

An Interview with

CHARLES COGEN

In New York City

July 25, 1986

This interview by Renee Epstein is part of an oral history project contracted by the American Federation of Teachers.

My earliest awareness of the American Federation of Teachers was I would call it an amorphous one. Until the time that I became actively involved in the union, that took some time for various reasons, what I knew about the AFT as an organization and the leadership was just little scraps and pieces here and there. But I do want to point out a few things that I learned about and heard about which I think are significant.

First, it is interesting to note that locals of teachers were admitted into the AFL so many years before there was such a thing as AFT. And of all places in the dark hinterland of San Antonio, Texas was I think the first to be admitted to the AFL as a local before this century.

Now, gradually locals are organized here and there without a national and the time came in 1916 when five I think or may be six locals together applied for a charter with the American Federation of Teachers. And, I think it is significant to remember that in all of this period from the beginning of the century to this time that I am talking about now, Sam Gompers played a very important role. He encouraged the organization of teachers. He attended meetings of various kinds and he was quite dynamic in his support, no question about it. At the same time, it should be noted that the charter that was granted to the AFT had a no-strike clause. So, those who later opposed strikes within the AFT and its locals had some ammunition on their side in that respect.

Sam Gompers had a very, very liberal and broad-minded and progressive, I hope I am not using too many adjectives, outlook on the organization of teachers. When he addressed them in writing or verbally, he always emphasized the fact that they are workers like all the other workers in the AFL. That they had employers and that they have to build a relationship which relates to that type of situation and was very strongly in defense of teachers rights in the classroom and outside the classroom. That was very important, because during that whole period up until the formation of the AFT and even for some years after, one of the or I would say two or three of the major problems confronting teachers was the problem of academic freedom. In the broadest sense of that term, that is personal freedom where you live and

work as an individual, freedom to organize, freedom to challenge your employers, freedom to write. They are all different aspects, but they all tie in with academic freedom.

Then there was the Loyalty Oath which was a very important part of the quarrel within the educational world. A number of states including New York state with which I am more familiar than others have Loyalty Oaths. Teachers were asked to swear loyalty not only to the state but to the institutions of the state. And there was a very interesting commentary on that type of requirement. I remember by the New York Tribune which was a rather conservative paper but it pointed out that if they had had a Loyalty Oath in the 1850's and 1860's, Abraham Lincoln could never have passed it because he could not be loyal to the institution of slavery.

Now, I may seem to be exaggerating in the role of the AFL in this connection. While it is true that Gompers, personally, and some of his colleagues were very liberal in their attitude on teachers rights. The American Federation of Teachers we must recognize was a very weak organization and it did very little on its own other than encouraging others to do things. The fights were mainly on a local basis. There is another aspect of the battles across the line of the educational system that has to be brought in. Gompers got involved in it and the AFT got involved in it and that involved the Yellow Dog contract.

We do not hear anything about it today because Yellow Dog contracts are prohibited nationally by the National Labor Relations Act and that has been in force several decades. But it used to be a pervasive situation throughout industry and including public industry namely education. In the Yellow Dog contract, the teacher was required when he was applying for a job to either sign a statement that he is not a member of a union and that he will not become a member of a union during the term of his employment. That was a toughy and it was in the education system. It was aided and abated by the existence of the NEA which had been in business long before we were and they, of course, encouraged that situation. And, though many schools throughout the county school systems where, when a teacher applied for a job he was at the same time given by the principal an application blank for the NEA. Which helps understandably to explain why the NEA was much stronger than the AFT for a long period of time. The AFT fought against the Yellow Dog contracts, but it was not really until 1935 with the passage of the National Labor Relations Act that these were done away with.

Like Gompers, the leadership of the AFT during all those decades from 1916 when we were chartered up to early 1930's and even thereafter with some exceptions I will point out. I think can be called a centrist organization a little bit to the left, a little bit to the right, here and there but that was it. The battle around the communist control of the local unions brought this to the fore in a big way. An so when in 1935 the New York City local, (this was also mirrored in other locals in the country like Philadelphia and

some others) when some locals appealed to the AFT to revoke the charters of these locals and to organize new locals, it took from 1935 to 1941 to get that consummated.

