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# The Ideological and Organizational Origins of the United Federation of Teachers' Opposition to the Community Control Movement in the New York City Public Schools, 1960–1968

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[See table of contents](#)

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## CONTROVERSY / POLÉMIQUE

# The Ideological and Organizational Origins of the United Federation of Teachers' Opposition to the Community Control Movement in the New York City Public Schools, 1960–1968

**Stephen Brier**

IN *THE STRIKE THAT CHANGED NEW YORK*, historian Gerald Podair argues that race was the fundamental issue that divided the city during the United Federation of Teachers' (UFT) strike that shut down the New York City public schools for weeks in the fall of 1968, idling more than a million students.<sup>1</sup> Running along a black-white (or, more pointedly, a black-Jewish) binary, Podair's analysis depicted the largely Jewish teachers union,<sup>2</sup> led by Albert Shanker, in opposition to black militant (and increasingly black nationalist) elements in several poor communities in Brooklyn and Manhattan that supported community control and opposed the UFT strike. Inflected by a then relatively new "whiteness" studies interpretation, Podair's analysis of the UFT's success in winning the strike focused on its and Albert Shanker's efforts to generate a

1. Gerald Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New York: Yale University Press, 2002).

2. By some estimates, in 1960 60 per cent of the New York City public school teaching workforce was Jewish. Podair, *Strike That Changed New York*, 15. The percentage of Jewish members in the UFT was even higher, according to Joshua Freeman, *Working-Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 223, who estimates the figure at 85 per cent.

sense of fear among public school teachers and their white allies about black anti-Semitism and to use that fear as one of the key justifications for the hard-line tactics the union used during the strike. The UFT's determined emphasis on black anti-Semitism was quickly picked up and enshrined in contemporary writings about the strike by Martin Mayer and Diane Ravitch. It also figured in speeches by political figures, including Vice President Hubert Humphrey, and became an established historical "truth" absorbed into many "revisionist" interpretations of the strike, typified by Podair's 2002 book, which attempted to understand the larger political implications of the teachers' job action in starkly racial/religious terms.<sup>3</sup> Ask most white New Yorkers of a certain age if they have memories of the 1968 UFT strike 45 years later and they are likely to respond with something to the effect of: "Isn't that the strike where there was all that black anti-Semitism?"

For those who do not know the broad outlines of the fall 1968 strike or the specific sequence of events that led to Shanker's and the UFT's charges of rampant black anti-Semitism, a brief summary of the relevant context is in order. Following a huge influx of African-Americans and Puerto Ricans into New York City in the postwar period and after more than a decade of half-hearted and wholly unsuccessful efforts by the immovable New York City Board of Education (NYCBOE) to desegregate the city's massive public school system, poor and working-class parents of colour and community activists across the city began after 1966 to shift their focus and actively fight for community control of neighborhood schools. The NYCBOE, formed in 1901 and largely controlled by the office of the mayor, exercised rigid authority over who taught in and administered the public schools (through a highly structured examination process, which had resulted by 1965 in an almost all white teaching and administrative staff), dictated what was taught and what books were used, and set policy for the expenditure of all state and city funds earmarked for public education. With the emergence of the UFT in 1960, the NYCBOE was forced to collectively bargain teacher salaries and fringe benefits, working conditions in the schools, and policies and procedures about teacher transfers and general employee protections. Community control advocates argued that the only way schools could be improved and a modicum of equality realized for the system's growing numbers of black and brown students was for local communities to be able to determine who taught in and administered their neighbourhood schools, what subjects were taught, and evaluate the quality of the teaching taking place. With support from the city (whose new progressive

3. Martin Mayer, *The Teachers Strike New York, 1968* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), 75–76; Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (1974; Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 369–370. Humphrey was reported as telling a large Jewish audience that he was "deeply troubled by the anti-Semitic remarks being made by some 'extremists' in the school dispute." Humphrey is quoted in Bill Kovach, "Racist and Anti-Semite Charges Strain Old Negro-Jewish Ties," *New York Times*, 23 October 1968.

mayor, John Lindsay, first elected in 1964, tried to respond to growing community concerns about a number of pressing issues, including the public schools) and powerful philanthropic organizations (especially the Ford Foundation) which embraced the community control idea, several demonstration districts in East Harlem, Manhattan's Lower East Side, and Brooklyn's Ocean Hill-Brownsville (OH-B) were established. These demonstration districts allowed parents to elect representatives to governing boards and those boards to appoint new administrators. The UFT (which had only won its initial contract with the NYCBOE at the end of 1961) at first supported the fledgling movement for community control. But the union soon turned against the experiment, following a particularly ugly confrontation between the teachers' organization and black and Puerto Rican parents during a fall 1967 UFT strike, precipitated by a controversy over how to deal with "disruptive children" in public school classrooms. The following year, in May, the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community control board dismissed nineteen UFT members who taught in OH-B schools. The community board claimed to have transferred the nineteen out of the district for reassignment elsewhere by the NYCBOE, because the largely white group of teachers had undermined community control efforts. In contrast, the UFT claimed the teachers had been fired without cause. A job action then followed in the autumn of 1968, waged in support of the nineteen and in opposition to community control. Beginning with the opening of the school term in early September and extending for more than ten weeks through mid-November, the UFT strike put some 50,000 public school teachers on picket lines; hundreds of thousands of students and their parents were forced to deal with the fact that their schools were on lockdown.<sup>4</sup>

