

***Tough Liberal: Albert Shanker
and the Battles Over Schools, Unions,
Race and Democracy***

by Richard Kahlenberg, Columbia University Press, 2007, 552 pp.

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Richard Kahlenberg's biography of the teachers union leader Albert Shanker is a must read for unionists, educators, politicians and democracy internationalists trying to make sense of the persistent failings of U.S. education, the gnawing weaknesses of the Democratic Party and the diminishing influence of the American labour movement. According to Kahlenberg, Shanker's 'tough liberalism,' is an approach 'wholly worthy of reviving' because it is:

...an ideology that champions an affirmative role for government in promoting social mobility, social cohesion, and greater equality at home and democracy abroad, but which is also tough-minded about human nature, the way the world works, and the reality of evil.

Of Shanker's version, he notes:

...over a thirty year period he stood squarely for two central pillars of liberal thought: public education and organized labor. . . he articulated a cogent rationale for his collection of 'liberal' and 'conservative' views that bridged traditional categories without merely splitting differences. For Shanker all roads led back to democracy.

Propelled to the top of New York City's fledgling United Federation of Teachers (UFT) at the time of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement in which he was deeply involved, Shanker led a protracted and wounding strike in the fall of 1968, just months after the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy, and 3 months after a riot-ridden Democratic Party convention in Chicago. The strike led to Shanker's new prominence as a labor leader but, because the strike was about protecting white teachers who had been fired because of their race by black school leadership, it also caused some to brand him a 'racist,' a charge which haunted him, unfairly, for many years. He overcame it with consistent and outspoken advocacy

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of equal educational opportunity and went on to become not only the president of the powerful and respected American Federation of Teachers but also, says Kahlenberg, ‘the most influential education reformer of the second half of the twentieth century.’

Born in 1928, Shanker grew up aware of the fierce battles raging in his mother’s union, the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU) – for socialists, the anti-democratic practices of the communists were always a major concern. We don’t know for sure why Shanker was reading the socialist philosopher Sidney Hook and the anti-Stalinist literary and cultural journal, *The Partisan Review*, at the age of 15, but Kahlenberg gives us enough tidbits to venture a guess.

Though they voted for Roosevelt, the Shankers were not Democrats. In the New York circles in which Shanker was raised and schooled in the 1930s and 1940s, the question was not whether one was a Democrat or a Republican, but whether one was a Socialist or a Communist.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Shanker began college majoring in history and went so far as to write an undergraduate thesis on the Spanish Civil War. But in the summer of 1948, he took philosophy courses at the University of Minnesota, and when he returned, he switched to philosophy as his major. Shanker began reading Hegel, Marx, Santayana, and Dewey. He read Dewey so thoroughly he could cite the page number on which a given sentence was written.

During his time at Illinois, Shanker became active in the local civil rights movement, and in 1947 he became a charter member of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) . . . Shanker, who knew the sting of discrimination himself, believed segregation was wrong and also undemocratic – reminiscent of the totalitarian Nazi ideology the United States had been fighting.

I went to work for Shanker at the American Federation of Teachers in 1974, before I knew as much as I should have about radical and union history. He invited me to go to dinner one evening with a few other union leaders and someone he told me was a very important historical figure. It was Charles (‘Sasha’) Zimmerman, a former communist who had left the Party and become one of its leading opponents after 1929. Zimmerman was also a key figure in the ILGWU while Shanker was an

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infant and as his mother, one of its members, was struggling to make ends meet. According to Shanker, ‘unions were just below God’ when he was growing up. I didn’t realise it at the time, but as an anti-communist ILGWU leader Zimmerman, must have been a political saint to Shanker.

Kahlenberg doesn’t talk about Zimmerman, but he does recount Shanker’s youthful flirtation with communism, his activism in the anti-communist and pro-democratic Young People’s Socialist League at the University of Illinois, and how he was influenced by the battle between New York City Teachers Guild and its historic rival, the Teachers Union, also based in New York. In 1940, the Guild obtained the New York City charter from the American Federation of Teachers, five years after the AFT had expelled the Teachers Union for communist domination. The leadership of the Guild included a goodly number of experienced pro-democracy faction fighters who had successfully opposed their pro-communist rival. This group included Shanker’s mentors and advisors – Kahlenberg doesn’t talk at length about these people, but they were hugely important to Shanker.

