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Albert Shanker

Albert Shanker (September 14, 1928 – February 22, 1997) was president of the United Federation of Teachers from 1964 to 1985 and president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) from 1974 to 1997.

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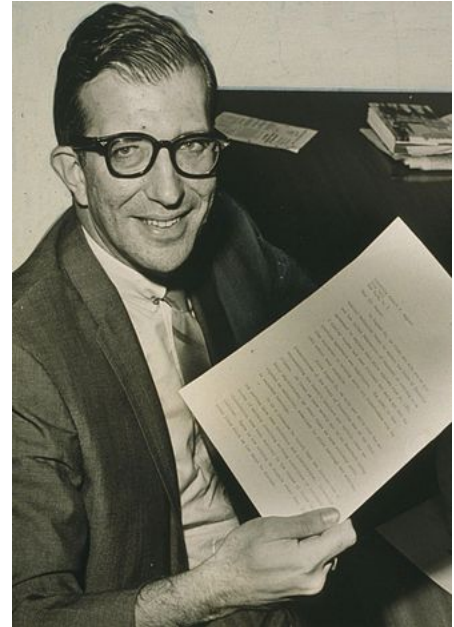
Early life

Shanker was born on Manhattan's Lower East Side in New York City^[1] to a Russian Jewish immigrant family. As a toddler, his family moved to the Long Island City district in Queens.^[2]

His parents, Mamie and Morris Shanker, were immigrants from Poland. Both were union members; his father was a union newspaper deliveryman, and his mother, who operated a sewing-machine in a knitting factory, was a member of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America. The Shanker family's deeply held political views were staunchly pro-union, following the socialism of Norman Thomas and including ardent support of Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal. The experience of watching his mother work 70-hour weeks convinced Shanker from an early age that there was a need for societal changes.

Shanker read several newspapers daily as a young boy, with an interest in philosophy. His idols were Franklin D. Roosevelt,

Albert Shanker



in 1965

Born	September 14, 1928 <div> New York City, United States</div>
Died	February 22, 1997 (aged 68) <div> New York City, United States</div>
Education	<u>Stuyvesant High School</u>
Alma mater	<u>University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign</u> (BA) <div> <u>Columbia University</u></div>
Occupation	Labor Leader, <u>AFT</u> & <u>UFT</u> President
Spouse	Edith Shanker
Children	4

Clarence Darrow, civil rights leader [Bayard Rustin](#) and American philosopher [Sidney Hook](#).^[3]

In 1946, Shanker graduated from Stuyvesant High School,^[4] where he was the head of the debate team. Thereafter, he majored in [philosophy](#) at the [University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign](#). He joined the [Congress of Racial Equality](#). Shanker picketed segregated movie theaters and restaurants and was a member of the [Young People's Socialist League](#) and chairman of the [Socialist Study Club](#).^[3] In 1949, he graduated with honors and began graduate studies at [Columbia University](#), where he ultimately attained [all but dissertation](#) status. In order to earn money while writing his dissertation, Shanker became a substitute [mathematics](#) teacher at Public School 179 in East Harlem, a historically working class neighborhood near Columbia's campus. He later taught mathematics in a full-time role at Junior High School 126 in the [Astoria](#) section of Queens from 1953 to 1959.

Founding the United Federation of Teachers

He began his tenure as a union organizer in 1959 to help organize the Teacher's Guild, a New York City affiliate of the [American Federation of Teachers](#) that was founded by [John Dewey](#) in 1917. Eventually, the Teacher's Guild merged with New York City's High School Teacher's Association to form the [United Federation of Teachers \(UFT\)](#) in 1960. During the 1960s, Shanker received national attention and considerable criticism for his aggressive union leadership and skillful negotiation of salary increases for New York City teachers. He left his teaching job to become a full-time union organizer. He felt that a teachers' union would be more effective if it were united with a common set of goals. In 1964, Shanker succeeded [Charles Cogen](#) as the UFT president, a position he held until 1985. In 1967 and again in 1968, he served jail sentences for leading illegal teachers' strikes. The [New York City teacher's strike of 1968](#) closed down almost all New York City schools for 36 days.

