TEACHER UNIONS: PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE INFLUENCE

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Introduction: This is the second in a series of four lectures sponsored by the Institute for Educational Policy Studies. This lecture is by Albert Shanker on 3/10/80. (An introduction by Stephen K. Bailey has not been transcribed.)

I would like to spend the time I have talking about two topics, and there are two and there is a relationship. The overall topic of the series deals with school governance, problems and prospects, and the specific issue in this talk deals with teacher unions -- past, present, and future influence. I think it's well to start with a reminder that we are so accustomed to picking up newspapers or listening to the media, watching and hearing talk about the negotiations or the lobbying of teacher groups, that most of us have a feeling that this was always so. Actually, the development of teacher unions is a very recent phenomenon in this country. The NEA has existed for well over 100 years, but for most of that time it was an organization which did not engage in either political action or in negotiations. It was what used to be called a professional association, and it became a union in many parts of this country in the mid 1960's, and in some parts of this country it is not yet a union. It's in a state of transition. Certainly the majority of states within that organization have now decided to become a union, have decided to opt for collective bargaining to negotiate contracts, to handle grievances, and generally to sever their relationships with school supervisors and administrators. The American Federation of Teachers, which was formed toward the end of World War I, had a rather interesting beginning. Most people think that as soon as the AFT was formed -- it was after all an AFL union -- that it's purpose was to act and behave like other unions. Not so. The AFT was founded by John Dewey, George Counts and other

professors of philosophy and education who did not forsee that teachers would one day act like other workers, although they both emphasized that teachers did have the problems of other workers and should have those rights. Rather, they thought that because teachers in public schools were educating the children of workers in this country that one way of being a more effective teacher was to participate in the struggles of the families that those children were involved in, and since those workers were involved in building a labor movement, that it would be a wonderful thing if teachers were part of the same labor movement and identified themselves with the struggles of the parents of the children that they were teaching -- very much like some of the recent participatory notions that to be an effective teacher, you should live in the ghetto or you should learn the language of the students, and so forth. And for many years, these organizations largely engaged in lobbying types of activities. And it was not until the very late 1950's in New York City that the teachers' union in that city decided to move toward collective bargaining, and all of these new movements have interesting backgrounds and histories. I would suggest that if you want to ask the question, 'why is it that all of a sudden, with a life from 1916 to 1957, '58, '59, that all of a sudden a teachers' union decided that it should behave like a union and really be a union?,' there were a number of accidents of the time. One of them was the fact that two of the subways in New York City -- the IRT and the BMT, which used to be private railroads -- went bankrupt and the city had to buy them or take them over because they had to maintain those mass transit facilities. And once they took them over, they took them over together with the union

that was there. It was similar to the nationalization of various industries in European countries after World War II, where the nationalization could not polictically result in the destruction of the collective bargaining relationship, and all of a sudden you had government involved in a collective bargaining relationship which it had not engaged in before. So teachers and other public employees in New York City said, 'well, they're government employees. If they can do it, why can't we?' Of course, another event of the period which was very important was the development of the Civil Rights movement, especially the activities of Dr. King, and the notion that public employees might strike was against the law. Franklin Roosevelt had made strong statements -- you don't have to go to Cal Coolidge. Roosevelt was pretty tough and so were other relatively liberal and pro-labor politicians. But what the Civil Rights movement of that period did was to raise the issue of whether it was not a proper thing to violate the law on occasion, if it was for a purpose which was a good purpose. And the combination of the subway workers having these rights, so that obviously it was not illegal or impossible, and the example of the great esteem in which many held the violations of law -- civil disobedience -- in the Civil Rights movement, those two provided a very strong background for the development of teacher unionism.