As a matter of fact one of the leaders of the pro-communist group, not saying he was a communist, became president that is Gerome Davis in 1935 just about the year we are talking about. It was not until 1939 that one of the strong anti-communist leaders in the country, George Counts, Professor of Teachers College, Columbia became president that it began to swing the other way.

The struggle about what to do with the communist controlled unions has a rather peculiar twist. Why did the AFT fail to revoke the charter of the New York local? Was the AFT pro-communist? The answer is no. The votes to refuse to revoke the charter saw the two extremes voting together. The radicals whom we know and the conservatives. Why that was so is a little difficult to say. I think it may have been a touch of opportunism in connection with running the organization. I don't know too much about it otherwise.

When Counts came in 1939 it was a breath of fresh air as far as I am concerned. He was the first one of the presidents whom I really had anything to do with. He was a very high-class person in every way. A scholar recognized as a leader in teacher education, very articulate, bright, good strategist and so on. Counts had a very strange career and he was not the

6

only one in this respect as far as liberal politics was concerned. That is in the early years of the communist revolution in Russia, he was far from being a communist but he was rather sympathetic and wanted to give them a chance and so on. But he went to Russia, he saw what was heppening there and learned about it and he finally became a very ardent anti-communist. He uses the leadership in that respect not only in the union where his influence was quite high, but he became a leading member of the Liberal Party in New York State. I don't recall whether he was chairman, he may have been if not chairman very close to chairman of the party. He was a fighter. And as far as education was concerned, he was among that group of educators who teachers are for teachers, who felt that the teachers should teach for a new social order. That was a very controversial philosophy and still remains so, but Counts did take that stand.

Well, when he talked about teaching for a new social order he meant that there should be and properly so, a certain amount of indoctrination for a good cause for the good of the country. Just as many, many liberals down through the ages feel that teachers should indoctrinate for democracy. So he felt teachers should indoctrinate for a social order where the workers will be given justice and the underprivileged will lose their underprivileged character and so on along that line.

Counts mission as he saw it, and as we saw him in the AFT was primarily to get rid of this terrible thing that was gnawing at the teaching profession

namely, the communist control of some unions and the continued growth in others. I think it is a testimony to his ability and ideology that he succeeded either directly himself or through those whom he talked.

I must say here parenthetically that from the time of the organization of the Teachers Guild in 1941 when they were granted the charter up until 1952 or thereabouts, I was not directly or strongly involved with the AFT for various reasons. I was active in the UFT as I have indicated on another occasion. But, I did not go to conventions for example, until I was elected president for one very simple reason, I could not afford to pay my own expenses at that time. And, the union's financial status was such that they could not afford to pay and people had to go on their own. Some could afford it, some couldn't.

Now I assume and it is reasonable to assume that the same situation existed throughout the country that there were many teachers who could not afford to go to the convention. People of ability and leadership and so on, and it was too bad that the AFT did not have the funds to subsidize such instances. At that time before 1951, I was a vice-president for the high schools in New York City in addition to having other responsibilities there. And, yet as I say, I could not see my way clear to go and nor did the UFT ever ask me would you go if we gave you this much or that much. At any rate, this is quite a contrast to what the situation is today.

Now a new phase came about when I became president of the Teachers Guild in 1952. I held that office until 1964 that is including the early years of the United Federation of Teachers. We started something of an organizing campaign and we were helped by the AFT to some degree. At first, I could not do very much. But they sent us an organizer a man by the name of David Selden, who stayed with us for a long time eventually becoming president of the AFT.

David Selden was a very able person. Bright, very broad minded, liberal, progressive, hard worker as far as I was concerned he had one fault which also came up in his work for the AFT and helped to cause him to lose his influence there. Dave like others whom I know, whom I respect in other ways he had a way of negotiating with other organizations and their representatives without telling me that he was doing it. And when I found out, of course, I did not raise too much holy hell about it, maybe I should have but I did not like it.