At some point during the ten-week strike, an anonymous mimeographed leaflet appeared in the mailboxes of teachers at Junior High School (JHS) 271 and P.S. 144 in Brooklyn. Ground zero of the community control struggle, JHS 271 remained open and functioning throughout the UFT strike. Staffed during the labour action by a group of older African-American teachers and new, young teacher recruits, almost half of whom were Jewish, this cadre crossed vociferous UFT picket lines every day to teach the school's largely black student body.<sup>5</sup> The mimeographed leaflet spoke of the need for black teachers to teach black students African-American history and culture and not "The Middle East Murderers of Colored People.... Not the So-Called Liberal Jewish Friend ...

4. The background to and details of the 1968 strike are described in Ravitch, *Great School Wars*, 338–376 and Podair, *Strike That Changed New York*, 71–142, 164–174.

5. The independent journalist I.F. Stone estimated that three-fourths of the non-striking teachers in Ocean Hill-Brownsville were white and that "about one half of these [white teachers] were Jewish." *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, 4 November 1968. The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Governing Board estimated, according to a *New York Times* report, that "40 per cent of the teachers it hired for Junior High School 271 are Jewish." See Kovach, "Racist and Anti-Semite Charges," *New York Times*, 23 October 1968.

[who is] Really Our Enemy and *He is Responsible For The Serious Educational Retardation Of Our Black Children.*"<sup>6</sup>

Authorship of the leaflet was never confirmed, nor could it be linked in any way to people officially connected to the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community control experiment. Shanker, who had been agitating from the outset about the radical aims and leadership of the community control forces, used the anonymous leaflet to raise the stakes in the strike. In a brilliantly effective if thoroughly unscrupulous maneuver, the UFT took the mimeographed leaflet, paired it with a second, different statement that offered strong support for total community control of the schools (attributed to "Parents Community Council, JHS 271, Ocean Hill-Brownsville Ralph Poynter, Chairman," a non-existent organization), printed half a million copies, and distributed them throughout the city and the country. This gave these documents, in a colossal understatement by Richard Kahlenberg, Albert Shanker's biographer, "far more circulation than they originally received." The impact of the leaflets on the city's large Jewish community was, according to Podair, "shattering."<sup>7</sup> The fear and anger unleashed among New York City Jews by Shanker's publicity ploy and the long-term harm it perpetrated are difficult to overstate.

Shanker was "one of the worst villains of the era, a race baiter without regard to the consequences," according to Sid Davidoff. A Queens-born Jew, Davidoff worked as a community liaison for Mayor John Lindsay, and was dispatched by Lindsay in May 1968 to help mediate between the UFT and the Ocean

6. The text of the anonymous leaflet is reproduced verbatim in Maurice R. Berubé and Marilyn Gittell, eds., *Confrontation at Ocean Hill Brownsville: The New York School Strike of 1968* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1969), 168. The editors note that the leaflet "was placed in the mailboxes at JHS 271 and PS 144 in Brooklyn," though Charles Isaacs, a JHS 271 teacher, who worked during the strike, says that he "never saw the two leaflets except in the UFT's combined version." Charles Isaacs, e-mail message to author, 19 July 2013.

7. The text of the second leaflet is in Berubé and Gittell, eds., *Confrontation*, 167. Kahlenberg is quoted in Richard Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Union, Race, and Democracy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 107. Podair's characterization is in *Strike That Changed New York*, 124. The content of the second leaflet had been called in by phone to "a UFT representative," according to Berubé and Gittell, *Confrontation*, 167. While the organization listed on the leaflet did not exist, its "chairman," Ralph Poynter, did: he was a Manhattan black activist. David Selden, who had mentored Shanker in the early UFT years and was president of the American Federation of Teachers, the UFT's parent organization during the 1968 strike, blames Shanker and the UFT, in no uncertain terms, for putting the two flyers together in a leaflet, printing it up in massive quantities "in the UFT's print shop," then having "UFT staffers and volunteers" distribute the flyers "at subway entrances and shopping centers." Selden concludes, without comment, that "Shanker denied any prior knowledge of the flyer operation." Selden and Shanker had a bitter falling out when Shanker ran against (and defeated) Selden for the AFT presidency in 1974. See David Selden, *The Teacher Rebellion* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1985), 153. In his otherwise evenhanded analysis of the 1968 strike, historian Daniel Perlstein fails to indicate that it was Shanker and the UFT that reproduced and circulated the infamous leaflet across the city. Daniel Perlstein, *Justice, Justice: School Politics and the Eclipse of Liberalism* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2004), 33–34.

