

The UFT Strike: A Blow Against Teacher Unionism

Steve Zeluck

SEVEN YEARS AGO, the United Federation of Teachers won a collective bargaining victory that made its parent organization, the American Federation of Teachers, a significant force on the American educational scene. Today, the policies of this same United Federation of Teachers have precipitated a crisis in the AFT of such proportions that the existence of the organization is threatened. The current UFT strike over the issue of community control and last year's UFT strike, largely over the issue of the "disruptive child," have led to a confrontation between the union and the entire black community which both sides now see as a struggle for survival.

How have such issues as these become the key to the survival of a trade union? To understand this, one must be aware of several unique aspects of teacher unionism.

The American Federation of Teachers is unquestionably the dominant voice of the teachers of urban America. Its chief competitor, the National Education Association (NEA), has become more militant (mostly in response to the militance of the AFT), but each collective bargaining election finds the NEA increasingly reduced to a rural and suburban base, and even that base is being hotly contested. Its numbers still exceed those of the AFT but the difference is qualitative: in losing the cities, the NEA has lost the center of social weight and power in modern society. Today the AFT, and not the NEA, is the key to the schools.

But at the same time that the AFT has been winning urban teachers, the cities themselves have been changing. In particular, the black urban population has grown enormously and the black movement has emerged as an aggressive force determined to win a measure of the power so long denied it. In this way, the growth of the AFT has won it new power but it has also placed the union at the vortex of the crisis of the American society. Every decision of the union has effects far beyond its membership or the "industry" in which its members are employed.

Given this situation, the union must choose between two alternative strategies. It can enter into genuine and close cooperation with the insurgent forces of the ghetto around a wide range of issues, forging an alliance against the establishment whose interest in educational improvement or the welfare of the ghetto is minimal. Or it can form an un-

acknowledged bloc with the status quo and the educational bureaucracy against the ghetto community (and ultimately against the students). It may be said that the second alternative is reactionary and unthinkable, that it could lead ultimately to the destruction of the union. Reactionary and destructive, yes, but in the absence of a carefully elaborated alternative, hardly unthinkable. There are powerful forces in the AFT now, many of them quite unaware of the implications of their position, who by both action and inaction are driving the union in precisely this direction. The unity and survival of the AFT will be decided in the immediate future by the clarity and decisiveness with which it chooses between the two courses open to it.

IF A BOLD AND COMPREHENSIVE ALLIANCE with the civil rights movement is essential to the survival of the AFT, it is equally the only road to significant educational change in the United States. Public education, especially of ghetto and working class children, has historically been starved for funds and there is no reason to believe that this is about to change in any meaningful way. In fact, there are "good" reasons for this social indifference. The American establishment sees education mainly as providing the skilled personnel necessary to maintain the economy; that is, the American educational system is an indirect subsidy to business. Inasmuch as the economy still needs pools of unskilled, menial labor, it is considered wasteful, if not actually dangerous, to try to educate everyone. In addition, the deep reservoir of racism in our society leads to the belief that such an attempt would be not only wasteful but futile.

The civil rights movement, by its own efforts, has already stimulated some very significant changes in education. But for all their significance, these changes have been at best token, paralleling the "success" of anti-poverty programs. A coalition of civil rights forces, teachers and the trade union movement is needed if the demand for educational change is to be taken seriously.

Such a coalition is also needed by teachers in their daily work. Students, after all, are not commodities. Few people would think of blaming an auto worker for the wasteful or unsafe design of a car. But teachers are held responsible for their "product." The first person blamed for the obvious failure of our schools is the individual teacher. It is not hard to point out that teachers' responsibility is at best derivative and subordinate, that the failure lies with those who hold the reins of power, that teachers are only their front men, the instrument of their indifference, and that attacks on teachers, individually or collectively, even when justifiable, are scarcely able to effect any substantial change in the situation.

However, the teacher is so visible and so vulnerable, and the daily

pressures are so intolerable, that such attacks are becoming the central concern of teachers in urban schools. Once again, the only way out is to redirect the resentment of the community toward the real culprits. This means that the union must not only face the facts of the monstrous conditions in the schools, but must take the lead in exposing them and placing responsibility for them where it belongs, with the real decision-makers and wielders of power—those who determine the allocation of resources in our society. It also means that the union must commit itself fully to the struggle for equality and not be content with tokenism—convention resolutions, trips to the South and conferences on Negro History. (It should not be forgotten that the AFT did make one real act of commitment when it expelled many of its locals for refusing to integrate immediately after 1954.) Only such policies can be effective and successful in defending teachers against abuse and unwarranted attacks by a frustrated and resentful community.