Strike-Leader: The Ocean Hill-Brownsville Strikes

Unions seek to protect workers from arbitrary treatment by procedures that, in some ways, mirror judicial procedures used by democratic governments. They are generally found in contracts and spell out the mechanisms of fair treatment and the grounds for charging employees with wrong-doing. Charges must be made, evidence presented and Defense offered. It all adds up to due process – the union’s counterpart to a fair trial.

On May 9, 1968 – four years after Shanker was elected president of the New York-based United Federation of Teachers (a merger of the old Teachers Guild and another organisation) – an experimental district governing board in the largely poor and minority Brooklyn neighbourhood of Ocean Hill-Brownsville fired 13 teachers and 6 administrators, all but one white and most Jewish. (The exception was found later to have been misidentified.) No charges were made, no reasons were given, no appeal was possible, and no due process procedures were offered. Kahlenberg does a skilful job telling the complex and difficult story of what followed. The race of these particular teachers was the issue, not their performance. Rhody McCoy, the district’s superintendent, believed that African-American kids should be taught by African-American teachers and he wanted to prove he had the

power to make this happen – due process be damned. This was the central reason for the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strikes.

When a union cedes due process protections to political pressures – in this case a bizarre coalition of elite foundation executives who were funding the experimental district, a weak Republican mayor from a patrician background, John Lindsey, and black power advocates who wanted racially-inspired control of their communities – it doesn't stand for much. So, for seven weeks Shanker and his union fought back in an on-again off-again strike that made history. What Kahlenberg's account helps us realise is that this strike widened an emerging split among U.S. liberals across an array of issues, dividing those who were uncritically sympathetic to black power's separatist impulse from those who believed in the Civil Rights Movement's agenda of social integration and who wanted to build political coalitions among the working and middle classes across racial lines. That split also divided those who, despite Vietnam, still saw Communism as the greatest evil, from those that regarded US imperialism as an equal or even greater evil. It divided those who believed in unions as a vehicle for middle and working class opportunity from those who came to regard them as conservative, defensive and bureaucratic. The advocates of labor rights, union-minority coalitions, integrationist politics, and democratic internationalism formed a new 'tough liberal' camp. Among them Albert Shanker was a key leader.

AFT President

In 1973, when American Federation of Teachers President Dave Selden, one of Shanker's former mentors, almost lost his office to a coalition that included hard-bitten leftists, Shanker's reaction was swift and pointed. He decided to run for the AFT presidency in the next election. He also pushed for and won key procedural changes – he succeeded in ending the secret ballot for convention delegates by making the argument that their votes, like those of members of Congress, should be openly reported to those who elected them. He also encouraged the development of political parties or caucuses within the AFT and successfully pressed for voting on slates of officers that were selected by these caucuses – thereby providing that leadership be elected as a group with an identifiable and unified group stance on major issues.

Shanker won the presidency of the AFT in 1974 and went on to unionise teachers at a startling rate, surprising the AFT's larger rival, the National Education

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Association. Despite merger talks that lasted right up until 2000 (when merger was finally voted down by the NEA) the larger organisation took up virtually all of the AFT's initiatives and adopted them as its own, while at the same time attacking the AFT and Shanker for their stance on every one. First was collective bargaining, followed by endorsements of political candidates, then lobbying and, finally, experiments in professional improvement. In each case, the NEA's initial stance was one of opposition.

Shanker's unions – both the New York based UFT and the national union, the AFT – were preparatory schools for smart union action. Everyone was expected to read, think and argue openly about whatever policy options were on the plate. One of my early tasks as a young UFT staffer was to deliver significant articles to top staff and leaders. Everyone knew Al had already read every one and was likely to ask his or her opinion about some piece or other at some point. If the subject was part of your job there was an expectation that you knew all sides of what was being said and written about it. If you had an opinion about a topic that related to someone else's job that was welcome too. In fact, there were no bureaucratic lines about who was to think about what, so energetic staffers frequently expressed themselves on each other's activities, a dynamic that led to plenty of staff in-fighting, but also ensured that most of the best ideas and information would reach Shanker one way or another. It also meant that the bemused groans that greeted the delivery of reading material were usually followed by a lot of concentrated page turning. The UFT's organisational culture of reading, discussing, and arguing across job lines became characteristic of the AFT after Shanker arrived in 1974. This style of operation was a precursor to what business academics and organisational experts advocated as the flat, 'learning organisation' some 15 years later. It was probably unprecedented in the modern labor movement.