Well, in 1960 there was a strike in New York City. It lasted one day; it resulted a year later in the first collective bargaining election in the country. And then there began a series of elections in other places, laws, so that we now have half the states in the country with legislative procedures for collective bargaining. And in most other states without such procedures, public em-

ployees and teachers have compelled local management to engage in bargaining anyway. So that, for instance, there is no such law in Illinois, and many of the public employees would prefer to have no law because they engage in bargaining anyway but they don't have a law with anti-strike penalties. So that with the exception of Virginia, West Virginia, North Carolina -- a few states where the State Supreme Courts have ruled that in the absence of the law, collective bargaining is prohibited -- bargaining goes on either with specific laws or in the absence of laws. And during the 1960's the AFT gained membership, took various cities away from the National Education Association, and the NEA very rapidly became a union, started bargaining. And in the 1960's teachers did well; the country produced a lot of money; federal aid to education was passed; the newly formed and operating teachers' unions did well for their members and the concentration of teachers' unions during that period of time shifted away from lobbying -- and I should say that the lobbying of all of the previous periods had been a political type of lobbying. That is, the view was that keep education out of politics and politics out of education, and teachers would have an annual bus or train or caravan to the state capitol, never supporting one candidate or another, but it was always saying that 'you should support the following because it's good for education,' or 'it's good for teachers,' or 'it's good for the children.' It was not politics in the sense in which these organizations engage in it at the present time.

In the '60's there was a turning away from that. Teachers found that local collective bargaining, being able to negotiate, in many cases striking, developing contracts and grievance procedures --

there was a kind of instant sense of power, of satisfaction, of progress. Things that the teachers had tried to get over many years and were unable to get, all of a sudden were negotiated; there it was. And there was an attitude during the 1960's among most teachers in the country that politics, political action, lobbying, were a waste of time, that that had been a terrible thing, that that was a way in which teacher leaders who were not militant enough, strong enough, wise enough, spent the previous decades, and that the way to do it was at the bargaining table. And in 1968, as we approached the election between Hubert Humphry and Richard Nixon, I remember standing before a very large group -- I think about 800 to 1,000 teachers -- in New York City, and a few weeks before the election suggesting to them that we should endorse Hubert Humphry. And I was booed. Not because they were against Hubert Humphry, but they believed that the role of the union should be collective bargaining and that we should stay out of politics. There were a number of speeches there that 'once you start supporting political candidates, you get more interested in electing them and reelecting them than you are in doing things for your own members, and you're going to end up -- we won't know whether you're really for us or for the candidate you're supporting' -- a very strong distrust of what happens when a union and the union leadership gets involved in political endorsements and political action, whether it doesn't inevitably result in compromising the direct fight for economic well-being. Well, they were in a sense anti-political during that period of time.

The 1960's are no longer with us and I would like to spend just a few minutes on some of the major background changes which have

resulted in changes both in school governance -- the background of that -- and of what the teacher unions are likely to be doing in the period ahead. First, I would like to say that it is my belief that the major single change which has resulted in both a change in where teachers are and what their unions are now doing and will be doing and also in school governance is something which happened -- it's obvious that it happened; it's been pretty much unnoticed; not too many people have made a big thing of it, and yet I believe that it's central. And that is that somewhere -- I don't know whether it was 1957 or 1960 or 1963 -- but somewhere in that period of time, something happened which has changed the position of education in this country, the position of teachers, the position of school boards, and that is that somewhere in there for the first time in the history of the United States, the gap -- the educational gap -- between the majority of people out there and teachers got narrowed to the point where teachers were no longer looked up to because they were more educated than the average person. They were now as educated or less educated than many people within our communities; a certain kind of respect and authority relationship which had existed for almost 200 years -- because up until the time of the GI bill of rights, the teachers of this country were among the small percentage of people who were, if not college graduates, training school graduates, certainly high school graduates -- and as a result of that, the authority, the respect, the status of many teachers and many educational organizations -- as I meet with many groups on the national level -- there is still not an understanding or an appreciation of the fact that there is a kind of nostalgia for the good old days when we were viewed differently

and treated differently and respected, and 'how can we get that back?' -- almost a kind of stimulation as to 'what could we. . . what kind of public relations can we get out to make people respect us the way they did in 1939 or 1944 or 1945,' or something like that?

