

Voting Ends Soon in UFT Elections: A Referendum on Leadership the Past Two Years

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During the COVID-19 pandemic, the largest teachers' union local in the country consistently left members unsafe, confused, ill, and even dead. In March 2020, the United Federation of Teachers delayed, and ultimately failed at, securing the safety and health of educators, students, and families in NYC schools. By the beginning of the week of March 16, the schools had finally started to go remote, but only after rank-and-file school workers staged widespread safety sick outs that both the city and the union leadership define as illegal. The deadly virus had spread in schools and communities. The UFT, meanwhile, had been negotiating in private with the mayor and Department of Ed, and eventually - too late - threatened to file an injunction in court to close school buildings.

If that was the end of the story, then the UFT - representing over 125,000 in-service and retired city educators - wouldn't have to answer for the rest of its missteps the past two years: negotiating fruitlessly behind closed doors with the city during the spring and summer of 2020, then briefly threatening a strike in the late summer, then failing to organize members credibly for such an action (after decades of telling the membership not to get involved), then consenting to in-person re-opening for the fall semester, and then approving new contract ("Memorandum of Agreement") behind closed doors without member input or approval, all while the contractual grievance process was still frozen, a favor done by the UFT for the city at the start of the pandemic as educators were sick and dying from COVID-19.

The biggest blow of 2021 for the UFT leadership was the revolt of retired members upset with the strong possibility of increasing costs and difficult health plan choices as a result of the UFT leadership's newly proposed, semi-private Medicare Advantage healthcare plan. The majority of retirees demanded out of the plan and the UFT leadership backtracked their support for it, using a successful retiree suit in court against the plan as a convenient cover to hide their affiliation with it during election season, when retirees have an opportunity to vote, usually as a supportive bloc for the ruling caucus.

After almost 19 months of refusing to allow deliberation and debate for the UFT's Delegate Assembly - which consists of representatives from each school in the city - at the November DA, UFT President Michael Mulgrew allowed a decent amount of questions, debate, and voting on resolutions. Mulgrew and his "Unity" caucus lost 2 key measures being voted on, including a resolution to class size reductions as a demand in contract negotiations, and nearly lost another resolution that would have required the union leadership to directly get member approval for any changes to healthcare, such as the recent moves to privatize newer and older members' healthcare and leave them at the whims of the profit-motivated marketplace. Mulgrew and Unity won this latter vote but lost the other two votes. This had not happened in his entire tenure as UFT president even once. The next month, he and his party filibustered the entire time and have not allowed any substantive democratic decision-making since.

In this spring's election campaign, all of the major opposition caucuses and groups within the UFT have organized together for the first time in recent decades to oppose the one-party rule that has seen givebacks and setbacks. The history of the UFT shows why the UFT "Unity" leadership group's strategy won't be changing anytime soon, and why members need to vote for a new direction in the election happening right now.

What Is Most Important to the UFT Leadership?

The United Federation of Teachers was founded in 1960 and within several years established itself as the dominant collective bargaining unit for public school teachers in New York City. In a series of strikes in the 1960s, the UFT solidified not only collective bargaining power but also more decent conditions and benefits for educators. This culminated in the 1968 strike, which pitted the UFT against the communities of the Ocean Hill and Brownsville in Brooklyn. Predominantly black, these neighborhoods wanted community control. They wanted to be able to hire their own teachers. They wanted to be able to control the curriculum to allow ideas and cultures that had previously been overlooked.

When Rhody McCoy was hired as superintendent of the Ocean Hill and Brownsville district, he implemented these ideals. Handfuls of teachers were transferred, interpreted by union leaders as equivalent to termination. Almost all of the teachers were white and Jewish. For McCoy, it wasn't about race but about their inability to buy into his and the community's project. He saw them as aloof, elitist, and unprepared for the work of liberating pedagogy.

UFT founder and president Albert Shanker mobilized the union against McCoy. Shanker called a strike to shut down NYC schools. Both sides were aggressive and defensive: the local community was accused of anti-semitism, the UFT was accused of racism. It was the longest strike in the history of American schools and the UFT won, at least on the bargaining table. Public opinion on the strike was divisive. Reflecting on the strike years later, author James Baldwin wrote:

Superintendent McCoy's] dismissal of the teachers meant that he thought he had the right to dismiss them...That he had no such right had to be made immediately and abundantly clear, not only to protect the power of the United Federation of Teachers, but also to prevent any of the billions of dollars involved in the Education business from being controlled by Black and Puerto Rican communities. Therefore, the head of the United Federation of Teachers, Albert Shanker, called a city-wide strike. This was to put McCoy in his place and to make certain that his exercise of authority would not constitute a precedent.

