

# Albert Shanker's Legacy: Comment on Norm Scott and Vera Pavone's Review in #45

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LEON TROTSKY'S TRANSITIONAL PROGRAM begins with words that have made the left nuts ever since. "The world political situation as a whole is chiefly characterized by a historical crisis of the leadership of the proletariat," the old exiled Bolshevik and Red Army founder wrote. That analysis was arguable in 1938, when it was written, less so in the 1960s, when the United Federation of Teachers was formed. Would that it were remotely plausible today. Yet that stilted frame of looking less at the development of social classes or class institutions and more at the maneuvers and peccadilloes of alleged elite "misleaders" characterizes what's so wrong with Vera Pavone and Norman Scott's review of Richard Kahlenberg's *Tough Liberal*, his political biography of teacher union leader Albert Shanker. Now Kahlenberg's book is hard to like. It's a defense attorney's brief for a highly controversial figure, and Pavone and Scott are not wrong to call it hagiographic, or the life of a saint. Shanker, whatever his strengths and failings, was no saint, yet the biography does read as if Kahlenberg's hand were manipulated by divine forces to write an institutional history that even few in the present teachers union would stand by. Yet in place of hagiography, the authors opt for demonology, the study of fallen angels, and their idealized approach shares far more with the hagiographers than they know. They blame Shanker and his democratically elected successors for every ill that befell educators in the last 40 years. For them, Shanker is the mustachioed villain in a silent film, his signature heavy-frame glasses in place of facial hairs; the "ruthless neocon" regnant. Why that picture is worth taking issue with — the authors are themselves longtime critics of the UFT's successive leaderships and are entitled to their views — is that their take on unions is emblematic of a weakness on the left: where rank-and-file maunderings of any sort are valorized, while elected leaders are excoriated, whoever they are and whatever their histories and strengths. Full disclosure. In my day job, I work for the man. Or at least the woman. My boss is Randi Weingarten, president of both the 200,000 member United Federation of Teachers in New York City and — since July — president of the 1.4 million strong American Federation of Teachers, too. This reply is not an official union communiqué, merely a perk of being a *New Politics* editorial board member. I'm not even a UFT member or a former classroom teacher, but a union staff writer, though in a former life I was a college teacher and a delegate to two national AFT conventions, the second of which saw Shanker ascend to the presidency. I claim no right to challenge the authors' views on specific internal union matters, nor will I do so. But surely the point of view of habitual dissidents whose union caucus garnered just 7 percent of the vote in the last presidential election, and who remain a null factor in union politics is itself a telling critique. These were the wrong reviewers to take on Kahlenberg. This isn't to dismiss a minority of one, or deny Gandhi's injunction that "In matters of conscience, the law of majority has no place." I've been in that minority frequently enough, including as a former steelworker who despised a leadership that stood stock still as the mills closed. Being in the minority can be an honorable place to be. But it also can be a self-interested, self-justifying place. The least a minority can do is speak as if it deserves to be a majority and act as a shadow leadership, though prominent members of "out" caucuses are by nature no more the bearers of truth and virtue and no less self-interested than are caucus leaders who are also elected union officials. No wonder the reviewers' critique of Shanker and his successors is so sweeping. They even blame Shanker for the Bush assault on education through the misnamed No Child Left Behind Act. Since Shanker died years before the coming of the NCLB, this is like blaming Edmund Burke for the massacre at Peterloo. Long after Shanker's passing, NCLB was sold to Congress as something that would narrow the yawning achievement gap between white and minority students by making schools accountable. Many are not, and it's one reason that numerous

