

# WHERE ALBERT SHANKER STANDS

*The president of the American Federation of Teachers makes no apologies for his ties with labor, two jail sentences for the right to strike, and his advocacy of professional autonomy for teachers*  
BY PAUL KROPP

*Albert Shanker, the American Federation of Teachers president who leads over 600,000 American teachers, is driving his Buick through the New York City rush hour. In Poughkeepsie, 70 miles to the north, 250 teachers are waiting to hear him speak. On the way, stopping only when the traffic crushes dangerously close, he spoke with Forum interviewer Paul Kropp.*

**Forum:** *What problems are on the horizon for American schools?*

**Shanker:** The coming teacher shortage is a major problem. We expect half the teachers in the United States will leave teaching in the next seven years. That's 1.1 million teachers. Demographically we now have a relatively small number of students in college and universities, so there will be a great deal of competition for college graduates. In the past, public schools were blessed with a large number of talented people who came to us not because they loved teaching or were well paid, but because they were running away from other problems. That no longer holds true.

In the great depression, teaching was a job—and any job was a good job. So outstanding people competed with each other to get into the schools. After World War II, quite a few men decided that they'd rather fight in the schools of Boston or Washington than fight in Korea or Viet Nam. So we got a lot of talented men who might not otherwise have gone into teaching.

Of course, the largest talent pool we had was women. Now you look in any law school and half the students are women; half the students in business

school are women; a third in dental school. All those women could have been on their way to becoming teachers. So we have a terrible problem—very few people are preparing to become teachers. And most of those who are preparing to be teachers are in the bottom quarter of their college classes.

**Forum:** *How do you attract excellent teachers?*

**Shanker:** One part is obviously money. We don't have to tell prospective teachers that they're going to become rich. But we still have many school districts hiring new teachers at \$13,000 a year when the average college graduate can get a starting salary of \$20,000. That gap is much too great.

Just as important as money is the nature of the job. In the thirties, if I asked my parents why did they work, they'd say, "You wanna eat?" Both my parents had tough, dirty jobs. But in the United States today, seven out of 10 people will not say, "I want to eat." They'll say, "I enjoy my job," or "I get a certain satisfaction, I have certain abilities that I enjoy using, people respect me, I get to do things my way."

Teaching, unfortunately, is still a highly regulated job. Bright people do not want to be treated like children. We're not going to get smart people into the field unless we can say to them, you're going to be able to use your intelligence to make decisions.

It's one of those circular issues. The more we do not permit teachers to make decisions and treat them like children, the more we get people who are dumb coming into teaching. And the more dumb people we get in, the more we

have to closely supervise them. And the more we supervise teachers, the more we drive out smart people who don't want to be treated that way.

**Forum:** *How do you break the cycle?*

**Shanker:** I have proposed a system of "Board Certification," where the profession itself certifies that somebody is outstanding in our field. Instead of having school boards or superintendents tell us who the outstanding teachers are, the science teachers, the math teachers, the special education teachers, ought to set up a system for identifying outstanding practitioners. And those outstanding teachers should be paid more and given the power to run their schools.

Schools shouldn't be like a factory with a foreman telling teachers what to do. Rather, we should certify some outstanding teachers and then treat them like senior partners in a law firm. They would do the training, the hiring of new people, the selection of materials. Then we wouldn't need so many administrators. New York City schools have more administrators than all the schools in France put together. Our city spends \$5,000 on the education of each child. But when you figure that there are 30 students in a class, then where does that \$150,000 go? The teacher might cost—if you include pension and other costs—maybe \$55,000 or \$60,000. Where does the rest of the money go?

**Forum:** *How do we make better schools?*

**Shanker:** We've got to rethink how schools are organized—especially since the reports tell us teachers are spending 85 percent of their time lecturing to students who are not listening or are bored. We could be using technology to handle

90 percent of what we do when we lecture. There are video cassettes that tell us how Eskimos live in Alaska better than any teacher's lecture.

**Forum:** *Then what is the job of the teacher?*

**Shanker:** The teacher creates new learning materials, matches up students with the technology, and runs the other activities that ought to be going on in the classroom. The teacher's job is to do the hard part of teaching—to get students to organize their thoughts, to put them into writing, to be able to persuade other people to agree with them. If I remember what was important in my school experience, it wasn't being able to answer idiot multiple choice tests—it was being forced to write essays until blood came out of my index finger. That process of thinking and organizing and writing is something that no machine can teach—and that's the job that teachers should be doing.