Now, in addition to that, the 1960's did something else too. The politics of education, I have mentioned, were pretty separate for a long period of time, but in the 1970's something happened which also has not yet been fully accepted -- I would say not yet been accepted by the educational community. In the 1970's there appeared, to anybody who wanted to look at it or understand, the direct link between the state of the economy and education. NEA, National School Board's Association, American Association of School Administrators, National PTA -- develop your list of organizations and ask yourself, 'have any of these organizations ever taken a position on any of the major national issues: taxation, unemployment insurance, Humphry-Hawkins, national health security -- you name it. Take a list of 20 or 30 major issues and ask 'have any of these organizations ever taken a position on any of these issues?' The answer is no. Why? Well, we are educational organizations; we deal with educational issues; we're apolitical; we don't deal with those issues. But in the 1970's something happened in terms of unemployment, recession, pressures on taxes. I was in Michigan early in the 1970's, talking to a group in a place that looked like this, to an audience like this -- mostly teachers in the audience, however -- and toward the end of the evening, somebody asked a question -- it was obviously going to be the last question of the evening. They said, 'Mr. Shanker, we are Michigan teachers. You're about to leave.

What do you think we ought to be most concerned with?' And I was kind of tired and I was a bit flip and I said, 'I think you ought to be most interested in tariff policies.' First they looked and then they laughed, and I said, 'now look, I know it's late in the evening and it sounded as though I was just trying to be flip about this, but think about it. You've got a huge oil industry in this state. One of the things that teachers do not understand and school board members -- we do not seem to understand that we get our money from taxes; we are getting it from the productivity of the private sector. The private sector in this state is going to be very much affected by an inflow of foreign cars.' This was before the energy crisis that I was there, so I didn't talk about energy. But I said that 'what happens to education is going to depend on a great many issues which none of you have ever bothered to think about as teacher unionists or as school board members, and I can't think of any other power group in this country that is as divorced in its thinking and concern, about the sources of its money as people in education. We just happen to think that because we're in a noble field and it's worthwhile and everything else, that somehow it will flow.' Well, it's too bad; a few years later there were all these workers that were laid off, but I still -- even after the 1970's, with the lay-offs of school teachers, with bankruptcy or near bankruptcy of school systems, with schools shut down for periods of time -- we still do not see the major organizations in education in this country taking any positions on the economic issues which would make a difference. Not only aren't they taking positions, there isn't much to show that the leaders of the organizations are educated on these issues themselves or that they are doing

anything to educate their members. I could understand the leaders saying, 'look, I understand this; it's very important, but my members don't understand it.' If you can see that, you'd begin a process of internal education. But there is no evidence as yet that any of the major -- I exclude, of course. . . but we can't do it alone, so I'm really talking about the educational. . . we can't; I wish we could -- the educational establishment. I include the NEA, the school administrators, the school principals, the national PTA, the School Board Association, the group of people that you would imagine get together from time to time -- and we do. So that the 1970's are a period where these major economic issues obviously -- direct demonstration that because of unemployment, this city had to increase its welfare. Or what happened when the interest rates went up? If you look at every major school district in the country, they used to be able to go out and issue tax-exempt bonds at 2%, 3%, 4%. When this went up to 8%, 9%, 10, 11, 12 -- what that did to the cost. . . the fact that school districts and the teachers had an interest in what the monetary policies were in the country. And we now see a similar new impact which is about to hit us obviously in terms of at least several different areas. One is military and defense expenditures, which will obviously increase in the next decade or two and will have an effect on the ability to finance education. Another is the growing understanding that we have neglected basic productive capacity and plant and that we are living -- in a sense, we are spending an endowment, and if we don't spend huge sums of money in terms of redeveloping the productive capacity of the country, that there will be a rapid decline in the near future of our standard of living, and that will have quite an impact

on the finance of education.

And when you talk about the finance of education, you really are talking about teacher unionism, or what is it that unions are about -- at least they're trying to maintain a standard of living and negotiate for their employees, and if the sources of money are not there, if they are not interested, not concerned, not dealing with where it comes from, then obviously there's a job that's not being done there. And these shifts in terms of finance have an impact on governance which I will get to in just a few minutes.