Hill-Brownsville community board when the crisis erupted.<sup>8</sup> I.F. Stone confirms Davidoff's assessment. The radical journalist, and himself a Jew who had visited and reported approvingly on the Ocean Hill-Brownsville community control experiment during the strike, concluded that Shanker and the UFT were "exaggerating, amplifying and circulating any bit of anti-Semitic drivel [they] can pick up from any far-out black extremist, however unrepresentative, and using this to drive the Jewish community in New York into a panic."<sup>9</sup> By doing so, Shanker bolstered his reputation as a "tough Jew" willing to forcefully confront any opponent (especially a black one) who employed, as he saw it, anti-Semitic rhetoric.<sup>10</sup>

I am not a historian who employs psychological analyses of historical figures, but I am led, nonetheless, to speculate on what appears to be the deeply personal roots of Albert Shanker's obsessive focus on anti-Semitism during the 1968 strike and his decision to use it to attack his and the UFT's black activist opponents. Richard Kahlenberg writes that Shanker grew up in the 1930s in a tough, working-class neighbourhood in Long Island City, Queens where "anti-Semitism was virulent and mainstream." Shanker was repeatedly beaten up, according to Kahlenberg, by Irish and Italian kids, his family's apartment windows were broken, and notes were left that contained the slur, "dirty Jew."<sup>11</sup> Kahlenberg recounts a particularly chilling episode during Shanker's boyhood, which was corroborated in an interview with Shanker's older sister, Pearl. In the hope of being accepted by some Irish and Italian boys who had a neighbourhood club, Shanker agreed to be initiated. The youths blindfolded Shanker and then

The group took Al to an empty lot nearby and put a rope around his arms and neck and threw the other end over a branch. They were about to pull him up when [his sister] Pearl

8. Sidney Davidoff, interview by the author, 8 April 2013, New York City.

9. *I.F. Stone's Weekly*, 4 November 1968. Shanker's scare tactics even stirred opposition among white UFT members and officials. According to John O'Neill – a UFT organizer and Director of Organizing for the union until 1968, and a forceful opponent of Shanker – the assistant editor of the union's newspaper, *The United Teacher*, Eugenia Kemble, was reprimanded by Shanker and forced to apologize for reporting that "union teachers in Brownsville (including some union chapter chairmen) discerned little or no evidence of the widely heralded Black anti-semitism...." John O'Neill, "The Rise and Fall of the UFT," in Annette Rubinstein, ed., *Schools Against Children: The Case for Community Control* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970), 179.

10. Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 223–224. Freeman also makes the fascinating point that the emergence of the "tough Jew" in the city's civic life in these years might well have been connected to Israel's unexpected vanquishing of Arab opponents in the 1967 "Six Days War," after which "many New York Jews concluded that they could and must fight like hell for themselves...." One of the most thoughtful reviews of the entire black anti-Semitism issue and Shanker's and UFT's role in it was published a year after the strike by a former television newsman and, at the time, a *New York Times* reporter. See Fred Ferretti, "New York's black anti-semitism scare," *Columbia Journalism Review*, 8 (Fall 1969), 18–28.

11. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, 19–20.

came out, saw what was happening and screamed. A bystander came over and rescued Al. The group later said they had strung Al up to avenge the killing of Christ.<sup>12</sup>

In assessing the emotional impact on Shanker of this event, Kahlenberg notes that, “The horrific experience left long-term scars. ‘It was an absolutely traumatic experience for him,’ says his wife, Eadie. ‘I think something closed in him emotionally.’ Said union colleague Sandra Feldman, ‘it had a huge effect on him,’ making him highly confrontational.”<sup>13</sup> Even if Shanker’s memories of the event (and those of his sister) were embellished or perhaps even if his remembrance of it served as a screen for something else that happened in his childhood,<sup>14</sup> the fact that Shanker held on to this powerful visceral memory is still worthy of note. It does not seem too much of a stretch, given the nature of this childhood trauma—real, exaggerated, or fictitious—to think that it helps to provide a psychological context/explanation for Shanker’s overreaction to any hint of anti-Semitism he encountered later in his life.

Shanker’s calculated response to anti-Semitism in the fall of 1968 was highly effective, whipping the Jewish community in New York—already troubled by what many in the community perceived as a rising tide of black anti-Semitism—into a frenzy. How successful Shanker and the UFT were is indicated by an anecdote offered by Daniel Perlstein, who describes the response of the city’s Jewish community to an act of anti-Semitic vandalism that occurred immediately after the 1968 strike:

The role of prejudice in Jews’ changing stance was exposed by the act of vandals who set fire to a Brooklyn synagogue in the winter of 1968. Rumors spread that the arsonists were black, and even when the culprits, all white and some of them Jewish, were arrested, one fourth of Jews continued to believe that the crimes were part of a rising tide of black anti-Semitism. Only 12% of Jews identified the vandals as white.<sup>15</sup>

It is difficult to believe that Shanker’s tactical construction of and subsequent targeting of black anti-Semitism during the teachers strike did not help to condition the kind of climate that nurtured such distorted perceptions.

12. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, 20.

13. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, 20.

14. The notion of “screen memory” is Sigmund Freud’s. He suggested (in 1899) that people’s remembrances of events in their childhood, both positive and negative, are often screens for things that they want or need to repress. Thus, memories about crucial events in one’s past can be clouded or even serve to trick individuals into believing that something happened in their past that did not in fact occur. See Madelon Sprengnether, “Freud as Memoirist: A Reading of ‘Screen Memories,’” *American Imago*, 69 (Summer 2012), 215–239. Whether Shanker’s memories of the anti-Semitic attack in his childhood are real or “screened,” the key point is that, either way, he used his past memory to help inform his attitudes and actions in the present. I am indebted to Paul Buhle for calling my attention to screen memories and their impact on oral history.

15. Perlstein, *Justice, Justice*, 43.



The maelstrom that followed Shanker's propagation of the anonymous anti-Semitic leaflet had another lamentable consequence: it succeeded in deflecting attention from what was actually going on educationally inside of JHS 271 and the other community control public schools located in poor communities in Ocean Hill-Brownsville and East Harlem. Sadly lacking in most historical analyses of the 1968 strike, both contemporary accounts and more recent studies as well, is attention to what and how teachers actually taught and students learned in schools that had embraced the experiment in community control. Too little is known of the ways black and Puerto Rican parents, as well as black, white and Puerto Rican teachers who crossed the UFT's picket lines, understood and enthusiastically embraced this short-lived experiment in public school reform in the midst of a contentious strike. I hope in future work to explore that set of key questions.<sup>16</sup> But in this preliminary statement I have a different interest: the ideology of public school teacher unionism as it was articulated and demonstrated in New York City during the epochal events of the 1960s.

Rather than rehash the familiar political and ideological debates that defined the 1968 UFT strike (no single labour event received such sustained coverage and commentary in the *New York Review of Books*, the *New York Times*, and other mainstream opinion outlets), I want to offer a different kind of framing of the strike to better understand how and why unionized New York City public school teachers supported the particular kind of trade unionism that the UFT and Albert Shanker embodied and practised in the 1960s. This necessitates exploring the ways that a particular form of labour organization and trade union ideology led the UFT and its members to bitterly oppose the community control experiment, an initiative that the union had once supported. The primary cause of the polarized and increasingly hostile relationship between unionized teachers and minority communities that defined the years before, during, and following 1968 was, in fact, the UFT's tactical and ideological orientation in these years. Anti-Semitism on the part of the black community toward the UFT strikers and Jews in general figured far less prominently. And I would suggest that the contemporary UFT and its members and the 1.1 million students in the New York City public schools and the working-class and poor neighbourhoods where they and their parents live are still dealing with the deleterious effects of that rancorous, 45-year old conflict.

To understand what New York public school teacher unionists and their leaders believed and how they acted in the 1960s it is important to consider three core principles that shaped their behavior and beliefs from the founding

16. Two new books, one that has just appeared in print and another that is forthcoming, address similar issues and questions: Heather Lewis, *New York City Public Schools from Brownsville to Bloomberg: Community Control and Its Legacy* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2013); and Charles Isaacs, *Inside Ocean Hill-Brownsville: A Teacher's Education, 1968–69*, forthcoming, SUNY Press, 2014, explores the author's experience as a JHS 271 teacher during and in the aftermath of the 1968 strike.



of the UFT through the community control struggles: 1) the UFT's embrace of its identity as a traditional craft union focused on improving the wages and working conditions of its members; 2) a rigid and sectarian anti-communist and narrowly social democratic politics and ideology, shaped by an embrace of the ideas and beliefs of Max Shachtman; and 3) a fervent commitment to notions of teacher professionalism.

The deep divide between craft and industrial forms of trade union organization and mobilizing strategies is one of the enduring binaries in explaining the history of the labour movement in the United States. From its very origins in the 19th century, craft unionism's primary goal had been to control and improve the wages and working conditions of members of particular and often narrow occupational groups by regulating and restricting output as well as strictly limiting who could work in specific crafts. Such restrictive actions and policies helped stabilize and enhance the wage levels of skilled workers and assure their control over the amount and nature of work at key moments in the history of capitalist development. They could also widen the nature of workers' struggles, challenging employers in ways that revealed the class antagonisms inherent in the exploitative essence of the profit system.<sup>17</sup> Nor, as John Laslett revealed decades ago, were craft unions inherently conservative: they always harboured significant enclaves of radical, even socialist, workers.<sup>18</sup> Recent scholarship has further complicated any simplified image of traditional craft unionism, suggesting that in sectors such as the building trades and garment industry, especially in the early 20th century, a broader vision of the labour movement and its purposes certainly existed. Craft unions were able to use militant tactics to realize not only better wages and working conditions but also to secure larger political, even radical, ends.<sup>19</sup>

