with the issues that are before you. And, not in generalities about whether the merger is good or not.

We have come to the point where everyone is in favor of merger in principle, just as everyone is in favor of peace. But we may end with a general statement in favor of merger and spend the next four years arguing about the shape of the bargaining table in the New York State negotiations.

I want to say that this house can move into two directors. You have a merger agreement before you. If the merger agreement is re-opened by either side, if they go back to the table because they have reservations. If you have reservations, and you do, I am here to inform you that I have reservations and our organization does.

To go back to the table means to re-open the whole thing. And to go over months and months of haggling over exactly the same items. And I guarantee that whether it's three months or five months or one year or five years that we go over it, we will come back with essentially and substantially what you have now.

Because it has been sliced so delicately and balanced so carefully that there will be no changes of any substance. Any delay is a waste. A waste of time, a waste of energy, a waste of effort. Any delay is a time when we continue fighting each other.

While our enemies are united and work against us. Now, your own constitution does not permit you to ratify or to conclude a merger at this meeting. And it is very good that it does not. Because indeed ample time has not been given for the entire membership to consider and to discuss, as a matter of fact they have not seen the constitution.

But this house can go one of two ways. It can decide to pass a resolution which says that it is in favor of merger in general, but not this specifically and let's wait. And if we wait and if we delay, there is a very good chance that the entire concept will die.

That we will fall apart once again, schools will open again next September. We will once again engage in disputes, we'll come together with another document which will be accepted with reservations. We will never be here with a document to which there will be no reservations.

I think that must be clear. Or this house can take a historic step. And I hope that you will. I hope that you will say to your colleagues here and those back home, that there is no time to continue talking about really the average little things that the average teacher in the State doesn't care about.

Ninety-nine percent of the teachers in this state don't care whether there are 38 directors or 42 or 48. They really don't care what or how many districts there are. They don't care what the rules of order are in this house or in our house.

They are very worried about the next round of negotiations. About pensions, about vouchers about performance contracting and a lot of other substantive issues. And they are intelligent in those fears. And we would not be intelligent if we get hung up on a bunch of procedural things which are really going to be settled in the years to come and not in an initial document.

And so you have an opportunity not to accept with reservations. You don't go back to your own districts and accept your negotiations with the Board of Education with reservations, you either accept it or you turn it down.

Of course there are always reservations. And that's the opportunity that you have here. I hope that you will accept the merger proposal as the best possible document that we could come up with...both sides.

I hope that you will not just ask that referendum procedures will be prepared for, but that you will mandate that there be one, so that every member of this organization will have a right to say yes or no. [APPLAUSE]

I hope that you will also mandate that in the process of this referendum that there be equal space given to your newspaper to both sides, so that no member out there feels that anything is being forced on them and when it is all over they will all bide by the results because they will all be given a fair opportunity to discuss the issues.

And that you will provide an opportunity for regional meetings throughout the state. For your leadership and ours, and where people on the other side of this issue will have an opportunity to express their views.

And that that would take place, not next school year after thousands of us have left the system and thousands of others have come in and new association presidents will have to be acquainted all over again with what all of us have gone through.

But this school year. A period of three or four or five weeks of discussion. People will know as much about this in five weeks as they'll know after five years. There's a certain amount there and that's all.

And, after it's read and re-read and discussed a couple of hours and it will either be liked or it won't be liked. And then I hope that you will arrange for a house meeting again this school year so that if your members are in favor, we can spend the summer putting both of our houses in order and begin the next school year with the knowledge on the part of the governor, the President and the Congress and the Legislature and everybody else that they face a new, and powerful and united and determined teacher organization in the state of New York. [APPLAUSE]

This is no ordinary meeting of your house. WE are here today at a moment of tremendous historic significance. Not just for our organizations but for every teacher in this state and for every teacher in this country.

We stand at a crossroad, one way, one road is a road to disaster. It's a road of continued conflict. It's a road of your trying to take a little piece of our territory and our trying to take a little piece of yours.

While the world falls in around us. It is a world of insanity in which our historic fears and rivalries prevail over the realities of the situation that surrounds us.

And those are the things that are being raised to prevent merger. There really isn't anything in the document that is so terrible. What keeps us apart is fear, rumours. That person is going to take over. This person is going to dominate.

That group is going to be swallowed up. On both sides I might add. I want to remind you that we are the smaller of the two organizations. And there are fears on our side.

And if we let our fears dominate us, indeed there will be a self-fulfilling prophesy and something very bad will happen. But there is another road. It's a road of voting not on the basis of our fears, but on the basis of our hopes and our dreams. Let's think of what a unified organization will make possible. Let us think of the possibilities of over three hundred thousand teachers in this state. With a single voice. With determination.

With the kind of muscle that no legislature and no governor could ignore. With the things that we could do for ourselves, for our families, for our students and for our communities.

Think of the relative powerlessness of teachers all across the United States of America. Think of the fact Presidents have gone to heads of professional organizations and to labor unions and to industrial organizations and to commercial groups. But nobody, no President of the United States, never has a President of the United States called in the voice of the teachers to ask who shall be a cabinet member or, what is your advice as to who should be appointed to the Supreme Court, or who shall be my vice-presidential running mate.

There are three million of us in the United States of America. But nobody ever calls us in to ask us these things.

Because we're too busy fighting each other. Now if we put this together in New York State and put it together in a way in which neither side dominates the other or swallows the other.

Because one, or two or three years from now teachers in Michigan and in Massachusetts and in California and Ohio and in Pennsylvania and in Illinois should look to New York and they should say, there's Tom Hobart and there's Al Shanker and there are the union people and there are the association people and neither side has ^{noted} ~~destroyed~~ the other. Neither side has dominated.

They're living well and they're doing well for their members and their school system. And if they can do it in New York, we can do it throughout the United States of America and build the most powerful force of good schools that has ever existed within this country.

[APPLAUSE]

That's the issue. Vote your fears and schools will go down while we're busy fighting each other. Vote your hopes and your dreams, there's nothing we cannot accomplish together. [SHANKER IS RECEIVING A STANDING OVATION]

MR. HOBART: There's a point of personal privilege at microphone 6.