How was AFT's relationship with its locals during the decade of the 1950's? There is not much that I could add that would be highly significant until the time came for us to consider fighting for collective bargaining and then entering into the strike period.

The AFT and here is where you have the short conservative element coming in, the AFT tried very hard to dissuade us from striking. Carl Megel, himself, the president of the AFT came down with a committee and among them was our own Rebecca Simonson who was always anti-strike. And, they used whatever moral pressure I don't know if there were any sets or not, I don't

recall whatever moral pressure they could use and of course it was futile.

As far as the question of strike is concerned, I think it was in some ways a relatively simple matter as to why the AFT opposed it and opposed its locals entering into it although there had been other strikes of a smaller degree in other places before them but this was a big thing. The first place, I have not looked into this and I don't know whether the charter that we got from the AFL still has that "no strike" clause in it. But at any rate

that is one consideration and then, well these people who were heading the AFT at that time were a conservative vent. Not reactionary I wouldn't say, but conservative vent and for them striking by teachers was not the right thing to do. They felt it was not the right thing to do. Furthermore, I suppose also that they felt we had a likelihood of losing and that would bring harm to the entire teacher union movement.

Out of that respect, you have to say that they really had something that had us worried. If we lost the strike and we would not get collective bargaining, first of all it was obviously without any further discussion, we would have practically ruined the union movement in New York City. And then it would be a matter of each local throughout the country looking back to us seeing what we had done, we had failed and they would never be influenced to become less conservative in their activities as well.

I think at this time it is incumbent upon me to indicate what

justification I had and what reason I had for favoring strike at any given time, while some of the other leadership in our local and certainly the AFT took a different stance. I must remember and recall to anybody's attention that I had, I don't know what Megel's background was in this respect, I had a labor background from way back. My parents from the environment that I lived in were completely pro-labor and sort of a militant feeling.

Now, in our union, first the Guild then the UFT, there was a progressive stage that brought out the final act of militancy. In the middle of that decade about 1955, I was among the leaders of the struggle for collective bargaining which was a rather revolutionary concept for teachers at that time and was pooeod, ridiculed by the NEA and others. We lost that battle in the state legislature. But, we tried to bring about some aspect of collective bargaining without calling it collective bargaining.

We tried to deal with the superintendent in negotiations. We had the labor leaders in New York City with us at meetings with the superintendent. Next step, they made a number of promises that they would carry out along the lines that we had requested and they failed. Then we voted. I am trying to point out how these things developed. It was not just a stab in the dark. So that it seems to me it became at one time inevitable, either you go ahead with it or you almost go out of business. So that there was a time in 1959 when we voted to have a one-day stoppage on a certain day by way of protest and on the eve of that stoppage Superintendent Theobol got on the air. I was on the air. He sent a message to me, "Call off the strike and come in and sit down and we will negotiate." I think these steps will

show that militancy was necessary and possibly could work.

So we went ahead and we know in a way here you can say we had what the units expression which has become quite current in the English language, we had a whisper. I don't know how to put it totally accurately. We had a certain amount of nerve or arrogance or what have you in calling and planning a strike. Well we had just about 2,500 members out of the 60,000 teachers or so, but we felt that we had to do it. Things were going along in such a way that no matter what we tried to do in a reasonable way by talking, negotiating didn't work. They did not keep their promises so that is the story.

Many people have asked, How could I justify a strike I and many others in my position when Megel and the others in and outside of the union took the opposite stance? Starting off with the proposition which is incontrovertible that the strike is illegal, to that I have a very simple answer. It may not be simple to those who don't follow me, don't follow my reasoning but it is not my own reasoning it comes from way back in ancient times in Northern America namely that there is such a thing as civil disobedience in connection with labor problems, in connection with many other problems.

A person has to basically in the long run follow his conscience. His conscience may sometimes lead him in the wrong direction but he has to follow his conscience. If in this particular case we are talking about, it was to

me unconscionable for the state to prohibit strikes and there is a lot of reasoning behind that which I won't go into. Then it followed that it was proper and sound to go ahead and strike.