The AFT combined ceaseless debate with work around a 'tough liberal' agenda. Kahlenberg notes that there were a small but influential number of young social democrats who joined the AFT's staff – heirs to the democratic socialist tradition crafted by A. Philip Randolph, President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and first African-American to sit on the AFL-CIO's Executive Council, Bayard Rustin, protégé of Randolph and organiser of the 1963 March on Washington, and Max Shachtman, head of the Independent Socialist League which merged with the Norman Thomas' Socialist Party in 1958. These staffers were joined by a talented group with on-the-ground expertise. The brains' trust that emerged was organisation-wide and included locally elected leaders – Dal Lawrence in Toledo,

Herb Magidson and Sandy Feldman in New York City, Nat LaCour from New Orleans, Ed McElroy from Warwick, Rhode Island and Pat Daly from Dearborn, Michigan were just a few of the early group of serious union thinkers who advised Shanker when he was first elected.

Education Reformer

Among thoughtful educators and politicians, Shanker came to be regarded as an education visionary. He had dared to acknowledge the truth of *A Nation at Risk*, a 1983 critique of the failings of U.S. public education and he began the Clinton years as the leading general in the army of advocates for standards-based education reform, who helped craft Clinton's 'Goals 2000' program. That program pressed states to develop clear standards for what students should know and be able to do, a defined curriculum to guide teaching to the standards, and assessments to measure the results. Such an idea is mundane to most developed European and Asian nations, but it was revolutionary to the highly localised U.S. system where most of what happens in schools has been determined at the district or even school level.

To win, Shanker took on the advocates of local control within the union, arguing that the U.S. needed an education system that would no longer mask the failures suffered disproportionately by the poor. To critics who defended professional teacher judgment as the source of all good – even decisions about what gets taught – he noted that teachers in the more directive systems of other industrialised democracies were more highly respected than their American counterparts, had more opportunities for professional growth and were producing higher student achievement – including among minorities and immigrants. He chastised educational leaders for expecting teachers to wear themselves out by reinventing courses that stood little chance of offering consistency or common standards. He convinced many – unfortunately too few – that high performance required policy-makers to assume their rightful responsibility by defining the content to be taught.

The Bush Administration's controversial 'No Child Left Behind' policy falls short of Shanker's formula for educational success. While using federal dollars – which are necessary to improve education for poor and minority students – states are able to set different standards for student 'proficiency' thus making any federal judgment about performance highly relative. The result is variable student achievement and perverse decisions about which schools have been successful and which not. The

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most recent effort to reauthorize this law is now stalled, probably until the election of a new U.S. president.

At the same time as he pressed for high standards and more accountability, Shanker also fought against all mechanisms for privatising education, whether in the form of vouchers or tuition tax credits, that would enable students to attend private schools. Shanker argued that these policies would ‘Balkanize’ education – fragmenting it into schools that would owe no accountability to the public and have little incentive to prepare citizens for a common responsibility. Debates over what course to take have been unproductive at least in part because Shanker was felled prematurely by cancer in 1997.

Democracy-advocate

Union-building and democracy promotion abroad moved Shanker deeply. He knew and respected Lane Kirkland, Irving Brown and Tom Kahn, the AFL-CIO’s internationalists, who never shied away from a good fight where democracy and trade union rights were at issue, and he worked on labor rights and democracy at the AFL-CIO, where he headed its international affairs committee beginning in 1989, and at the AFT. Shanker helped Soviet dissident Vladimir Bukovsky leave the Soviet Union in 1976, and was key to the release from prison of Chinese trade union leader Han Dongfang in 1991. He pressed for the AFT to help the Chilean teachers union and other Chilean unions to bring down Pinochet and to support the South African teachers as they took on apartheid. He also backed the efforts of democratic unionists to bring down the Sandinistas in 1986.

