

ALBERT SHANKER INTERVIEW

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3 QUESTION: Dan Sanders, a very important leader
4 of the AFT, is going to be leaving us. I wonder if you have
5 a few words to say about Dan.

6 PRESIDENT SHANKER: Well Dan and I go back a long
7 way, thirty-five years in the teacher union movement, starting
8 in Junior High 126 which was one of a handful of schools where
9 there was any union activity. Dan signed me up.

10 He signed up quite a few other people in the
11 school and we literally spent our lunch hours--we went
12 out for beer and pizza after school. We went to each
13 other's homes just planning, thinking, trying to figure
14 out how to get teachers to join the union and to believe
15 in it.

16 Dan very soon became the editor of the newspaper
17 which means he wrote everything and went to the printer and
18 pasted up headlines. It was a four-page tabloid. One person
19 put it out and it was Dan.

20 In those early days every member was promised
21 that the newspaper would be delivered to their homes in an
22 unmarked envelope so that even the postman wouldn't know
that they were members of the union.

1 Dan, however has done about every type of work
2 that you can think of, not just editorial work, but he did
3 organizing. We all know him. In NYSUT, he is the outstanding
4 lobbyist and legislative person. He has organized and con-
5 ducted strikes. He has gone into places where we had almost
6 no members and got us to be the collective bargaining agent.
7 It is just an unbelievable story in terms of the number of
8 things that Dan has been master at and the contributions
9 that he has made over this very long period of time.

10 On a personal note, for many years we lived
11 practically next door to each other. We drove to work and
12 back and gave each other ideas, told teacher jokes, argued
13 with each other and spent countless hours in negotiations
14 that sometimes would go for a number of months locked in a
15 negotiating room and sleeping on the floor until the strike or
16 set of negotiations was over.

17 Dan, of course, has also played a national role
18 going way back to the original voucher notion. There was
19 an attempt to impose it in Rochester. Some places in
20 the northeast, and I remember he went out to California to
21 see how it looked there and came back with a report which
22 prevented it from being imposed elsewhere.

1 And in New York, he was a central figure in
2 the merger of both organizations; on the committee to help
3 bring it together, and of course, helped to make the new
4 organization--not so new anymore--NYSUT. the great success
5 that it is today.

6 QUESTION: Can you tell us about Dan's role in the
7 merger?

8 PRESIDENT SHANKER: Well, putting an organization
9 together together sounds easy after it is all done, but
10 when you have two separate groups that had almost no con-
11 tact with each other over the years except for occasional
12 fights over a piece of turf--first, of course, was the
13 problem of developing some understanding, so that both sides
14 would trust each other and Dan was at the center of that.

15 Then there was the question of how do you get the
16 staffs of both organizations to be willing to support it,
17 and then there was the problem of how do you physically just
18 put two staffs together, two newspapers, two groups of
19 lobbyists and you have duplications. How do you make that
20 work together?

21 And Dan was really the person who more than any-
22 body else on the AFT side devoted full time to thinking about

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2 it. And the service structure that we have today was largely
3 of Dan's making. Dan's notion was this, and I can
4 remember through all the talks he said this is not going
5 to be a cheap organization to be a member of.

6 In those days we were paying dues to two national
7 organizations, and state organizations and locals that
8 were running very good operations and had very high dues
9 structures.

10 He kept saying over and over again in order to
11 make sure that the membership stays in, we have to have
12 a tremendous delivery service. We have to guarantee
13 protection to people, we have to have services that are
14 available to every member, and only if they see those
15 services and see them directly, are they going to remain
16 loyal to the organization.

17 Many of the things that we take for granted were
18 things that Dan sat at the table and said no matter what it
19 costs that we have got to do it because the members are not
20 going to pay for an organization unless they can visibly see
21 what they are getting.

22 QUESTION: All right, if we can just for a minute
switch gears now, I am going to ask you a few questions for

1 a video that we are producing to be used for organizing
2 the PSRPs. The whole production is about 15 minutes in
3 length.

4 We are focusing on why a paraprofession school-
5 related personnel person should join the AFT? What would
6 you say to someone who asked you Why, Al, should I join the
7 AFT as a PSRP?

8 MR. SHANKER: Well, many PSRPs across the country are not
9 in the AFT and there are many of them who do not have any
10 effective organization fighting for them, and I think the
11 first thing to do is just to compare the kinds of things that
12 we managed to do for those who did come and join us and
13 allowed us to work with them and to help them.

14 That includes memberships in pension systems where
15 they were denied pensions before. There are places which
16 now have certification where there was no certification. It
17 is places where we managed to put them on annual salary
18 whereas before that they were just hourly workers. There
19 were places where people were always stuck in dead-end
20 and poorly paid jobs where we have negotiated a career
21 ladder where they get time off and they get their college
22 education paid for. We have thousands who started out as

1 paraprofessionals making \$1.75 an hour who are now class-
2 room teachers making \$35,000 a year and more. Those are
3 just some of the things.

4 You do not get those benefits without a good,
5 strong organization., and an organization that believes in
6 not just doing a little better, but really believes in
7 transforming the role of school-related personnel and
8 understanding that in a school, nobody should be a second-
9 class citizen.

10 QUESTION: You know AFT has been recognized as
11 the ideas organization. We have been in forefront of the
12 education reform movement, and we now have a vision of how
13 schools in the future might look, "dramatically different"
14 as you called it.

15 What role or how will the jobs of paraprofession-
16 al school-related personnel change in this vision of schools
17 for the future, and why and why is that good for them?

18 PRESIDENT SHANKER: Well, our schools now don't
19 work very well for most students. They work pretty well
20 for about 20 to 25 per cent of the students. Those are the
21 ones who really learn math and they learn how to read com-
22 plex materials and they learn how to write effectely, but

1 80 per cent of the students, even those who remain in
2 school, 75 to 80 per cent, never get up to that skill level
3 and the reason it seems is pretty clear because a lot of
4 youngsters just can't sit still for that period of time that
5 they are required to.

6 Well, a lot of them can't learn by just listen-
7 ing to somebody else all day long. They might learn if
8 in addition to listening they were able to watch a video
9 tape, listen to an audio tape, do a program on a computer,
10 sit down with an adult in the school and get some
11 individualized instruction, maybe have some peer tutoring
12 with some older youngster, so if you think of the schools
13 of the future as one that gets away from this lecture method
14 which is not effective for 75 or 80 per cent of the kids,
15 and it is a place where the kids can move around and use
16 different ways of learning, then the paraprofessional is no
17 longer the junior assistant helper in the classroom. The
18 paraprofessional really is, at times, a teacher. And so are
19 some older students teachers at sometimes.

20 And at times you won't need an adult at all. There
21 will be a video cassette. It really turns the entire in-
22 stitution into something that is very, very different

1 and it is more of a partnership or teamwork type of
2 operation where different members of a team are at different
3 bases and playing different roles, and we get away from this
4 structure that we have got now where the superintendant is
5 the boss and he dumps on the principal and the principal
6 turns around and dumps on the teacher, and the teacher
7 can get angry at the students and sometimes at the para
8 where the whole thing is top-down and it is more like the
9 army.

10 We need something that is more like a hospital
11 that works well, or a law firm or an architect's firm where
12 you have got a lot of people doing important work and playing
13 leadership rolls. It is a new kind of school. I think it is
14 going to be great for teachers. It is going to be great
15 for school-related personnel.

16 Mostly it is going to be terrific for kids because
17 right now kids who could be learning are really sort of shut
18 out of the whole thing because they are not those few kids who
19 can learn by listening to a lecture.

20 QUESTION: It is wonderful. Thank you.

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