Another important gain from such a coalition would be the realization of the demand for teacher power. The historically legitimate demand that teachers, and not the educational bureaucracy, control the schools (by means of election and recall of principals, the determination of curriculum, etc.) has never, given the unquestionable failure of the schools, been more pertinent than it is today. At the same time, it is today totally unrealizable, especially in the cities, without the consent and cooperation of the black community.

If effective education and practical democracy require that authority be wrested from the establishment-dominated city boards of education, the aim of "teacher control of the schools," it must be obvious that the means to this end have to be modified to fit the new context of an erupting ghetto mobilizing to gain control over the institutions that dominate their lives. The movement for community control in the ghetto is aimed at taking power away from the boards of education, paralleling the aim of the teachers' movement. The two efforts are inseparable; neither can be won alone or at the expense of the other.

Abstractly, of course, community control of schools does not necessarily lead to educational progress. There are thousands of middle-class schools with de facto community control without any positive educational consequences. Less abstractly, the extension of community control to urban schools entails obvious dangers. If the teachers' movement remains isolated from this development, it will be all too easy to focus on teachers as the core of the failure of the schools. Further, if the movement for community control fails to produce significant changes (as is likely in the absence of the vast sums needed for schools and urban reconstruction), the most probable result will be demoralization, desperation, and cynicism.

But in action these dangers can be averted. Community control that

is the product of mass activity and involvement, especially if it is won in cooperation with the teachers' movement, is quite different from the sort of control that is handed down (and strictly limited) by a beneficent bureaucracy. Such control contains the potential for the self-mobilization of teachers, students and community to bring about serious, constructive changes in the educational system.

Today, in the cities, to counterpose teacher power to community control is to sabotage both and to surrender a great opportunity to shift the center of power in the schools in the direction that the teachers' movement has long sought.

To all these urgent reasons for an alliance between the teachers union and the ghetto and working class community must be added the fact that recent years have seen a great increase in the number of black teachers in Northern urban schools—one-third of the staff in Detroit and Chicago, three-quarters in the District of Columbia (New York City's 8 percent is anomalous)—and that this trend is continuing. These figures, large as they are, understate the actual weight of black teachers in the AFT. The union is still, in most cities, actively opposed by the NEA and any significant defection of black teachers could easily destroy the union outside New York City.

For all these reasons, the AFT has been forced by historical circumstances to face the question of its relationship to the black movement, not as an abstract moral issue but as a matter of the life or death of the union. Given these pressures and needs, transcending those facing any other union in the country today, it is hardly surprising that the AFT is the first union to have developed a significant opposition on a national scale, one which has proposed union recognition of the ghetto's right to self-determination with all that implies for the schools and the union and which won 25 percent of the vote for its presidential candidate. The existence and growth of this caucus gives hope that the proposed course toward the community that has been discussed here will be adopted. If so, the teachers union could begin to have the same healthy vanguard influence in society and in the labor movement that is shared by the teachers unions of France and Japan.

THE UFT

IF THERE ARE FORCES PRESSING THE UNION to move in a more progressive, more democratic direction, there are also, unfortunately, powerful counter forces. The first of these is the current social and political climate. Teachers, even union teachers, are not immune to the current demand for "order uber alles" or to the unacknowledged racism endemic in our society. Nowhere does this problem, and the dangers implicit in it,

appear more clearly than in the recent history of the single most important unit of the AFT, the 50,000-member United Federation of Teachers.

For many years the UFT was thought of as the "left wing" of the AFT. The origins of its leadership in the Socialist and Liberal parties and its relatively democratic structure and operation gave it an air of progressiveness, personified by its former president, Charles Cogen. Even after the UFT failed to support the school boycotts of 1964 (a failure not due to any criticism of the boycott as a tactic or softened by the offering of any alternative), the black and liberal movements continued to see the UFT as fundamentally "on our side."

In the last fifteen months, this attitude has been completely shattered. The UFT's totally punitive approach to the "disruptive child" in the strike of September 1967 and its adamant opposition to any meaningful community participation in the schools (hiding behind its legitimate demands for "due process") have embittered relations between the union and those who should be, and once were, its closest allies. The breach has reached the point where both black and white teachers are ready to engage in strikebreaking on a scale that threatens the future of the union.