**Forum:** *What are the real enemies of public education?*

**Shanker:** I think bad management and a certain lack of imagination. It's the kind of mentality you get when an institution has been safe for 200 years and suddenly it's in danger. I don't think that most school principals or superintendents really believe public schools could disappear and be replaced by private schools. Nor do they have a feeling in their guts of what that would mean to our entire society. Therefore, they continue doing business as usual. And they resist making changes because there's always a price for making changes.

The public is saying they don't have faith in the institution. The reason they're saying that is because we did such a good job educating them. We have a much better-educated citizenry. People today want more from their schools than my parents wanted.

**Forum:** *How do you start satisfying these new demands?*

**Shanker:** You need the Saturn project approach. Start with some empty buildings. Then invite those teachers who want to think about new ways of learning to come there. Of course, some of that was done in the sixties, but the mistake we made then was allowing the children to be the ultimate determiners of what the curriculum would be. If we have a firm grasp of what we want—which is to transmit our culture and to get youngsters to be able to function as intelligent citizens—then the only real

question is, what's a better way to do this than what we've got now.

**Forum:** *Should teachers be involved in politics?*

**Shanker:** Sure. They're citizens and employees just like everybody else. They have the same right—and I would say obligation—as people in banking or business. The question of who teaches, how big classes are, who makes decisions in the system, how violent and disruptive youngsters should be handled—there isn't one question that's not decided politically. So if we're not in

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politics, we're not in major educational decision making at all.

**Forum:** *What about your competing organization, the National Education Association?*

**Shanker:** The NEA started at the end of the Civil War and it was mainly an organization of principals and superintendents and a few college professors. It wasn't an organization of teachers. In its first two years, the AFT had signed up more teachers than the NEA had in 60 years. But after World War I, there was a big Red scare, and a lot of superintendents went around the country urging teachers to sign up with the NEA, which became the company union. So the NEA became a massive organization as a result of employer domination. As late as 1964 the NEA national executive board had only three teachers on a board of 100 people.

In 1960, when there was no collective bargaining for teachers in the United States, the NEA urged teachers to vote against it. They said, essentially, that steelworkers and garment workers

have collective bargaining and if we had collective bargaining our status would be lowered to that level. Well, the teachers rejected the NEA view by better than three to one in a massive referendum. After that, a group of young Turks took over the NEA. The new leadership didn't come out for collective bargaining, they came out for "professional negotiations"; and they didn't come out for strikes, they came out for "professional holidays" or "sick days" or "sanctions." So ultimately the NEA adopted all our policies and positions and called them by different names.

Now we still differ on the question of whether teachers should affiliate with the rest of the labor movement. It seems to me that once you adopt the philosophy of unionism—that the individual alone is not powerful enough to confront the institution for which he or she works, so the collective strength of everyone at the local level is needed—then you're committed to affiliation. We know it's not enough to work at the local level because control lies at the state or provincial level. So, if the logic is, the more people you have supporting you, the more powerful you are—then why not be in an organization where you can win over the support of all the other people in the labor movement. I mean, is the AFT stronger or weaker when it goes to Washington speaking for the 14 million members of the AFL-CIO and not just 650,000 teachers? The influence you have when you're part of a much larger organization is much greater.

Besides, the rights of teachers to negotiate will not be preserved for long unless the rights of other workers are protected. Teachers were not among the first to win those rights, they were among the last.

**Forum:** *You twice went to jail for a strike.*

**Shanker:** I went to jail in 1968 and 1969. When a strike is called here under New York law, the city calls for an injunction, and then there are fines and the leader is subject to going to jail. I went twice—each time for 15 days. It doesn't sound like a long time, but it's long when you're inside.

**Forum:** *It's been eight years since . . .*

**Shanker:** Well, they changed the law. They don't actually send labor leaders to jail any more. They found it increased my popularity with the members too much, even with the general public.

**Forum:** *Are there times when the right thing to do is to go to jail?*

**Shanker:** Oh sure. Those were basically defensive strikes. We had no other choice but to do it. What we did was not only good for teachers—there were issues that were good for schools and good for children. I still don't understand why anyone would want to prohibit teachers from striking. It seems to me it's one respect in which our society resembles countries we don't like very much. What happens now in New York state is that the first day of a strike is immediately an illegal activity. It's ridiculous—the first day of a strike is usually the first day after a 10-week summer vacation. Somehow the 10 weeks of summer vacation didn't injure the child, but the first day of a strike does.