Nonetheless, such craft union militancy was also frequently accompanied by active resistance to organizing and admitting into union membership unskilled workers, who often worked alongside their skilled counterparts (for example, southern and eastern European immigrants working in the iron and

17. See especially David Montgomery, *Workers' Control in America: Studies in the History of Work, Technology, and Labor Struggles* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

18. John Laslett, *Labor and the Left: A Study of Socialist and Radical Influences in the American Labor Movement, 1881–1924* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

19. See especially Michael Kazin, *Barons of Labor: The San Francisco Building Trades and Union Power in the Progressive Era* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 82–112, 145–176; and Eileen DeVault, *United Apart: Gender and the Rise of Craft Unionism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 75–104, 179–214. See also Nelson Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2002), 39–43 for the role of craft unions in the labour organizing drives in the 1930s; and Ruth Milkman, *L.A. Story: Immigrant Workers and the Future of the U.S. Labor Movement* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 26–76, 150–186 for the key role of militant craft/business unions in labour organizing drives in Los Angeles in the 1930s and 1940s and again in the 1980s and 1990s. Milkman suggests that one key craft union organizing strategy that proved successful over time was to compel employers to “take wages out of competition.”

steel industries in the late 19th and early 20th centuries), as well as women workers (in early 20th century tailoring and garment manufacturing), and workers of colour (especially African Americans, but also Asian and Latino workers, in many industries and at various times). Despite periodic bursts of labour militancy, US craft unions' exclusion of the unskilled, immigrants and women helped create what Lenin termed a "labour aristocracy" that hewed to a narrow "economism" focused on bread-and-butter issues of immediate benefit only to their members. This was especially the case when these craft unions were led by officials embracing a cautious business unionism. As the late, great Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm noted in a classic article about the labour aristocracy: "a purely 'economist' labor movement must tend to fragment the working class into 'selfish' ('petty bourgeois') segments each pursuing its interest, if necessary in alliance with its own employers, at the expense of the rest."<sup>20</sup> Those tendencies were exacerbated after World War II as craft union (and for that matter, even industrial union) militancy declined dramatically, increasingly replaced by conservative business-union practices that emphasized top-down leadership, rigid adherence to and reliance on the National Labor Relations Board-imposed collective bargaining regime, and often cozy relationships with employers. The American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations [AFL/CIO] merger in 1955 seemed to ratify this business turn, signaling a move away from the previous militancy of the labour movement.

The UFT's adherence to the craft/business-union model, evident from the union's founding, was thus well within the mainstream of US trade unionism in this period. The UFT had literally grown out of the shell of the older Teachers' Guild (TG), a social democratic split off from the more radical NY Teachers' Union (TU), which the communists had helped organize as a CIO union during the Depression.<sup>21</sup> The early UFT, like its Teachers' Guild ancestor, grew, in large measure, as a result of the evisceration of the Teachers' Union, which was expelled from the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) in 1940 and effectively destroyed in the late 1950s by a swelling chorus of McCarthyite red-baiting and anti-communism, propagated, in part, by the TG. Particularly troubling to the TG/UFT was the CP's and the TU's militant and enduring commitment to anti-racist, pro-community politics and mass struggles and actions throughout the late 1940s and 1950s in New York City,

20. Eric Hobsbawm, "Lenin and the 'Aristocracy of Labor,'" *Monthly Review* 22 (August 1970); reprinted in issue 64 (December 2012), <http://monthlyreview.org/2012/12/01/lenin-and-the-aristocracy-of-labor> (accessed April 20, 2013). Hobsbawm also devoted a full chapter to analyzing the 19th century labour aristocracy in Britain in his important collection *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (1964; London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 272–315.

21. The newly formed UFT copied the TG's organizational structure, hired much of its support staff, and even moved into the old TG offices, according to Perlstein, *Justice, Justice*, 16–17.

as historian Martha Biondi has so brilliantly reminded us.<sup>22</sup> Tough craft and business unionism was the TG/UFT response to the social movement ideology and community solidarity and strike actions of the TU, even as UFT leaders continued to pay lip service to mainstream integrationist ideals and strategies.