This crucial development in the UFT can be traced to two factors, the objective work conditions for teachers in ghetto schools and the subjective needs of the leadership of the UFT. The objective factor is all too well known. The complete lack of meaningful and relevant education for the poor of all races, combined with the increasing consciousness of blacks, have produced an explosive mixture that makes teaching, especially conventional teaching, a frustrating, demoralizing and at times even hazardous occupation. The role of leadership in such a foreboding situation can be all-important. It can organize and direct the frustration and indignation of the teachers at those who are responsible for the crisis of the schools. But to do so, the leadership must be prepared to offer an alternative to the status quo, one which poses the need for drastic educational changes, recognizes the necessity for a vast mobilization of forces to effect these changes and commits the teachers union to take the lead in beginning such a mobilization.

Without such an alternative, teachers will increasingly fall prey to reactionary notions. The destructive tendencies within the union will grow, pressing the union leadership and the schools farther to the right and leading to a debacle. This is what has occurred within the UFT. Unwilling to fight for new alternatives, the leadership capitulated to the growing destructive climate and by striking in September, set into motion a chain of events of which it is no longer the master.

The first overt step in the capitulation of the leadership was taken

in the spring of 1967 when the UFT demanded the right of classroom teachers to expel the "disruptive child." No measure other than this was proposed by the union to deal with these children. Once the UFT adopted this demand, the fissures between the union and the community widened into a chasm. The demand was later dropped but the damage had been done. The remaining ties between the union and local civil rights organization were all but severed. (For ceremonial purposes, the UFT retains the services of Bayard Rustin.)

This was predictable and presumably was considered and weighed by the UFT leadership before adopting the demand. But to the surprise of the leadership, the black community went farther, for the first time making aggressive efforts to break the strike and gaining the support of a number of black and white teachers. Still more ominous, a sizable number of black teachers, in New York and across the country, quit the union.

Unfortunately the leadership disregarded this warning signal. Instead of reconsidering its posture and strategy,* the union plunged six months later into an even more direct confrontation with the black movement. Local black communities, dissatisfied with the Board of Education's performance, sought to assume some of the Board's authority (a transfer of authority that had been promised to the three experimental community governing boards by the Board of Education but never actually granted). None of these demands involved any diminution of union rights.

Instead of encouraging and associating itself with this democratic movement and thus being in a position to influence it and prevent its possible transformation into an anti-union movement, the UFT launched a bitter campaign in league with the Board of Education to block any effort at community control of schools. With this decision, the union's divorce from the civil rights movement was complete. The union was headed for a confrontation that could only end in the present strike.

* It is always difficult, but necessary, to consider the role of individual and subjective forces in social processes. Such considerations are important, especially in explaining the UFT's drift to the right during the past year. In the Spring of 1967 it became clear that the UFT would have to strike for a contract. At the same time, the leaders had serious doubts about the membership's response to a strike call. It was in this context that the explosive (and rallying) issue of the "disruptive child" was raised. The issue was dropped before the strike was settled but there was open dissatisfaction in the ranks over the terms of the new contract; in fact, both secondary-school vice-presidents urged a "no" vote on sound grounds.

The widespread discontent continued to pose a grave problem for the leadership in the Spring 1968 election and this undoubtedly contributed to the decision to take a further step to the right. Seizing on tactical errors by some community leaders, the union launched a massive campaign against community control of the schools, in the name of "due process" and the defense of teachers' rights.

FACT AND FICTION ABOUT THE STRIKE

THE CURRENT STRIKE, reams of speeches to the contrary notwithstanding, is not over the issue of due process or teachers' rights. Here is some of the evidence:

1. After six years, the UFT's contract still contains no provision whatever controlling the involuntary transfer of teachers, a provision that is common in other school contracts. In New York City, involuntary transfers are governed solely by Board of Education rules. The UFT has always lived by these rules and permitted involuntary transfers *on a mass scale* without objection, much less active opposition. Even worse, the UFT has remained totally passive in the face of transfers and firings of hundreds of teachers for opposition to the war, support of community control, or attempts to teach in the manner proposed by Paul Goodman, Kozol, Kohl, and others.

2. The attempts of the local governing boards to transfer involuntarily were an issue solely between the Board of Education, which had been doing so all along, and the local boards, which had been promised that right. At no point did the actions of the local boards violate the union contract.

