Albert Shanker: Ruthless Neo-Con

written by Vera Pavone, Norman Scott | June 14, 2009

WITH PUBLIC EDUCATION, teacher unions and classroom teachers under one of the most severe attacks in history by corporate funded think tanks, education profiteers, self-proclaimed pundits, and politicians from both parties, along comes a hagiography of Albert Shanker by Richard Kahlenberg, to add to the drumbeat. Kahlenberg's *Tough Liberal*purports to demonstrate the consistency of Shanker's ideology over time — support for democracy, union militancy, teacher rights, civil rights, equality, strict national educational standards and accountability for teachers — with the massive changes in education that have swept the country. Kahlenberg lauds Shanker for starting the ball rolling on many of the ideas that ultimately generated No Child Left Behind — federal mandates imposing market-driven forces and enforcing a factory model of schools, with a rigid test-driven agenda where rewards and punishment are based on the degree of success in carrying out these mandates. States, local school districts, schools, school leaders, and teachers are expected to adhere to a protocol that includes high stakes testing, frequent and heavy-handed monitoring, pre-approved educational programs, closings of public schools, hiring and firing teachers and supervisors based on a narrow judgment of student achievement, dumbing down assessments, and forcing school systems to adopt longer school days and years. The initiatives that Shanker claimed would save public education have ended up punishing senior (higher paid) teachers, victimizing struggling students, shifting students to private and charter schools, and hiring private contractors to take over functions formerly under the purview of public systems. These initiatives unleashed a throng of self-proclaimed educational reformers, few of whom were experienced educators, coming instead from the ranks of lawyers, corporate executives, and think tank researchers. They and their cheerleaders in the news media paint teachers as the enemies of reform. They complain that unions are major obstacles to reform, and they attack contracts that call for limits on class size, limits on time teachers spent in the classroom, allowances for preparation time, and on the traditional union's role in protecting teachers accused of incompetence and malfeasance. They charge teachers with putting their own self-interest ahead of caring about children or education. The stated rationale behind these drastic changes, beginning with the report A Nation at Risk in 1983, is that our education system is failing too many children and requires a top-down overhaul. Kahlenberg praises Shanker for being "astute" enough to jump on board. "Shanker's embrace . . . represented an enormous departure from past AFT policy. Here was a major labor-union leader endorsing a report that said public education was in trouble, proposed merit pay, had the strong backing of business, deemphasized the importance of labor's equality agenda, and put emphasis on all kids rather than the poor." (p. 278) Rather than marshalling the forces to attack these ideas, Shanker bought into many of them, arguing that teacher unions needed to be part of the reform effort in order to gain a seat at the table. Shanker used the concept of professionalization to win union members over to reforms, but didn't put up any resistance when it became clear that these very reforms were leading to the marginalization and de-skilling of teachers. Shanker even took part in the assault on teachers when he said "a lot of people who have been hired as teachers are basically not competent" and hinted there were a lot of dumb teachers in American classrooms and "defending teacher incompetence was . . . intolerable and politically unacceptable." (p. 284) Shanker laid the groundwork for the UFT to allow contractual protections to slip to the extent that even the innocent and competent are sent to teacher detention centers, or so called rubber rooms. Kahlenberg notes, "The AFT was generally supportive [of NCLB] . . . far more . . . than the NEA, which later sued to have the program halted. This support was consistent with Shanker's call for greater accountability, and for the federal government to invest in high levels of education for all children. It was also consistent with Shanker's view that as a political matter, teachers needed to embrace reform and help shape it rather than be seen as obstructionist." (p. 378) With NCLB coming under severe

criticism from educators and the general public, Kahlenberg spends the last third of the book justifying Shanker's views — claiming they were distorted (charter schools) or misunderstood: He was really trying to save public education, not contribute to its demise. In April 2008, on the 25th anniversary of A Nation at Risk, educational researcher Richard Rothstein wrote:

> A Nation at Risk was well-intentioned, but based on flawed analyses, at least some of which should have been known to the Commission that authored it. The report burned into Americans' consciousness a conviction that, evidence notwithstanding, our schools are failures, and a warped view of the relationship between schools and economic well-being. It distracted education policymakers from insisting that our political, economic, and social institutions also have a responsibility to prepare children to be ready to learn when they attend school.