I want to remind those who are listening to this that this concept of civil disobedience is by no means a recent innovation or something tied in solely with the labor movement. So though he engages in an act of civil disobedience when he refuses to pay taxes for a good reason he thought. The American revolutionists were engaged in civil disobedience against the authorities. But there is one integral part of the concept that I must point out that makes a difference from other types of disobedience of the law and that is that the person who engages in civil disobedience is willing and ready to take the consequences of his acts. Unlike those who commit certain illegal action, who want to go scot-free, we were willing to take the consequences. We knew that the consequences might be jail or it might be whatever, but we were willing to take those consequences.

As far as Megel is concerned, of course, I present a point of view which is from one side. We in New York, as far as our leadership in the organization is concerned, practically unanimously had very little respect for him as the president of the organization. He was a nice guy. He has a certain amount of charm and charisma which went across with a lot of people. But, for one thing, we in the UFT always dreaded his coming down to speak to our organization especially at our annual spring conferences.

I hate to personalize this too much but it has to be said that his speeches were replete with malapropisms. Such strong ones that made us feel quite unhappy about it. He may have changed since then. I have met Carl, I have a good relationship with him personally. I met him from time to time but I don't recall having heard him make any speeches of any length so he may have improved under somebody's tutelage or he may not have, I don't know because this was the man as I knew him.

As far as his presidency of the AFT is concerned, it was a conservative leadership. I mean it was conservative compared to how we felt here in New York and in some other places. He was not militant. He did not go for collective bargaining in a big way and it was shown in his own local in Chicago where John Fewkes was president. One of the first things that I did when I came to Chicago as president of the AFT was a courtesy visit to the Chicago local. There was an awful lot of hell raising there about the fact that the leadership of the local - and I am pretty sure Fewkes was president at the time and if not it does not matter too much - was not willing to take its chances to go for collective bargaining and certainly to go for strikes. And that is as I said awhile ago was I think characteristic of the Megel leadership but I have to broaden it.

There were two caucuses in the AFT over a period of time. The National Caucus which was Chicago led and the Progressive Caucus which was New York led obviously together with some others. They were both you might say

centrist organizations compared to other organizations. But, in relation to each other the National Caucus was conservative, cautious, don't take too many chances and on the other hand, the Progressive Caucus was militant. I coined a phrase when I was president of the UFT which I think is quite relevant here. I coined a phrase when we were having trouble with those in the union who were anxious to get us to strike at the drop of a hat and we in the leadership were willing to strike when we felt it was desirable. I coined the phrase "responsible militancy" and I think this is the thing that differentiated in the first place the leadership of the UFT from the opposition in the local and the Progressive Caucus leadership in the AFT.

We had in addition to the New York local, we had a number of other locals that were very much in tune with our tendencies. I mention particularly Denver and Dearborn, of course Philadelphia. Denver is in a class by itself in a way. They sent us a group of young men led by Herrick Roth and there was his able assistant Forsyth and others. It was very interesting how this one local could produce so many men of this type and also similar. They were bright, they had charisma in the best sense of the word, handsome, fighters, intelligent. These men were high up in the leadership of the Progressive Caucus in the AFT and also in the AFT itself. They were represented on the Executive Council.

While we are talking about ideological differences, I think there is an outstanding situation which occurred which is a very fine illustration. I ran for president of the AFT in 1964, I was elected. I ran against Charlie Smith, a nice guy. And then in 1966 when I ran for reelection, my opponent

was John Fewkes one of the top men in the AFT. The campaign that took place at that time at least one very important aspect of it is amply illustrated by one happening. At the convention hall where we were meeting, there were banners strewn all around and the ones that stood out most conspicuously read these were the Fewkes National Caucus banners, "Fewkes America in the American Federation of Teachers."