From the outset, the UFT and many of its leaders, especially Albert Shanker, who won the presidency of the New York union in 1964, were in intellectual and political thrall to Max Shachtman, a former Trotskyist who served as the intellectual progenitor of a conservative form of socialism (“social democracy”) that articulated a staunch anti-Stalinism, within which an evolving anti-Communism was very much in tune with the McCarthyite sensibilities of the 1950s. Alongside this politics of relentless antagonism to all things Soviet was an expressed pro-integrationist stance based on a belief in the need to unite the American working class across racial and ethnic lines. Like Shanker, Shachtman supported the mainstream Civil Rights Movement and its recognized leaders in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but was vehemently opposed to the various forms of radicalism and nationalism that emerged after the mid-1960s with the rise of the Black Power movement. As was the case with so many left sectarians who experienced the struggles of the 1930s, Shachtman was also a proponent of a bare-knuckles, polemical style of politics and ideological engagement, a kind of “kill-or-be-killed” mentality toward his political opponents.<sup>23</sup> Shachtman’s influence would be felt decisively within the leadership corps of the UFT and Shanker, in particular, was a devoted protégé. He hired Yetta Barsh, Shachtman’s wife, as his assistant in 1965 and Shanker and Shachtman saw each other regularly at Shachtman’s Long Island home, where the two men and their wives socialized and talked politics. Shanker, who was twenty-four years Shachtman’s junior, apparently learned his political and ideological lessons well.<sup>24</sup>

22. Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2003). Marjorie Murphy argues that “The work of Communist teachers in Harlem and Bedford-Stuyvesant was designed ... to radicalize progressive education and make the classroom a vehicle for social change.” Marjorie Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: the AFT and the NEA, 1900–1980* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1992), 188.

23. According to Shachtman’s recent biographer, Peter Drucker, Shachtman, by the mid-1960s “... subordinated African-American demands to holding the Democratic Party together and ensuring the AFL-CIO’s predominance within it.” See Peter Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left: A Socialist’s Odyssey Through the “American Century”* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 2007), 287.

24. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, 62. Drucker describes Shachtman as “an intellectual gray eminence behind AFL-CIO leaders George Meany and Albert Shanker.” See Drucker, *Max Shachtman and His Left*, 1. Kahlenberg concludes that “Max’s influence on AI was quite significant ... amplifying Shanker’s intellectual understanding of Communism.” See Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, 150–151, quoting Eric Chenoweth, former AFT and AFL-CIO staffer. Shachtman was an informal foreign policy advisor to the AFL-CIO leadership, helping keep organized labour in line behind first Johnson’s and then Nixon’s disastrous Vietnam policies.

Shanker's and the UFT leadership's craft/business unionist and Shachtmanite ideologies were frequently complemented by a tough, blue-collar trade unionism that was fully committed from the organization's earliest years to using hard-ball tactics to improve the working conditions, wages, and status of rank-and-file teachers. Considerable gains were realized through hard contract bargaining with the Board of Education and periodic strikes. The nascent UFT established an early alliance in 1960 with the city's powerful, all-male building-trades unions, which dominated the New York City Central Labor Council (NYCCLC), headed by International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Union Local 3 head Harry Van Arsdale.<sup>25</sup> Van Arsdale and the NYCCLC were committed to expanding the ranks of organized labour in the city to include those in the growing municipal sector, especially the teachers.<sup>26</sup> Encouraged by their links to the muscular craft union ideology of the building trades, the early UFT leaders imagined teachers, in the words of one of them, as "assembly line workers ... piece workers." One UFT member, describing teachers' behavior during a 1962 strike, recalled that "We were tough like truck drivers and Jimmy Hoffa."<sup>27</sup> Such clear intimations of a strong identification with craft-union toughness by rank-and-file teachers and their leaders ultimately led to teachers' proud refusal to be intimidated by their Board of Education bosses or, more importantly, by parents and community control advocates in the 1967–1968 period. It is not surprising that the early UFT had its greatest organizing

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Shanker and the UFT dutifully followed Shachtman's line and lead on Vietnam and, later on, his attacks on the New Left and black radicals. Perlstein, *Justice, Justice*, 17; and Paul Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), 155–158. Shachtman had other personal and political links to important players in the 1968 strike and its aftermath. The Anti-Defamation League (ADL) played a key role in bolstering Shanker's and the UFT's claims about rampant anti-Semitism in the black community in several reports it issued in January 1969. Abraham H. Foxman—who went to work at the ADL in 1965 and helped turn it, after he became its National Director in 1987 (a position he still holds almost half a century later), into the preeminent voice for conservative Jewish, pro-Israel politics and values—was another Shachtman protégé who got his start at the ADL because of his links to Shachtman. On the ADL reports see Ferretti, "New York's black anti-semitism scare," 25–27. On Foxman and Shachtman, see Paul Buhle and Robin Kelley, "Allies of a Different Sort: Jews and Blacks in the American Left," in Jack Salzman and Cornel West, eds., *Struggles in the Promised Land: Towards a History of Black-Jewish Relations in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 217. Information about Foxman's long ADL career from Anti-Defamation League Archive website, accessed 14 July 2013, [http://archive.adl.org/education/holocaust/foxman\\_bio.asp](http://archive.adl.org/education/holocaust/foxman_bio.asp). Buhle also claims that Foxman "moved into neoconservative circles" in the 1980s (after he took over as ADL National Director), after which the ADL was "cooperating with intelligence agencies against radicals in unions, entertainment, and elsewhere." See Buhle, *Taking Care of Business*, 288, fn. 67.