By signing on to A Nation at Risk in 1983, Shanker created an alliance with the business community, misdirecting the teacher union movement towards a package of misleading reforms. Kahlenberg notes that many of Shanker's colleagues were dismayed at first, as he portrays him as a lone visionary who had to bring them along. The irony of the lack of an internal democratic debate over these crucial issues in the AFT and the UFT escapes Kahlenberg and he makes short shrift of the fact that Shanker's Unity Caucus machine exercises absolute control over the UFT and AFT. As retired educators who worked in New York City schools through the period when Shanker, followed by Sandra Feldman and Randi Weingarten, ruled the United Federation of Teachers in NYC, we were particularly interested in 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. Kahlenberg's re- writing of history gives Shanker the last word on every decision he made, painting him as a realist who knew when to compromise. In Kahlenberg's view Shanker was consistent and tough. In opposition to the soft-hearted liberals in the left-wing of the Democratic Party, he was right: to oppose community control despite the long-lasting rift it caused between teachers and black parents and community members; to oppose affirmative action (quotas) and bilingual education; to support back-to-basics curricula, the war in Vietnam, unlimited military spending, and a hawkish foreign policy. But we see Shanker's consistency and toughness in a different light. A critical review limits the space to analyze all of his positions, but suffice it to say that Shanker's role vis-á-vis civil rights, equality, and the union movement, was problematic for those involved in these struggles. The foundation of his tough liberalism was an extreme form of anti-communism, which evolved into anti-socialism, anti the New Left, anti half the Democratic Party, anti-anyone or any group that didn't share his antis. This ideology was developed and promoted by Shanker and his close friends and comrades, all followers of Max Shachtman and members of the right-wing branch of the Socialist Party, then the breakoff group Social Democrats-USA (SDUSA). After the initial formation of the UFT, which in itself is a story that is far more complicated than the grade-school level account given by Kahlenberg, there was a period when Shanker was one of several leaders who forged ahead in uniting teachers into one big union that took on the task of not only defending the rights of teachers, but also addressing the growing civil rights movement that was to have an enormous impact on schools throughout the country. SHANKER AND OTHERS IN THE LEADERSHIP of the UFT participated in projects to aid the civil rights movement in the south. He allied himself with the most moderate wing of this movement (Bayard Rustin, Roy Wilkins, A. Philip Randolph, and Martin Luther King Jr.), which focused first on integrating public institutions and then on addressing issues of poverty. This approach failed to address the growing anger and militancy of blacks and Latinos who were questioning the systematic social and economic oppression that affected every facet of their lives. Despite his frequent mention of Martin Luther King's relationship to Shanker throughout the book, Kahlenberg doesn't mention the growing gap between their viewpoints during King's last year of life when he began to