Shanker was instrumental in building the AFL-CIO’s Polish Workers Aid Fund from union and member contributions – to help Solidarnosc in the early 1980’s. When the National Endowment for Democracy was created in 1983 the lion’s share of its funds went to labor work – over 4 million dollars alone to Solidarnosc through the Free Trade Union Institute (FTUI) during the Reagan and Bush years. Shanker maintained contact with Solidarnosc leaders and supported their cause within the AFL-CIO. In 1984, guided in part by the 80-year-old Sidney Hook, Shanker started ‘Education for Democracy’ in the AFT, an effort to teach about democracy in U.S. schools. Then, after the fall of communism in Eastern Europe this went on as ‘Education for Democracy International’ to carry on a similar mission there.

'Scoop' Jackson Democrat

Shanker had opposed Democratic Party reforms recommended in 1969 by the Democratic Rules Reform Committee, chaired by soon-to-be presidential candidate George McGovern. The reforms proposed that convention delegates be apportioned by sex, race, ethnicity and youth on the basis of each group's percentage of the general population. Shanker saw this as anti-democratic and anti-labor. (Not that he wanted one, but it was significant that labor, a group defined by class and organisation, was offered no quota.) He feared a working class backlash against the Democratic Party and, sure enough, McGovern lost to Nixon overwhelmingly in 1972 and the Democrats and labor both bemoaned huge defections from working class white voters. Ironically, once in office, Nixon, who recognised the power of quotas to split labor internally and to split minorities away from the white working class, came up with his own employment-directed quota policies to fuel the Democratic Party's internal fires. Despite the efforts of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority – a small band of 'tough liberals' including Shanker, Ben Wattenberg and Penn Kemble (my brother) – to support Henry 'Scoop' Jackson, U.S. Senator from Washington State, in the Democratic Primaries in 1976, the party failed to sufficiently return to an effective coalition of its labor, minority, middle class and working class roots.

'Scoop' Jackson came as close to Shanker's political thinking as any presidential candidate ever did. As Kahlenberg points out, Jackson was an anti-communist 'foreign policy hawk,' whose history included confronting Joseph McCarthy. He 'was also staunchly pro-labor and had a strong affirmative economic agenda.' The same day Shanker gave Jackson his personal endorsement, Jackson spoke at a Social Democrats USA dinner and 'blasted [Jimmy] Carter's anti-Washington campaign.' Jackson was 'to the left of Carter on economic policy, the role of government, and unions, and to the right of the rest of the Democratic field on foreign policy and defence – precisely where Shanker was.' But, Jackson's campaign failed to take off and he lost to Jimmy Carter. With the Democratic Party still in the grips of the McGovern reforms, and having taken a stand for Jackson, tough liberals like Shanker had too little influence to change things before Carter's coming defeat and the long Reagan and Bush years to come.

So, besides building the AFT's own political operation and watching its mounting success with state and local candidates, until the election of Bill Clinton, national Democratic Party politics had been discouraging for Shanker. But, by 1992 the AFT had the nationwide political muscle that could help lead to a Clinton victory.

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The AFT supported Bill Clinton in New York State during the primary season, putting him in contention for selection as the Democratic Party's candidate that year. It was a move Clinton never forgot. Shanker had an open door to the White House during the Clinton years, especially when it came to education policy, and his political and educational influence reached an all time high.

Today, arguments continue over the same issues on which Shanker staked out, but the 'tough liberal' politics he espoused has fewer adherents. Kahlenberg says that Shanker was unable to extend the success of his vision beyond education and his union and that he had much work left to do on the larger democracy agenda: 'His failure to convince fellow liberals to extend their support of democracy more broadly – to racial policy, international affairs, and their views of the labor movement – leaves open the question: what might society look like if we tried.' I believe there is still a place in American union and political life for 'tough liberalism' but enlarging its impact will involve us trying much harder. 'Fellow liberals' need to do some sharp thinking about how to relate sound education and labor policies to democracy advocacy abroad. Then a host of labor and political leaders need to step up to the plate. It is actually quite remarkable that Shanker got as far as he did.

Eugenia Kemble is Executive Director of the Albert Shanker Institute and former assistant to Albert Shanker at the American Federation of Teachers (1975-82, 1990-96) and the United Federation of Teachers, New York City (1967-74) In 1983 she was the AFL-CIO's representative on the study group that created the National Endowment for Democracy and from 1984-89 she directed the AFL-CIO's Free Trade Union Institute.