25. David Selden describes Harry Van Arsdale's key role in helping the UFT negotiate its first few contracts with the Board of Education. Selden, *Teacher Rebellion*, 27–29, 40–43.

26. Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 204.

27. The quotations are from Perlstein, *Justice, Justice*, 19–20. I have drawn heavily on Perlstein's thoughtful insights into "teacher consciousness" in shaping my analysis in this article.

successes among the largely male junior high and high school workforce in the NY public schools; the largely female primary school workforce was not as keen on this early UFT vision of teachers as truck drivers.<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, both before but especially during the 1968 strikes, the UFT also practised a very specific form of craft union exclusionism by supporting testing policies that ended up restricting African-American and Puerto Rican entry into the ranks of new teachers and school supervisors. The UFT and its largely Jewish membership actively and vociferously supported the Board of Education's and its Board of Examiners' decades-old system of competitive testing to determine who could become a classroom teacher and, more importantly, how individual teachers could build the necessary seniority to transfer into the "best" (read "white, middle-class") schools in the system. The competitive, standardized testing regime imposed by the Board of Examiners, favored, as Gerald Podair has noted, "self-reliant individuals who were judged by standards of 'objective merit' divorced from considerations of racial group origin."<sup>29</sup> That testing system had helped Jews break the iron grip of the Irish on the teaching profession in the 1930s, opening the field to a huge influx of Jews into the ranks of New York City teachers in the following three decades. But the UFT's continued embrace of the Board of Examiners' selection process, which obviously had served Jewish teachers well, effectively restricted the number of blacks and Puerto Ricans in the teaching profession and in the ranks of principals and assistant principals throughout the 1950s and 1960s. In the mid-1960s, only 3 per cent of all principals working for the NYC Board of Education and only 8 per cent of teachers were black, at a time when half of the one million plus students enrolled in the NY City public schools were students of colour.<sup>30</sup> When the community control school boards in East Harlem and in Ocean Hill-Brownsville called for expansion of the number of black and Puerto Rican teachers and supervisors who worked in the communities' public schools, the UFT considered this an outright assault on the "objective" criteria used to determine access to the profession, and thus to union membership. They bitterly opposed any effort to move beyond qualifying exams to diversify the workforce in the public schools, a response worthy of the most restrictive craft unions.<sup>31</sup>

28. Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, 220–222 notes the sharp increase in the percentage of male classroom teachers between 1954 and 1964 (a 94 per cent increase as compared to 38 per cent for female teachers). Murphy also notes that education research in the 1960s suggested that "men were more likely than women to join [teacher] unions [because] men had greater needs for benefits than female teachers..." See also Perlstein, *Justice, Justice*, 19.

29. Podair, *Strike That Changed New York*, 50.

30. Jerald Podair, "The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis: New York's Antigone," unpublished paper presented at the CUNY Graduate Center, 6 October 2001, 8, retrieved 15 July 2013, <http://www.gothamcenter.org/festival/2001/confpapers/podair.pdf>.

31. Podair, *Strike That Changed New York*, 50–51, 53, 155–156.

The UFT revealed another indication of its ideological and practical embrace of craft union economism by its willingness to make common cause during the 1968 strike with the Council of Supervisory Associations, which represented the public school principals who had direct managerial control over classroom teachers. The two groups jointly filed an ultimately successful lawsuit seeking to restrain the community control movement from hiring supervisors not already on the Board of Examiners' approved hiring list.<sup>32</sup> Like traditional "labour aristocrats," the UFT was not above building alliances with managers against the encroachments of the "lesser skilled," which helps explain, at least in part, the UFT's rigid opposition to the efforts of parents and their supporters to gain some measure of control over the public schools in their neighbourhoods.

The third leg of the stool propping up the UFT's reactionary labour ideology during the community control strikes was the union's and its members' abiding commitment to the idea of teacher professionalism. Seemingly at odds with the tough, blue-collar, wage-worker orientation of the early UFT organizers, professionalism was in fact intimately connected to teachers' passionate embrace of their identity as and pride in being skilled workers who demanded a measure of control over their workplaces. Harkening back to the earliest expressions of professionalism and teacher pride embodied in the growth of the National Education Association after 1900, the UFT and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), its parent body, also argued for the white-collar status of its members.<sup>33</sup> In addition to the notion of skilled workers' manliness and toughness, the union embraced teacher professionalism as a key ideological component in its organizing efforts during the 1960s.