Perhaps Shanker is best known for opposing community-control leaders in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville district of New York City, which led to the [1968 strike](#) after white teachers were dismissed from the school district by the recently appointed black administrator.^{[5][6]}

For more than a decade, Shanker wrote more than 1,300 columns in [The New York Times](#) and essays in other publications. Accompanied by a small photograph of Shanker, the *Times* columns, titled "Where We Stand," sought to clarify the union's position on matters of public interest.

Activist legacy

Despite Shanker's organizing efforts and the 15 days that he spent in jail due to his organization activities, he was branded a racist by critics.^[7] Yet he persisted in building the [United Federation of Teachers](#) and was elected president of the [American Federation of Teachers](#) in 1974. He was re-elected every two years until his death.

In 1975, the UFT authorized a five-day strike, leading to allegedly saving New York City from bankruptcy after Shanker asked the Teachers' Retirement System to invest \$150 million in municipal bonds.

On September 21, 1981, Shanker had dinner with Leon B. Applewhaite, a personal friend and one of the three members of the [Federal Labor Relations Authority \(FLRA\)](#). Applewhaite was involved in deciding whether to uphold the decertification of the [Professional Air Traffic Controllers](#)

Organization for the strike they had called in August of that year. During the dinner, Shanker urged Applewhaite not to decertify the union, an action which plainly violated the prohibition on the *ex parte* contact contained in the federal Administrative Procedure Act. Although the contact was not ultimately found to have legal consequences, the D.C. Circuit Court of Appeals criticized Shanker's behavior in their review of the FLRA's decision. (See 685 F.2d 547.)

In 1988, Shanker was the first to propose charter schools in the U.S. He was inspired by a visit to a public school in Cologne, Germany, in which teams of teachers had considerable control over how the school was run, and about what and how to teach. They stayed with each class of students for six years. The schools were integrated by ethnic and economic origins, and were originally intended to focus on the neediest students, drop-outs and those most likely to drop out soon.^[8]

In 1993, Shanker turned against the charter school idea when he realized that for-profit organizations saw it as a business opportunity and were advancing an agenda of school privatization.^[8] Indeed, the charter schools that were finally established in the U.S. were different from Shanker's vision. "On average, charter schools are even more racially and economically segregated than traditional public schools," according to an opinion piece in *The New York Times* explaining Shanker's views.^[9]

Opponents of the Vietnam war have criticized Shanker and other AFL-CIO leaders for supporting the war in Vietnam and other reactionary and anti-labor aspects of U.S. foreign policy.^{[10][11]}

Later years

Shanker was a visiting professor at Hunter College and Harvard University during the 1980s. He continued to work toward organizing teachers throughout his life and attempted to bridge the AFT with the National Education Association, which he never saw happen. In 1991, U.S. President George H. W. Bush appointed him as a member of the original Competitiveness Policy Council.

Shanker died of bladder cancer and was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1998 by U.S. President Bill Clinton.^[12]

Disputed quote

The quote,

"When schoolchildren start paying union dues, that's when I'll start representing the interests of school children."^[13]

is often attributed to Shanker.

The Albert Shanker Institute attempted to find the source of this quote, and concluded that "we cannot demonstrate conclusively that Albert Shanker never made this particular statement... but, we believe the quote is fiction." The first appearance, which those at the Institute could find, was in the *Meridian (Mississippi) Star* newspaper, August 13, 1985, but no source is included in the article.^[14]

In popular culture

- There is a reference to Albert Shanker in the Woody Allen movie *Sleeper* (1973).^[15] The protagonist is transported to the future, where he is told that the old world was destroyed when "a man named Albert Shanker got hold of a nuclear warhead." Film critic James Monaco wrote- 'This is not funny at all, unless you know the cranky, whining head of the New York United Federation of Teachers'.^[16]

See also

- Albert Shanker Institute

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External links

- Albert Shanker Institute (<http://www.shankerinstitute.org/>)
- Appearances (<https://www.c-span.org/person/?747>) on C-SPAN
- Quotations from Albert Shanker (https://archive.today/20130204092720/http://thinkexist.com/quotes/albert_shanker/)
- United Federation of Teachers official website (<http://www.uft.org/>)
- A film clip "The Open Mind - A View from the Top (1986)" (https://archive.org/details/openmind_ep1283) is available at the Internet Archive
- Albert Shanker Personal Papers (<https://reuther.wayne.edu/node/3522>)
- AFT Office of the President's: Albert Shanker (<https://reuther.wayne.edu/node/2112>)

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