**Forum:** *What's it like to work with Ronald Reagan and the right-wing groups who look at the schools and say that the only important thing is discipline?*

**Shanker:** I happen to think that discipline is a good thing because the liberals are very bad at that. So that's one of the pluses of Reagan's administration. But to talk about discipline and then take money out of the schools is ridiculous. You can't just throw tough kids out on the street. By cutting budgets, we reduce the number of options for what we can do with these young people.

Of course there are many things we fight the administration about—their budget cuts, their move toward prayer in the schools, tuition vouchers. But we agree with them on a couple of things. We agree with bilingual education. We support the Talented Teacher Act, which gives college scholarships to bright students who promise to teach for five years.

**Forum:** *Let's look at an issue that seems to put you on the political right. The concept of merit pay, extra pay for "better" teachers, is flatly rejected in Ontario—but you've embraced it here. Or so it seems.*

**Shanker:** I didn't embrace the concept of merit pay. Everything that everybody said is wrong with it is wrong with it. But I did say, when the majority of the public feels that public schools are no longer working well, when most citizens are prepared to pay tax credits or provide vouchers for private schools—then you'd better make as many friends as you can. When the reform movement came along after *A Nation at Risk* appeared, a lot of governors, politicians, and businesspeople came out to strengthen public education. It was important not to turn around and kick

these friends of public education by saying that they're crazy or stupid for liking the concept of merit pay. What I said was, we've got a lot of influential friends here—it's our obligation to consider all the proposals that they're making.

So now we have entered into a dialogue with the business community. After all, what they're saying is that the future success of their business depends on good public education. And that means they'll support us if they think we're doing a good job. I haven't seen any of them come along and say, Al I

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want to run the schools, do this, this and this. They've got some ideas from their own experience. They want to know if their ideas will apply to public schools. If we've got some good answers they'll usually agree with us. If we don't have good answers, we ought to be willing to try some of the things they propose.

**Forum:** *Have you seen a merit pay proposal that's worth trying?*

**Shanker:** First, it depends on what you call merit pay. Second, there are at least a dozen U.S. districts where they've had merit pay for a decade or more and the teachers like it. If there are districts where you can avoid the obvious pitfalls—teacher demoralization, favoritism, aggressive competition rather than cooperation—if merit pay works in these places, then why should we oppose it?

Now, the districts where it works tend to be those where teachers are fairly well paid and well treated and the kids are "learning" students. In those districts, the question of who gets merit pay and what the qualifications are—the

administration leaves that up to the teachers. They say, you work it out, but you should do it because the community wants outstanding people recognized.

**Forum:** *So you favor peer review?*

**Shanker:** Not always peer review. In some places teachers develop an objective set of standards and anybody who meets those standards gets it. Interestingly, in no place where merit pay works is it awarded solely on the basis of whether the person is a good performer in the classroom.

**Forum:** *What about those plans connected to pupil performance?*

**Shanker:** There is no successful program connected to pupil performance. We don't measure doctors on whether their patients live or die, but on the basis of how well they do given the patient they get in the first place. So if we did that with teaching, we'd have to evaluate not the real achievement of students, but the expected achievement given that a student comes to us with certain deficiencies or problems. And that gets us in another mess. We'd have to label students—we'd have to say to certain students that we expect them to make only six months' progress this year because we think you're not intelligent and you come from a poor home and we don't expect you to perform. Now that's ridiculous.

**Forum:** *Give us an example of a merit pay plan that works.*

**Shanker:** In Florida there are school merit pay plans. Essentially it does develop a school set of standards based on expectation, that is to say, past performance of that group of students. Then it says to the teachers in the school, if you meet the following goals—it could be attendance, or achievement, or reduction in dropouts—then your school will be awarded x number of thousands of dollars. And you can divide that among all the members of the faculty, or buy equipment, or create new programs. Instead of getting teachers to compete against each other, instead of preventing me from helping my neighbor who's competing with me—the plan compels me to turn to my neighbor and say, "Look, would you do this because you're messing things up for the whole school." So we have an incentive for the entire school.

**Forum:** *So competition can work?*

**Shanker:** Sure. Competition can be very healthy. The issue is not to keep competition out of education, the issue is to find ways to use it appropriately. ♣