Another point in this area, which is part of the backdrop of what's happening here, is that teachers in the 1960's all of a sudden felt powerful -- you strike; you get a state law on collective bargaining; you sit down; you negotiate; you have a contract; you can take it to the principal; 'ha ha; you can't do this to me anymore; I can take a grievance' -- very strong feelings that way. But very, very great changes are taking place now. The demographics -- decline in student enrollment is very important in terms of schools, teachers, finance, but also very important in terms of the politics of education because not only fewer students, but with more people living longer, the percentage of adults with children in the schools, who have a direct interest in the financing of public education, is very rapidly declining. Not only that, you have the voting patterns of people -- senior citizens. About 65% of them vote. Of people in the younger brackets, about 45% of them vote on a national basis. So that when you take all of the considerations -- declining student population, the birth rate, the increase in the number of elderly voting patterns -- and then add to

that what the census is going to do in terms of the shift of the majority from the north to the south after this census in terms of voting patterns and values -- political values of the south in terms of maintaining public services -- we are. . . while teachers and their unions are viewed as being an extremely powerful force on the scene, and you get the newspaper editorials, you get the Right to Work Committee sending the letters out and everybody saying, 'will the teachers take over the management of the schools and education?' All of these things are happening. You have a public increasingly skeptical because they are more educated and unlikely to just follow -- likely to be more and more hostile. You have this tremendous impact of these economic, international, domestic changes in terms of financing, and then you have these massive changes in terms of power, in terms of. . . in the 1960's, if you compare the percentage of the population that had children in school -- and also we should not ignore one other thing about teachers in the 1960's. It's an experience that I went through -- I remember very well -- and that is that the first time we went on strike, we had very large-scale public support. You know, most of the time the public does not know what the details of a strike are about, but you got to remember that the teacher was viewed as somebody who -- the teachers had not been on strike before; they hadn't fought; there were the annual editorials, 'be kind to the handicapped'; 'be kind to the teacher who's underpaid and overworked'; and teacher recognition day -- pin the flower on the lapel and that sort of thing. And when the teachers went out on strike for the first time, most people out there said, 'well, I can't blame them.' That was the gut reaction. 'Even if it is against the

law -- I don't want you to break the law -- but I can't blame you.' But the second time you go out, its 'what? Again?' And the third time -- the issues hardly matter. The public does not usually get into the issues -- image questions here are very important. The first time it was the view. . . the same thing happened to the hospital workers in New York City. When they were making $23 a week and they first went out on strike, everyone said, 'that's wonderful. That's a great civil and human rights activity that they're organized.' But once they had their first strike and they made $35 a week, the morality was gone. They were now unionized workers and it wasn't the same anymore. The same thing is going to happen to Caesar Chavez. You know, the first time you're viewed as downtrodden. So that's something that's been lost also.

Well, we have some developments -- rapid movement -- in the whole question of governance of education, and this too, if you look at American history -- yes, the great school wars were there, as Diane Ravitch has pointed out. There have always been conflicts, but by and large we've had a delivery system which is very much like the public school system which we have in mind. And what we have before us now are very strong, effective movements for tuition tax credits, for vouchers. We have legislation that has been pending for some years now -- for a decade -- on early childhood education and family services, and one of the big debates around that legislation is whether the school system should be the sponsor of such services or whether such services should be sponsored by many different, community-based organizations -- youth agencies and so forth. So here you have a discussion about massive expansion of education, with the overwhelming power on the side that this should

not become part of the public school system. You have legislation like the youth employment and CETA in which huge, alternate, publically-funded school systems have been established by the federal government, with for the most part the public schools standing by and saying, 'thank God we don't have to take care of the drop-outs anymore.' And what you have is almost a competitive system. You know, the day that 16,000 teachers were laid off in New York City, in the three weeks after that,$56 million in Title III of CETA funds were given out by the mayor of the city of New York to churches and synagogues to run little educational programs in storefronts around the city of New York, so that while the public schools were being in a sense dismantled as a result of financial crises, the federal government was providing funds and the city was providing funds to finance an alternate school system.