3. Since under the existing Board of Education rules, teachers may be transferred without charges being filed, with the consent of the Superintendent, the local board was acting in accord with existing rules in not filing charges originally.*

Unquestionably the Board of Education rules cited are a gross and indefensible violation of due process and must be fought. But for six years the UFT leadership has accepted these rules with remarkable equanimity. Their sudden concern with due process (a concern that does not extend to the many teachers involuntarily transferred by the Board of Education) is, under the circumstances, less than convincing. In view of the bitter campaign the UFT leaders have waged against community control, it becomes clear that the due process issue is merely a dodge.

Those who still had doubts about the UFT's goals in the strike should have been convinced by an event just prior to the third resumption of the strike on October 11. Several labor leaders brought Shanker a proposed basis for settlement which had the tentative approval of the Board of Education and the local governing board. The main points were: 1. Recognition of agency shop for the UFT; 2. Restoration of the disputed 83 teachers to their *teaching* positions in the district; 3. Written guarantees of due process; 4. The UFT to publicly recognize and support community control and decentralization; 5. The UFT to join the govern-

* Documented details of points 2 and 3 can be found in the brochure, "The Burden of Blame," issued by the New York Civil Liberties Union.

ing board in demanding funds from the Board of Education to assure the effectiveness of the experimental districts as well as for general educational purposes; and 6. The details of the previous points to be negotiated between the UFT and the local governing boards. The UFT rejected this proposal.

A LOOK AT THE RECORD

THE UFT IS ON RECORD as favoring decentralization. That record is purely ceremonial. Its actions have included deliberate sabotage of the experimental districts, an unparalleled lobbying effort, deals with anti-labor forces and ultimately the strike.

From the inception of the community control program the UFT has collaborated with the Board of Education to undermine and sabotage the program. The UFT made no protest when the Board of Education refused to grant the local boards any real rights or powers. The UFT was silent when the experimental districts were short-changed in supplies and staff. The UFT participated in the Board of Education-inspired attacks on the experimental districts on the grounds of "chaos" and "racism" at I. S. 201. The UFT tried to negotiate a special agreement last Spring which would have encouraged experienced teachers to leave the experimental districts. One result of this campaign, by the way, is that by the Spring of 1968, despite public appeals by David Spencer, the chairman of the local governing board, for teachers to stay in the UFT, less than one-fourth of the staff at I. S. 201 were union members.

Politics has its own logic of development. As the union moved constantly to the right, it was thrown into closer and closer collaboration with forces it had always opposed in the past. The UFT joined the city-wide supervisors association, the spokesman of the educational bureaucracy, in a court action to bar the introduction of more black and Puerto Rican principals in the schools (five out of 900 principals in New York City are black). A few weeks later, the union, looking for support in its effort to prevent passage of any significant decentralization bill, found it among the same state legislators who were responsible for the anti-strike, anti-labor Taylor Law. The UFT not only formed a bloc with them and won the first round in its fight to prevent community control, it paid its debt by officially extending electoral support to them.

None of these efforts gained a definitive victory over community control. The confrontation really began when the Ocean Hill-Brownsville governing board tried to transfer the disputed teachers (despite persistent stories in the *New York Times*, no one was fired), and it began on this issue of "due process." It is tragic that the local board should have used the question of teacher transfer as the focus of its struggle with the Board of Education. But given the UFT's position on commun-

ity control, even prior to the strike, it is not surprising that the weakest aspect of community control—the notion that the ills of education can be attacked through “teacher inadequacy”—should have come to the fore. An implacably hostile UFT was hardly in a position to help correct the sometimes erratic course the ill-defined movement for black self-determination has traveled. In this way an historic opportunity to pose to the black movement a set of demands which could unite all those seriously interested in better schools and a better society was destroyed by the parochial, intellectually provincial, and politically bankrupt leadership of the UFT. (Of course the UFT is not the sole example of this provincialism; witness the decision of the UAW leadership to cease its efforts to register white auto workers for fear they would vote for Wallace.)

At this writing, with the third strike still on, it remains to be seen if the UFT can compel the abandonment of the community control program, its real—and at last, publicly admitted—goal in striking. Given the political climate and the relative disorganization of the black movement, the union may well win, possibly with the eager help of those same anti-labor, reactionary legislators whose aid they have had before. But in winning, the union will take on itself the blame for the death of community control. In winning, the union will be blamed for the inevitable increase in racism and decrease in education in the schools. In winning, the union will have contributed heavily to the black-white polarization that is taking place in this country, with all that portends.