civil rights groups today support reauthorizing the law, despite its dangers to public education. Among the law's many faults, it emphasizes testing as a one-stop means of assuring accountability, leaving students and teachers ill-served. Tests don't measure higher-order skills, and contemporary supporters of the 1983 report "A Nation at Risk," least of all Shanker, never saw testing as key to the report's recommendations. Then the Bush administration's NCLB radically underfunded remedial programs. It also exaggerated what any schools could accomplish, unlike the group Bold Approach, which urges instead moving beyond just reforming schools to tackling social and economic disadvantages in the larger world, so that preschoolers entering school come prepared to learn. No wonder both the teachers unions — the AFT and the NEA — concluded that NCLB was just a tool to bust unions, eliminate tenure, create more turnover and hire younger, inexperienced, lower-paid educators. Among the problems: NCLB was done on the cheap. Again, this was nothing Shanker predicted, advocated or accepted. The truth is that Al Shanker was more a tragic figure than an evil one. A brilliant union organizer, his virulent anti-communism and his ties to the AFL-CIO's egregious George Meany put him on the wrong side of history. But to posit a 40-year record of class collaboration and teacher union defeats orchestrated by a ruthless personality — as Pavone and Scott do — is over the top. When the authors wonder "how Kahlenberg could square Shanker's reputation for militancy with support for a regime that has weakened teacher unionism, demeaned teachers, and undermined public education," I don't recognize the UFT here. I don't even recognize the United Auto Workers, which it can be fairly argued has done a poor job of defending members against concessions, plant closings and off-shoring of jobs. Yes, another man or woman might have handled the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community control fight better, and the split between African-American community activists and what was then a predominantly white union was a wound that took decades to heal. But what sparked the battle wasn't Shanker's doing; it was the unilateral move of the experimental district's leadership to transfer teachers — mostly union activists — without due process. The bottom line for the union had to be defense of members' job security, especially given the "let's you and him fight" perspective of the Ford Foundation, a principal supporter of the experimental district. Every union — especially a public sector union — should put a premium on forming and maintaining excellent relations with the surrounding communities. In fact the future of trade unions may lie not so much in organizing sectorally as geographically and class-wide — as Bill Fletcher Jr. observes. But if a union betrays its own present members' palpable interests, it's lost its reason to exist. The fact that within two years of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville debacle the UFT succeeded in winning representation rights for the workforce of largely African-American and Latino school paraprofessionals suggests the racial wounds were already healing. A racist union couldn't have sparked that organizing drive. Neither could a broken union. And it is disingenuous to write, contra Kahlenberg's assertion that the union's critics were "a coalition of wealthy whites and angry blacks," that "one would be hard put to find people in the black community who feel they have or have ever had the support of wealthy whites." Have the authors never heard of united fronts from above? The Lindsay administration certainly did. The authors are also factually wrong about Shanker being responsible for the givebacks during the city's fiscal crisis of the 1970s. It was Victor Gotbaum of AFSCME DC 37 and Barry Feinstein of IBT Local 237 who delivered municipal workers and their pensions into the arms of the bankers and the bond raters. As to the union's not calling strikes in some 30 years: the strike isn't the point; it's the inevitability of a unified strike and its crippling effect on the employer that matters. It's strike preparation that matters. The best strike is one that doesn't get called. With half of all new teachers leaving the city schools in their first seven years, building a strike consciousness alone is Herculean. Should it be considered? Yes, in spite of New York State's Taylor Law, which heavily penalizes strikers and their unions, strikes must never be written off. But organizing a successful strike action takes more than calling upon the creatures from "the vasty deep," like Shakespeare's Glendower, when the real question is "will they answer?" just as the city transit workers learned from their aborted 2005 job action when, as critics of that union's leadership say rightly, little strike preparation was done or outreach to the public planned. Yes, strikes and strike preparation have even greater value than what is on the table during a labor

dispute. They're a teachable moment of the best kind. Rosa Luxemburg's idea that "Those who do not move, do not notice their chains," is as true today as when the German revolutionary wrote it. But there are numerous ways to move and strategies and tactics for choosing when and how to move. Even the seemingly intractable Lenin knew about tactical retreats. That's also why cars come with multiple gears.

[reply by Scott and Pavone]

## **Footnotes**