Now everybody who knew anything or thought anything about what was happening in the AFT knew that at least a certain group, I would not say all of the National Caucus by any means. At least a certain group which was in the senate seat at that time the International Caucus led by Chicago was baiting liberals in the nastiest sort of way. After all, New York to them stood for hot beds of radicalism. At this point it might be worthwhile and pertinent to go into this question of radicalism, phases of radicalism, etc. and how they related to history of the organization.

When I talk about radicalism and admit very readily that there were radical elements in the AFT and in the UFT which were non-communist and anti-communist. That is one thing I talk about the very substantial socialist or pro-socialist group and related elements people who are one hundred percent pro-democracy but wanted to change the economic system in certain respects which I will not go into. This is quite a far cry from the radicalism of the communist which tied us up so terribly in so many years of our existence.

The communists, we have got to start with the proposition and if we don't start with that we can't get anywhere in this discussion. The communists were anti-democratic, were totalitarian, had no respect for the opinions of others. Therefore, to us, that is people with my way of thinking, it was harmful to our society, to our democratic institution, to our schools, to the kids to let them teach our youngsters because we know communist ideology and communist practice places no limits. There is no dividing line as far as they are concerned.

A communist teacher has to be a communist teacher. We know that. As a matter of fact, an organization like the American Civil Liberties Union, you can't ask for a more civil rights organization than that, excluded communists from their leadership for a similar reason, namely that a communist cannot by the very nature of the ideology and practice of the party and related groups, cannot think independently. He has to take orders from his communist party and those orders in too many cases were seriously detrimental to the general welfare and to the welfare of the schools. Now, so we took the position in the Teachers Guild and then the UFT, well by the time the UFT came around there was hardly any problem left. But, in the Teachers Guild and the AFT also that this sounds very drastic it is, "A person who is a proven communist should not be permitted to teach in the public schools." But, at the same time, it is very important to note that we fought as strongly as possible for due process of law. In every case we insisted that the authorities prove that the man is a communist otherwise we insisted that nothing should be done in his particular case.

Our period of the UFT 1960 to 1964 was a crucial one not only for New York City but for the country as a whole. The collective bargaining idea spread with various degrees of speed in different places throughout the country. After some years even the NEA took it over under a different name "Collective Negotiations." And even the strike became more popular than it had been before. This new trend reached its high point when our group, the Progressive Caucus group led by New York took over the presidency of the AFT in 1964 with me as their candidate.

Collective bargaining became goal number one. The strike became a necessary medium when necessary. If I am not redundant and along with those factors, we felt that we had to do something which would make this transition practical so we started a very decisive organizing campaign. We reorganized the organization department. We assigned representatives in different parts of the country. We set up a million dollar which today is peanuts I suppose, but for that time was big money, a million dollar organizing fund and that started the ball rolling.

Our members increased very appreciably, I think about 150,000 or so compared to the 50,000 not too long before. A side light of the whole thing, very important from an organizational point of view was that the National Caucus went out of business. They became, well I don't know whether you can say physically became or joined but at any rate in effect that is what it was, they joined the Progressive Caucus. We ran candidates together and it

transformed the organization completely in that respect. The only ones that we now have to fight are the small remnants of the extreme left which still exists nationally and locally.

Well some people feel that there is a certain amount of harm and willful disregard of the democratic process now that you have one caucus rule you might say in the AFT as well as locally not everywhere but almost everywhere. This raises several questions of political strategy and political activity which significant but very hard to define and to make precise. Now within the caucus, by definition of the caucus at least as I know it, I don't know how it operates elsewhere in Congress or elsewhere. By definition when the caucus makes a decision the members of the caucus must follow the caucus line in the organization.

Now you can argue yourself black, deaf and dumb on the question of whether this is proper and legitimate. I can make a good argument on both sides. The fact of the matter is I don't like the way it operates in some ways. We have had some of our best men in the UFT who have been out of leadership and to some extent activity because they differed with the leadership of the Unity Caucus in New York. We had one of our very best men Rue Mitchell who just said because he couldn't voice opposing views at AFT Conventions just stopped going to the Conventions. Now that is one way of solving the problem but I don't know, as I said I don't like it and it depends upon the way in which it is done as to whether I really don't like it or whether it is just a certain minimal degree of liking or disliking.