Even the UFT's early support for improvement of conditions inside New York City public school classrooms in the 1960s was not simply a product of teachers' heightened "social conscience" or a belief in equal educational opportunity. According to Sandra Feldman, a Shanker protégé who later succeeded him at the helm of both the UFT and the AFT, "teacher consciousness" in 1967, which often translated into the union's commitment to better schools, "was largely, and understandably self-interest ... a struggle to create a respected profession from a beleaguered, downgraded occupation."<sup>34</sup> This focus on professional pride and workplace control ran headlong into the militant demands of parents and educational activists, who were using community control in the 1960s to fight for a major reorganization of the public schools. That

32. Podair, *Strike That Changed New York*, 89–90. It is also interesting to note that the AFT allowed principals into separate locals. See Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, 228.

33. Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, 23.

34. The Feldman quote is from Perlstien, *Justice, Justice*, 22–23. Podair offers a different interpretation, arguing that the UFT's commitment to improve schools was part of its well-orchestrated 1967 "More Effective Schools" campaign, which was basically a plan to hire more teachers. Podair, *Strike That Changed New York*, 73–74.



reorganization effort aimed to correct endemic racial and economic injustices that the long struggle for school integration had failed to achieve. Marjorie Murphy notes that, “The strike of teachers in 1968 seemed to expose the whole arrangement of a professionalized teaching workforce under a hierarchical, centralized school system ... [and] ... in the process ... fundamentally ignored the community.”<sup>35</sup> As Daniel Perlstein concludes: “At precisely the moment when black parents were challenging school officials’ failure to combat racial inequality, the UFT argued that teacher professionalism precluded parents from exercising significant authority in the schools.” In Shanker’s own blunt words, offered during the 1968 strike, unionized teachers would never “teach in any school or district where professional decisions are made by laymen.”<sup>36</sup>

UFT unionism in the 1960s was thus built on a toxic combination of craft union consciousness, Shachtmanite ideology, and the notion of teacher professionalism, tinged with an obsessive emphasis on the menace of community intervention and black anti-Semitism. That ideological brew helps explain the obdurate nature of the UFT’s political and organizational responses during and after the 1968 strikes. The community control forces not only needed to be defeated when they tried to change the governance of local schools; they also had to be rooted out, defamed, and, finally, destroyed.<sup>37</sup> Shachtman promoted this kind of hostile response to political “enemies,” and Shanker and his colleagues reacted in the same way toward the TU. They would treat their later critics in the AFT, including former allies like David Selden, similarly.<sup>38</sup> This ideological rigidity poisoned for several decades the possibilities of building alliances between teachers and working-class and poor communities of colour. Coalitions of these constituencies were and remain essential to successful political and institutional struggles to transform New York City’s public schools.

35. Murphy concludes that by 1968 the UFT “was now so professionalized, so tied to the centralized school system, that there was little contact between teacher unionists and community workers.” Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, 231.

36. Perlstein, *Justice, Justice*, 22–23. Feldman’s and Shanker’s statements are quoted by Perlstein.

37. John O’Neill argues that the union gave up all liberal pretensions and commitments during the 1968 strike. He quotes (anonymously) a UFT Executive Board member during the fall of 1968: “We have to adopt a scorched earth policy in Brownsville. If those people hurt us we have to destroy their schools. This is the only way to teach them a lesson.” John O’Neill, “The Rise and Fall of the UFT,” in Rubenstein, ed., *Schools Against Children*, 180–181.

38. Selden notes that UFT’s vitriol also extended to “Those few teachers and liberal leaders who sided with the community control forces [who] were forever damned in the eyes of Shanker and the UFT. ... They did not deserve the epithets directed at them by teachers. Torn between their commitments to unionism and the civil rights movement, they had sided with the governing board from a sincere desire to help blacks and other minorities gain a measure of justice and dignity. But to the UFT, they forever became ‘scabs, strikebreakers and Communists.’” Selden, *Teacher Rebellion*, 155. Selden might well have been describing his own fractious and fractured relationship with Shanker and the UFT after 1968.



We are living to this day with the consequences of the brutal defeat of community control in the late 1960s. As New York City's public school system continues to fail its 1.1 million children and the current UFT leadership tries to rebuild a parent-teacher political alliance irrevocably shattered 45 years earlier, we are reminded of the historical tragedy and embittered legacy of the 1968 strikes. Woody Allen was absolutely on target when he penned the inimitable line in his 1973 futuristic film, *Sleeper*, explaining how the world had come to be destroyed: "According to history, a man named Albert Shanker got ahold of a nuclear warhead." Knowing the history of the New York City public schools during and after the 1968 UFT strike, all we can do is sadly shake our heads in agreement.<sup>39</sup>

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39. Both Joshua Freeman and Richard Kahlenberg, writing from very different political perspectives about Albert Shanker, use Woody Allen's Shanker tag line from his 1973 film *Sleeper* in their chapters on the 1968 strike and its aftermath, testimony to the quip's enduring power, 40 years later, as a cultural and political trope. See Freeman, *Working-Class New York*, 227 (Freeman also entitles his chapter on the strike "A Man by the Name of Albert Shanker") and Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal*, 1–2, 172–73.