Now, what has happened with many of these federal programs is that the federal government creates obligations on the part of public school systems: educate the handicapped, provide bilingual education -- huge obligations in terms of providing services, in terms, by the way, of integration of students, obligations which in many cases are unpopular with the public. And then when there is great public reaction, 'but the schools are not really doing a job educating the handicapped,' 'are not providing sufficient bilingual education,' or on the other side, 'have not integrated the schools, or 'we don't like what you're doing in terms of integration.' The federal government says to the schools, 'do this,' does not provide the ability for the schools to do it, and then creates financial support for alternative institutions which do not come under any of those regulations that the public schools are put under. So that I

visited in Baltimore some weeks ago a youth employment demonstration project designed to teach drop-outs basic skills. And I walked in and the first thing I saw was every single student in the place was a minority student. If any public school had that, there'd be some discussion of 'couldn't you bus or do something about it?' No question about that because this is not a public school; this is a federally funded, community-based organization doing this. Then I raised a question, 'do any of these students ever act up? Do they ever yell, scream, throw things, or fight?' 'Oh sure they do.' 'Well, what do you do?' 'Well, we have a point system here.' 'What's a point?' 'Well, if they're absent, they get a point. If they fight, they get a point. If they do this. . . If they get 8 points, we throw them out.' 'Throw them out for how long?' 'Throw em out forever.' 'What percentage of your students do you throw out?' '50%.' 'Well, so what happens?' So the agencies funded by the federal government -- no public school could expel a student on that basis under the Supreme Court's due process ruling. There is no provision for education of the handicapped in this program, which is a federal mandate for public schools. So what we have in the governance of education is a rapid. . . we have a bias on the part of federal agencies, on the federal government, and the bias is something like this. It's whoever cannot read, whoever cannot write, whoever can't count, whoever drops out -- whatever happens -- this is a result of the failure of the public schools. And therefore, instead of doing something about the public schools, what we ought to do is give up on them and we ought to give money to other agencies; we ought to give it to cities; we ought to give it to churches; we ought to give it to synagogues;

we ought to give it to the Labor Department or to the Agriculture Department or the Commerce Department; and they ought to be running such institutions. Now, it may very well be that those institutions could do a better job of educating than the schools, but the interesting thing is that whereas schools are required to maintain attendance records, none of these outfits are required to maintain attendance records. We know that there's vandalism in the schools; you'll never know that it's in any of these other agencies not required to keep such records. We know that test scores are going down in the schools because we have to give tests. None of these agencies -- I meet with leaders of community-based organizations who say, 'we have wonderful programs because we have innovations; we don't have the bureaucratic procedures. . . our kids really learn.' I say, 'well, do you give them tests? Do you have any evidence?' 'Oh no, we don't give them tests. That's another one of your bureaucratic procedures.' 'Well, how do you know?' 'Well, take my word for it.' Well, if the public schools had accountability procedures like that, we'd be much more successful too because they're just self-serving statements on the part of the people who have a strong interest. And yet take a look at it. There are billions of federal dollars flowing into the alternative programs.

My points are that there is a -- through federal policies -- a rapid movement away from public school as the delivery system for education to alternative organizations, federally funded. Teacher unions will in this next period continue to fight. They're engaged, to some extent, in a defensive fight to hold onto collective bargaining rights. A few years ago the public was very sym-

pathetic to teachers because teachers were powerless. Now the image is that teachers have too much power. There are some marvelous pieces that have been written that teachers are so powerful that they really control both sides of the bargaining table. After all, teachers are involved in electing school boards, and they're so powerful in electing school boards, Governors, legislators, Presidents and Congresses. And then on the other side they sit at the other side of the table and they practically write their own contracts and get the other side to rubber stamp them. And therefore there is movement in a number of states to cut back on the bargaining rights. There's no question that teachers will continue to be engaged in that basic battle. Beyond that, teachers are back into politics, but there is a question, an open question, as to whether the politics that teachers are involved in will be the narrow politics of only aid to education, only a separate department of education, or whether teacher politics will become a politics of understanding what are the sources of money -- first of all, an understanding of the declining power in terms of numbers of the education establishment; secondly, some kind of economic analysis, some sort of relationship to other economic powers within the country in terms of the fights that are about to take place. That is still an open question. But what it looks like right now is that the majority of teacher and education groups in this country, if I had to bet on it right now, will remain narrowly focused in terms of education, will not enter into questions of energy policy or money rates or employment policy, will continue going and fighting for a department of education and trying to get increased education funds, even as they become a smaller and

smaller part of the electorate and less and less powerful.