For Baldwin, the strike was clearly and classically American in its character: The teachers' union believed that marginalized groups, such as African-Americans, could not rise up too far, or too fast, and those making any perceived attempts to do so had to be subdued and neutralized.

Educator and activist (and HS Executive Board candidate for the opposition slate United For Change in this spring's UFT election) Ronnie Almonte argues that Baldwin's critique is sound:

The view that the strikes served to protect a system of white privilege was reasonable. Teachers and principals in New York City were hired off an eligibility list from which Black people were largely absent. The examination system that determined eligibility was clearly discriminatory. Most of the new principals appointed by the local board of Ocean Hill-Brownsville were, therefore, deliberately selected outside of the list. But the board's appointments were opposed by the union. In an unprecedented move, the UFT reached across class lines to join the principals' union in a lawsuit against the local board's choice of "ineligible" principals, all of whom were either Black or Puerto Rican. In the lawsuit McCoy's selection as superintendent was also challenged.

It is here that we begin to see one of the issues with the UFT's origin and its approach then and now. It focused on business unionism, meaning larger social dynamics were a secondary concern to helping drive economic production and profit and thereby using that profit to leverage for more benefits and wages exclusively for members, ignoring other common benefits to be gained by organizing with communities (smaller classes, more counselors and support staff, more resources and safer facilities, food and housing security for families, quality healthcare for all, etc.).

The reverberations of this dark history in Shanker's UFT are clear. The UFT took the morally incorrect position, and yet the UFT headquarters is still adorned with portraits of Shanker. The consequences were devastating: charter schools, often run by corporate interests, and so-called philanthropists, such as former Mayor Michael Bloomberg, have taken and distorted the idea of community control that the union was unwilling to claim and support.

Historian Jerald Podair, the author of *The Strike That Changed New York*, described Shanker and the UFT's choice between business unionism and social justice unionism as follows in an interview conducted in December 2019:

The UFT higher ups would say "we are for social justice" and "you know we supported Martin Luther King and all of his campaigns." He did address the UFT on many occasions, he supported them when they were establishing their own union, and they supported him at the March on Washington, at Freedom Summer. So they thought they had the social justice bona fide. What Shanker and other union higher ups would probably say in 1968 is "you don't know what it was like to be a teacher in the New York City public schools in the forties and fifties, but we do and what we know is that teachers had no control, no power, no dignity." So the UFT was founded to change that. As for social justice, at Ocean Hill-Brownsville they were asked to make a choice between the two and the UFT leaders ended up choosing the power of the union and the power of the teacher over ideals of social justice. In other words, they were for social justice but not at their own expense.

In the Jim Crow South, the UFT was willing to stand up for justice. However, in its own backyard, the UFT rejected the burgeoning civil rights movement in NYC. In exchange, says Podair, the political establishment rewarded the UFT after the 1968 with its biggest prize for bargaining and working conditions:

The UFT established itself as co-manager of the New York City public school system through the strike, which it was not before 1968. Most of the strikes before had been about money, but Ocean Hill-Brownsville was not about money, it was about control. Before Shanker and the union leaders' goal was to get money, but control in many ways was more important than money; in other words, if

[Mayor] Lindsay tried buy him with money during this trial, if he allowed for everyone in the system to get a check but go back to work in non-teaching roles or reassigned positions, Shanker would have turned that down, because he understood that that would have been a short-term victory but the long-term goal would have been lost: control.

The UFT's position as not only a bargaining unit but also a weakly positioned co-manager of the public school system has remained until today. Unfortunately for UFT members and for New York, it hasn't necessarily been advantageous for communities or educators. And New York is considered to have the most segregated school system in the country.

The Present UFT Leadership's Role As Co-Manager of NYC Schools

So attached to this co-manager role allowed by city governments, the UFT has not used the strike since 1976. In the 2020 school reopening, the union leadership worked in secret throughout the summer with the city, only to acquiesce to rank-and-file pressure and begin half-heartedly threatening a strike as the fall approached. The press conference where the UFT President Michael Mulgrew announced strike preparations featured some of the most powerful Democratic Party figures in the city aside from Mayor DeBlasio: City Council President Cory Johnson and Comptroller Scott Stringer. Evidently, the UFT leaders were only able to stand up to the political establishment with the help of the political establishment itself. No current public school educators, parents, or students were present.