The UFT has also placed a powerful weapon in the hands of its enemies. Many leaders of the establishment have favored decentralization for their own reasons, as a pacifier to an aroused black community (a concession which may have gotten “out of hand” once the black people seized hold of it) and secondarily as a way of weakening the union, a tactic which the union could outflank only by a bloc with the community. If decentralization is killed, the establishment can put the blame on the union. If, on the other hand, some significant decentralization is achieved, the union will be faced with hostile, and now anti-union, local boards as well as the still-powerful Board of Education.

THE AFT

THE SITUATION IN NEW YORK IS NOT UNIQUE. The same issues are bound to arise in other cities. However, the large numbers of black teachers in in urban locals outside New York will provide considerable resistance to any efforts to adopt the UFT approach. In the District of Columbia the union has actively supported community control and even sees the movement as an aid to teacher defense and authority.

The near state-of-war between the UFT and the black community

even before the strike had its effect on the August convention of the AFT. Community control became the single most prominent issue of the convention. But though the delegates were unhappy, they were also uncertain and hesitant. As a result, a compromise resolution was passed which is not likely to settle anything.

Now the issue must be faced squarely. If the AFT is to move forward or even maintain its current strength, it must act clearly to recognize and welcome community control as a blow at establishment control of the schools and a step toward better schools and a greater teacher voice in the schools. The union must affirm its natural alliance with the civil rights movement and commit itself to consultations on all issues of vital concern to both movements. In particular, the AFT should adopt a policy of consultation with the community in drawing up contract demands and in planning joint campaigns and united actions. In line with this new commitment, the AFT should stop temporizing with the AFL-CIO and demand that the Federation launch a real campaign against racism within and without its ranks.

This is a choice point for the teachers union. One path leads toward a new alliance and a unique role in American education and the American labor movement. The other, the path of conventional wisdom, and "unionism-as-usual," leads only to bitter defensive struggle, fragmentation, and the dissipation of the store of ideals joined to power that is implicit in the union of teachers.

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Justice Fortas' Concerning Dissent— **A Dissent Concerning Justice**

Richard Ashcraft

ALTHOUGH HE IS ONLY ONE OF NINE OLD MEN, when the man who almost became the next Chief Justice of the Supreme Court writes on so crucial an issue as civil disobedience, it is a matter of great importance. It is of most importance, naturally, to those immediately affected: Negroes, students, and others identified with the New Left. They are the persons likely to commit actions which fall under one of Justice Fortas' two topical headings, i.e., dissent and civil disobedience. (There is a third category, revolution, but such activities are curtly dismissed as 'intolerable' or 'unrealistic')

In his recently published essay, *Concerning Dissent and Civil Disobedience*, (Signet, N.Y. 1968) Justice Abe Fortas presents what he depressingly calls his "daring" view of the subject. Since the work offers some clue as to what future treatment one can reasonably expect from the highest tribunal in the land, it is not likely to unleash a flood of new hope for those already critical of the political system's response to certain social grievances. Despite his fondness for warning the reader of the "subtleties" of the problem, Fortas expounds a familiar, and, so it appears to me, simple viewpoint: law and order must be maintained. At the expense of achieving social justice, always subject to delays, maintenance of order claims primary immediacy. In what follows, I wish to dissent from that position and suggest that occasionally—and 1968 is such an occasion—the priorities need to be reversed.

Fortas makes clear the limits of his theory of political action at the outset. "The basic means of protest," he contends, "is the ballot box." The vote is the "all-important" and "most effective weapon in the citizen's arsenal." One might gain the impression from this that, by pulling a lever, the individual who steps into the voting booth every two or four years is loosing a veritable hydrogen bomb on the system. This apocalyptic view of electoral politics is an odd brand of realism, given the feeling of impotency most citizens attach to their single vote in a national referendum. The fact is, voting is one of the least important actions available to those seeking a redress of grievances. As Thoreau put it in his essay on civil disobedience, "Even voting for the right is *doing* nothing for it. It is only expressing to men feebly your desire that it should prevail."

At best, an election may register the presence of widespread opposition, though it more often functions as a procedural ratification of the existing government's policies. But however important it may be as a