emphasize a broader view of critical issues — the immorality of the war in Vietnam and the responsibility of corporate America in the continued oppression of minorities. Throughout the early days of Shanker's rule over the UFT, his vaunted militancy was always reserved for the battles that served to justify and bolster his own power and personal trajectory for the union. In April, 2008, a standing room only crowd of various ages and ethnicities attended a Brecht Forum sponsored event which revisited the 1968 Ocean-Hill Brownsville dispute between the Shanker-led UFT and the local community, evidence of the enormous interest in the events of 40 years ago. It has been argued by many that Shanker's hostility to the community control initiative in the late 1960s, the prolonged series of strikes in 1968, the role of Shanker and other union leaders in provoking and exacerbating tensions, had consequences for the labor movement and the relationship between teachers and parents/communities, consequences that have lasted up to the present. Ocean-Hill was a seminal event, resulting in changing the political landscape in NYC and beyond. As the key player in the dramatic events, the prolonged work stoppages led by Shanker were the most controversial and commented aspects of his life, and Kahlenberg presents many of the post-1968 moves Shanker made as an attempt to repair his severely damaged reputation. Kahlenberg refers to Ocean-Hill Brownsville as a "liberal assault on organized labor," mainly about due process rights and the abandonment of "the idea that race should play no part in who is hired and fired," an extreme oversimplification. People on the other side of the issue view the same events as an assault on the parents and communities of people of color by Shanker and the UFT. Kahlenberg judges the impact of Ocean-Hill-Brownsville as a "politically disastrous direction for liberalism: a coalition between wealthy whites and angry blacks." 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. There is no way to discuss the full ramifications of events of 1968 in this space, but Kahlenberg's total alignment with Shanker's actions and positions does an injustice to the vast complexities and implications of the Ocean-Hill Brownsville dispute. Contrast that to the balanced and nuanced account offered by Gerald Podair in *The Strike That Changed New York*, a resource cited by Kahlenberg, but none of the nuances, insights, and analysis Podair brings to the table are reflected in *Tough Liberal*. Shanker's true interests became evident during the 1975 New York City financial crisis. There were cataclysmic cutbacks in all city services. For public education this meant the closing of nearly 100 schools, shortened school days, layoffs of nearly 10,000 teachers, and large salary deferrals. When confronted by an angry membership, Shanker allowed a strike to begin, but his intent was to do nothing to insure its success. Instead of leading a struggle against the financial blackmailers and rich real estate interests that had caused the crisis, he put his main effort into convincing the demoralized membership to accept that there were no alternatives to the massive cutbacks. After the strike's failure, he even agreed to loan the city hundreds of millions of dollars from the Teacher's Retirement System. The long lasting impact of his sellout of the strike was that more than 30 years later the UFT has never called another strike and never misses an opportunity to remind teachers of what happened during the 1975 strike as a lesson to be learned. If Kahlenberg had been a teacher from the late 1960s through the 70s, he would have seen first hand how Shanker used every trick in the book to shut out all opposition voices that called for alliances with other municipal unions to fight against cutbacks in services and fight for an overhaul of municipal tax policy that gave away tax abatements to wealthy corporations, while the city's bondholders got away with usurious interest rates. Shanker's maneuverings prevented thousands of teachers opposed to the Vietnam War from debating the UFT and AFT policy of backing the huge military budget and the war, money that could have been used to fully fund every school system in the country; and from debating Shanker's push for AFT/AFL-CIO involvement in foreign interventions to undermine unions that were considered "too left." Kahlenberg would have missed discussions an informed, engaged, and militant union should have been having; he would have missed them because they never took place. Following the banking crisis and settlement, which left teachers and schools reeling, Shanker continued to be a shill for the business community, as he allowed the union contracts of the 1960s and early 70s to erode incrementally, leading to the present contract which is beyond recognition. Class size was no

longer to be negotiated, and supportive services were increasingly optional. With each contract negotiation came the admonition from Shanker and his assistants: If we want higher paychecks we can't ask for better working conditions. Through the next two decades, through upswings and downswings in the national economy and rises and falls in New York City's financial health, there was never enough money for providing schools the basic funding needed to make all schools function successfully. On a rainy recent March afternoon, a UFT organized demonstration at city hall protested millions of dollars in budget cuts by a dictatorial mayor with a strangle grip on the NYC schools that has shunted aside educators and parents. Thousands of teachers and other school workers were joined by a wide variety of community organizers and politicians. Some of the community organizers said this was the first time since 1968 they had felt comfortable working with the UFT. Although the UFT has had opportunistic relationships with some community groups in the past for a variety of reasons, that has not been viewed by many activists as building real alliances with the community and other unions. A few blocks away, at the very same moment, the Federal Reserve was handing over billions to bail out brokerage firms that had played fast and loose with money in the subprime mortgage crisis. In all the speeches by UFT leaders and politicians calling for the restorations of cuts to education, no connection was made to the events taking place just a few minutes' walk away. That a teachers' union refuses to challenge the concept that billions can appear for bailouts and for wars, while accepting the limits put on the piece of the economic pie assigned to education that can never be enough to fix the schools, is Albert Shanker's true legacy. In his acknowledgements to financial supporters for his book, Kahlenberg lists the Hewlett, Broad, Century, and Thomas B. Fordham Foundations. He states: "Albert Shanker did not fit neatly into existing ideological boxes, so it is perhaps unsurprising that a work to describe his life drew financial support from foundations across the spectrum." We view this support as a very narrow spectrum. It is important for Kahlenberg and his backers to show that everyone who matters is on board — business leaders, foundations, and "responsible" union leaders like Randi Weingarten and Albert Shanker before her. But there is a broader spectrum beyond the NCLB supporters — the vast undercurrent of parents, teachers, students, and independent researchers who are becoming increasingly active in exposing the real crisis in education. Albert Shanker was part of the problem, not the solution.

Michael Hirsch, a member of our editorial board, will be responding to this review in our next issue.