Since 1968, the UFT leadership has continued nominal support of civil rights struggles and other fights against injustice, but it has relied on functioning as a de facto co-manager of the public school system, which also prevented and prevents it from acting too harshly (strike, etc.) to oppose city governments, corporate power, or even the draconian strike penalties that the union itself uses to dissuade members from taking action. Podair said the following regarding UFT leadership after Shanker (who served for a quarter of a century, setting the tenor for the UFT's one-party Unity Caucus autocracy):

They really [have] had the same agenda as Shanker. In other words, they're all tough union bosses who put the interests of their membership above all. The conceit for the UFT, all through the years, is to say the interests of their members coincide with the interests of social justice and you don't have to make the choice between one or the other, but of course that's not always the case as we saw in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. When push comes to shove they're going to protect members... The social justice component is important but when it collides with the interests of the union members, they come first and I think most union leaders, even the public sector union leaders who say they're for social justice, they're going to make that calculation.

The stridency towards business unionism is apparent from its earliest days to its most recent past. In 1964, the UFT was a growing power in city labor and politics, and it could have lent support to the largest student boycott in the history of the city. The boycott, supported by civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, was against the de facto segregation of New York City schools. Almonte provides the following critique:

The UFT's record on civil rights in the city also left much to be desired. The UFT was on the sidelines when in February 1964 the largest civil rights demonstration in the country occurred. Over 400,000 students boycotted the public schools, demanding that they be integrated. Shanker refused to endorse the boycott, claiming that doing so would constitute violation of the UFT contract's no-strike clause. To the boycotters, the UFT's abstention spoke volumes. If the UFT was a bystander in the early 1960s, by 1966 it appeared to have become an antagonist to civil rights. That year Harlem families demanded a Black principal for the newly constructed school I.S. 201. They

also demanded community control. When the white principal voluntarily rescinded the job offer, the UFT, without regard to the desires of the Black community, demanded his reinstatement and won.

The following year, the union seemed to have renewed its attack on the Black community. The UFT tried to negotiate in its contract a “disruptive child” provision, which would have allowed teachers to more easily remove students from their classrooms. The provision was criticized by the African-American Teachers Association (ATA) for granting police powers to white teachers to remove Black students.

Again, we return to the present: From 2017-2019, , at the Delegate Assembly, the UFT’s leadership caucus, Unity, which was founded by Shanker and is currently headed by Mulgrew, fought tooth and nail against the national Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools. Then, in 2020, in the wake of the George Floyd uprising, the Unity Caucus surprisingly (or opportunistically) decided to endorse the Week of Action, offering to collaborate with other groups, such as the Movement for Rank-and-File Educators, on a resolution to endorse it at the DA. The DA was allowed to vote to endorse, and it did with over 90% of members. Apparently, the delegates were ready for change.

The False Dilemma of Community Control vs. Worker Control

The UFT’s silence in the 1964 student boycott is eerily reminiscent of similar silence in the aforementioned struggles over segregation in New York, which expanded greatly during the mayoral tenures of Guiliani and Bloomberg and was allowed to fester during that of De Blasio. For Black and Latino students, the dilemma is often between attending a subpar local community school versus traveling around the city to another school that may or may not have better resources. Further, adolescent students have to undergo difficult testing and admissions processes that favor white and affluent students.

My former student Tiffani Torres of Brownsville, Brooklyn, described the horrific high school application process for her just a few years ago:

Applying to high school was a very stressful time for me. My family was not well-versed in the high school application process, and all I knew was what the 500+ page directory told me. What I noticed during this time was the vast difference in resources available at each school I researched. Some had a plethora of sports and AP classes, while others had a handful. During my time in high school, I witnessed these disparities in practice. A lack of funding for sports and AP classes, and a less than ideal space were issues that all of my peers had to deal with. Students are made to believe that what they are being offered is all that is available, when in reality their more affluent and white counterparts are handed opportunities that my peers aren’t made aware of.

When I asked Torres, who did organizing work with the student activist group Teens Take Charge, what she would say to those who claim the admissions process is merit-based, she said

The system of screens under which our school system currently operates can only be merit-based when every student is afforded the same opportunities to prevail. Segregation and inequality begin at the elementary level. While schools in more affluent neighborhoods have loads of PTA funding, extra-curriculars, various guidance counselors and staff available to them, other schools are faced with a revolving door of teachers and staff and a severe lack of funding. The worst part is that students are made unaware of the fact that they are receiving less, believing instead that they are the problem. We are the change that we wish to see. Being submissive to the inequities that continue to plague NYC students will only exacerbate its effects.

And as for how the UFT is a collaborator with corporate and government forces that maintain

segregation, she is clear:

All of these figures come into play. Anyone who is not actively fighting against a system that perpetuates inequality is contributing to its development. Unfortunately, students are made to believe that their place in our society or their school's insufficiency is a reflection of their own actions when in reality, it has nothing to do with them, but with privilege. Those in positions of power will not give up that power on their own, and we see this in parents who fight against the elimination of screens and G&T programs under the guise of meritocracy.

