

Albert Shanker's Legacy: Reply to Michael Hirsch

June 12, 2009

MICHAEL HIRSCH'S CRITIQUE misleads, or outrightly distorts, many of the points we made in our review.*

Shanker and NCLB

THE TWO-DECADE LONG ROAD from "A Nation at Risk" to NCLB runs right through Shanker and is paved with Shankerisms: accountability, standards, high stakes tests, narrowing curriculum to what's "measurable," identifying and punishing schools (and ultimately, teachers), and charter schools as an alternative to public schools. Clinton's "Goals 2000" plan, which Shanker mostly endorsed, was a predecessor to NCLB. Kahlenberg praises Shanker's role in the process through his alliances with the business community. Hirsch claims the AFT was opposed to NCLB when in fact, Shanker's successor, Sandra Feldman, sat on the NCLB committee and lauded many of the provisions, something the NEA did not do. Since then the AFT/UFT has consistently signed on to the standards/accountability bandwagon, giving short shrift to lower class size and other essential learning conditions.

The 1968 Strike

HIRSCH BUYS THE KAHLENBERG POSITION that the 1968 strike was about job security and due process and Shanker had no options, a fairly simplistic approach given that the UFT has always counseled teachers to transfer when under attack. Hirsch misses the irony of shutting down the entire school system due to the transfer of 11 teachers, when today the union has agreed to the transfers of hundreds of teachers out of DOE-labeled "failing" schools, teachers unable to get positions and forced to work as day-to-day subs due to the union's giveaway of seniority rights. Podair's more nuanced analysis in *The Strike That Changed New York* indicates that Shanker had more of an agenda than just defending due process rights.

The 1975 Fiscal Crisis/Strike

HIRSCH BLAMES GOTBAUM instead of Shanker for the givebacks and pension bailouts. In his "Where We Stand" column (Oct. 19, 1975), Shanker contradicts Hirsch, justifying the use of \$300 million in teacher retirement funds: "[T]eachers stepped forward when no one else would. They resisted the normal human instinct to slash back at those who had torn into them. The bankers interrupted their incessant prattle about civic responsibility just long enough to refuse pleas that they help bail the city out." Shanker forced the end of an effective and powerful strike, agreeing to a contract that ensured the layoff of 10,000+ teachers.

Attempt to Marginalize Us

HIRSCH PORTRAYS US as disgruntled, ineffectual leftists, tied to outdated ideological baggage. Our thrust has always been to build an active and informed membership. UFT leaders have not always been wrong, nor do we claim the rank and file is always right. Leaders should be responsible, honest, and promote democracy: a dynamic relationship between leadership and membership that allows a variety of views to be aired. From Shanker on, Unity Caucus has used its power to stifle critical voices challenging its positions. It attempts to deny opposition access to teacher mailboxes,

despite the fact that the right was won in a grievance without any help from the union. Using an erroneous analysis of the results of the citywide union elections, Hirsch tries to marginalize our critique and us. In the 2007 election only 21 percent of active teachers voted. The opposition ICE/TJC slate received over 22 percent of the vote of classroom teachers and 12 percent of the total vote, not the 7 percent Hirsch claims. A remarkable 47 percent of the vote cast was by retirees (out of the reach of the opposition) who voted 90 percent for Unity/ Weingarten who promote themselves by using dues to fly around the United States to meet with retirees. Unity earned 14 percent (10,000) of the 70,000 classroom teachers, a drop by a third from 2004 (15,500). These results point to a significant loss of legitimacy and support for the union leadership. Numerous members of the opposition serve as school delegates and Chapter leaders, despite often vicious campaigns in chapter elections, which sometimes include interference by Unity Caucus reps and collusion with principals. As individuals and through our caucuses and organizations, we have been critical of the union leadership from Shanker through Weingarten. Hirsch knows full well the level of attention the UFT leadership pays to what we have to say, often adopting our language and pretending to support our positions, while undermining attempts to build activism that can challenge NYC DOE's attacks on public education, educators and union members.

Conclusion

ONE CANNOT UNDERESTIMATE Shanker's role in shaping the UFT, the AFT, and the union movement, principally through SDUSA, its front organizations, its ties to government institutions and elected and appointed government officials, and its influence among union hierarchies. This raises many questions concerning the role of leadership and the piecemeal destruction of a labor movement both in this country and abroad. Thanks to Ira Goldfine for his help with this reply. *Our response is limited by our allotment of space. A more comprehensive response will be posted on the web site and the Education Notes online blog.