There is another set of issues which relates to the question of the narrowed educational gap between teachers and the public. In my view, the fact that most of the public is as educated or more educated implies that there ought to be a very strong quest for quality and standards and for some type of demonstrable evidence that the schools and teachers could give to the public showing that the schools do indeed perform and produce. And that ultimately, with an educated populace, that is the only thing that's going to satisfy. I do not believe that jingles on television or some sort of a quick slogan or a shopping bag or billboards or buttons or things like that -- I don't think any of those things will work, that over a period of time the public has to be convinced . . . it doesn't have to be convinced that the schools can cure every disease; it does have to be convinced that the schools are trying, that where the methods don't work, that they're trying something else. It also has to be convinced that where the schools have things that do work, that they're keeping them. That's one of the big problems of the schools is that we're oversold on innovation constantly. We're going to throw out everything and bring something new in -- the whole public relations nature of the political process in the schools. But unfortunately at the present time again in this field the battle seems to be that most education groups oppose any type of objective testing or measurement. And while there are many arguments given, it's largely based on fear, fear that if you have test scores that maybe teachers or school boards or administrators or somebody else will be held accountable or will be measured, and that the public is too stupid to under-

stand that tests don't tell you everything, that they are fallible, and that if test scores go down, maybe it means that we haven't put enough resources in. I mean there are all kinds of things that could be done with it, but right now the movement on the part of educators is to oppose testing because the test scores haven't given us good public relations. I found something very similar in this new movement for teacher centers, which many of you may be aware of. The federal government is now spending about $13 or $14 million. The idea is good; it's to develop collegiality. Teachers don't like to go to their principals and say, 'I really don't understand this,' because if you say that to your principal, it might be part of a confession which is used against you in a trial proceeding later on, so to have someplace where teachers can go in a non-threatening atmosphere, with people who have no authority over them, to ask questions and to get answers -- that's a fine idea. But quite a number of teacher groups are now saying, 'teacher centers are so wonderful that they are going to replace higher education in the future because why does a teacher need a college edduation? None of these college professors have ever taught in elementary and secondary schools; they really don't understand; it's all a lot of theory. The only people who could really help teachers are fellow teachers.' Well, what will that do to the status of teachers in this country? There's a kind of nationalism sweeping teachers: this great power. 'We're going to do this with teacher centers.' But there is also, both in the testing controversy and in the teacher controversy, the very worst response that you can possibly get in a era when the public is more and more educated, and that is the response of the education community is anti-

intellectualism: to say that these things don't matter, that they don't really test anything. No one raises the question at a teacher center of how do you know that the teacher who is helping others is any better? Who knows? How do you measure? How do you look at it?

Well, I've gone beyond my 30 minutes. I want to conclude by saying that my interest, and I think that if education groups could pull themselves together, that with 15,000 school districts in this country, each with 7, 8, 9, 10 elected public officials, with a parent organization, with 3 million teachers in this country who, unlike auto workers or rubber workers or others that live in every single election district election district in the country, there is a political power base that's there. What is lacking is not numbers or power; what is lacking up to now is a sense of connection to economic forces within our society and understanding of the economic and educational and intellectual issues. And I think that what is also lacking and what has to be brought home is some kind of a sense of history about what public schools have meant to this country. In all these talks about tax credits and vouchers, we fail to look at the fact that around the world there is heightened conflict among national, racial, ethnic, geographic groups. The countries that have more than one language -- a tremendous number of conflicts and wars. But American public education has had, in spite of the annual test scores that come out, has served a function which voucher schools will not serve and which tuition tax credit schools will not serve, that what we have not had and what we must have is an affirmation of the function that public schools have played within this country in terms of bringing people

together and look at the alternatives. No one seems to think, when they talk about tuition tax credits, of the Jonestown experiment or other groups that would be publically financed, and to ask, 'what would education or what would our society be like 10 or 15 or 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 years from now with the alternative institutions that are now being proposed?' So if I have left you with more questions than answers, that was the intention because that is where it is. We're in a terrible state of. . . education is under attack, and those of us in education have not put forces together in terms of a set of efforts, and I hope that I have given some indication of where I think those efforts should be.