It's possible Torres was too soft on the UFT leadership, who did not actively support the protests, demonstrations, and other actions of various student groups during the 2017-18 and 2019-20 school years. The UFT has only really spoken out in vague statements against segregation in general and for integration and equity in general. They propose more committees and task forces, reserving more concrete shifts to only the most clearly objectionable injustices. And yet, as we look at similar unions in Chicago, LA, and Minneapolis, we see that they have fought hard for their most marginalized communities and even worked in coalition with communities to bargain for the common good and win victories for not just the union members but the school system as a whole: smaller classes, more counselors and support staff, and a variety of other improvements in school and city infrastructures.

Where is the UFT Leadership Today?

The UFT is consistently soft or silent on inequality issues affecting too many NYC students. Across the country, workers are going on strikes at an increasing rate and teachers' unions have been tying community struggles to union demands. This spring, there is a united front of opposition groups that is running to support the expansion of community control and bring communities together with teachers and other union members to fight to transform the schools and city itself. Today, The United For Change coalition in the current UFT election wants to bargain openly with community input, which they hope will also allow more leniency for hard bargaining tactics such as strike readiness that the current UFT leadership balks at.

The Albert Shanker leadership in the late 1960s saw members crossing the UFT's picket line, in doing so supporting anti-racism and opposing the ill-conceived strike against community control and the "disruptive student." But these members who crossed the racist picket line weren't anti-union. Many even had been members in the pre-UFT group known simply as the Teachers Union union group, which represented NYC educators from the 30s to the 50s, until McCarthyites purged and neutralized much of its socialist-leaning leadership and membership. Most who crossed the 1968 picket lines were of such left traditions or of the new 60s culture and were following their own philosophy of how best to be school workers, labor activists, and student advocates. They were called union traitors and sacrificed their own physical safety and job security so that they could stand with communities.

Nowadays, the union leadership is pretending like it never lost Delegate Assembly votes in the Fall to opposition members and has filibustered recent Delegate Assemblies. If members speak out, they are similarly branded as anti-union and as against the esteemed traditions of the union. And while our union has done many great things and won many great rights and benefits for members, it also has never dealt with its past. Were those teachers who crossed the picket line anti-union? Did they lack solidarity? Most today would probably argue they were justified to oppose their union leadership.

UFT rank-and-file members have a choice this month. The choice is between union, city, and corporate bosses controlling schools versus workers, educators, and communities controlling schools. The choice is between whether principals should be handpicked by the Department of Education versus whether they should be chosen by workers and communities. The choice is between performatively opposing segregation and inequality in our city versus actually organizing members and their school communities to create schools that are integrated, safe, fair, and democratic. The choice is between whether the union should continue to dig deeper into alliances with corrupt politicians versus whether it should stake its future on members and communities fighting together for stronger contracts for educators and better schools for everyone.

Turnout was about 24% in 2019 UFT elections, but chances are it won't be as low this time. The UFT leadership has been on the defensive, with increasing complaints circulating that union resources and positions have been used inappropriately and even in violation of labor law. UFT Secretary Leroy Barr and the Unity-Controlled Executive Board even conceded several violations connected to their use of official union media resources.

But the election is just part of a larger situation within which the opposition can unite to change the single party control of the UFT in favor of a truly progressive, grassroots approach. A new contract is due to be negotiated this fall. NYC needs a new union leadership to hold the line on elements of the contract that intersect with issues of inequality, such as class sizes and health standards. If the union cannot win the battle against segregation, it can speak out and show where it stands. If desegregation is stalled or slowed, then the push needs to be for more quality and healthy school buildings, which requires funding and staffing, which requires the UFT leadership to speak out more clearly and organize members more aggressively for wealth redistribution from the ultra wealthy, and which all requires working in coalition with communities during bargaining, instead of bargaining against communities.

All of these fights are intertwined and all of them are urgent. A new union is possible, no matter what any establishment says about being practical. What's not practical is business as usual in the most segregated school system in the country that just went through a pandemic. NYC's schools deserve better. The election is almost over. **Ballots are due by May 9.** When ballots are counted on May 10, and if turnout increases substantially as many expect it will, we will know more precisely how much change UFT members actually want in their union and schools.

[Editor's note: Readers may want to read Steve Zeluck's article, "The UFT Strike: A Blow Against Teacher Unionism," in New Politics, Winter 1968. We are working to bring the archives to our site but in the meantime, Zeluck's article can be found here.]