When the leadership of the group, whatever group it is caucus or the union whatever, makes it quite clear in one way or another that he or she will not stand for different views even before the caucus has made a decision, that I think is going too far. That is a danger in the union. There is also this element in the matter of organization, caucuses and power structure that in a up and going union particularly in a large union, a large local, a large national organization there are a lot of jobs open and a heck of a lot of people who want jobs and others who want to hold on to their jobs. Now it is very difficult, unfortunately, for a person to do one of these get a job or hold on to a job if he differs on any substantial issue with the powers that be.

Well, when I became president of the AFT in 1964 I brought with me and I don't mean this in any egotistical personal sense, but as the former head of the UFT, I brought with me and with of course the AFT along with me a dynamics which followed from what we had done in New York City which was quite unprecedented certainly in the scale that we had done it and the way in which we had done it. So we brought with us the philosophy of collective bargaining which was not entirely new in the country in name, but from the point of view of something that is a viable system. Collective bargaining and the strike as an instrumentality and naturally this came up again and again in the national councils of our organization and threw the national organization back to the various locals throughout the country.

In order to vitalize the situation, we adopted what we call the "CO-ORG Plan" Cooperative Organization. It is a somewhat complicated thing. To put it briefly as the term indicates it was a procedure whereby the national organization and the locals worked together both financing the plan and operating the organizing within the locals. That worked for awhile but not long after its initiation, conflicts of roles whether they were placed upon personalities or some principal differences or what have you between Dave Selden and the organizers and a jurisdictional battle took place between the organizers and Selden. So when he took over, the plan was terminated it was dropped completely.

In the "CO-ORG Plan" as I have already indicated there was cooperation going both ways financially and working and doing the day to day organizing, we had some good men on the scene particularly in the national organization. A fellow by the name of John Schmid and then Jim Mundy at the head with the outfit, both very, very able men and conflicts arose essentially in regard to jurisdiction as to who was going to run the show. Whether the men on the scene, the organizers were going to develop their activities according to what they saw where they were working or whether some of the people in Washington were going to do it.

As a result of that conflict, eventually as I said the plan was stymied, it was done away with and Dave Selden while he was president, he took over the position of Director of Organization which obviously was not to me at least a very tenable situation. Very soon the staff was decimated because of the turbulence that arose in the conflict and they had to start more from

CHARLES COGEN INTERVIEW

October 24, 1986

Tape 2

Our relationship with the labor movement is a very important point to consider. First of all I must state my own philosophy in that regard. To me not only belonging to the mainstream labor movement but being active therein has been a point of essential activity and principle. Fortunately, I think it is fair to say that almost throughout the entire history of the AFT right from the beginning the AFL or the AFL-CIO and the Walter Reuther CIO have been with us quite down the line, always supportive.

The era of Bill Green, the man who was president of the AFL was very strong for the union. Made many speeches and attacked the powers that be and whatnot. I would say the only significant point at which their support did not come through, support of the AFT as it stood at the time was in the 1935 situation when the Progressive group, it was not called that at that time, wanted to have the charter of the New York local removed for being communist controlled and the AFL was strongly in favor of our position and when they were repudiated by the AFT there was a rift between them on that score. But since then practically every issue that I can think of, we have gotten along very very fine.

Now there was one point where we could have gotten into trouble. And may be did in a minor sort of way get into a little personal trouble there. When I was president of the AFT Walter Reuther was trying to organize some sort of opposition to the George Meany group. He called a conference. I don't know exactly who they all were but he called a conference of some of the leaders of unions and Dave Selden and I represented the AFT.

When the conference was over Walter Reuther drew up a statement critical of the Meany group which he asked the representatives of the various unions to sign. Dave Selden said that we should join the signers and I was opposed to it. Well Dave was more of an idealist than I was at least from the point of view of activity. He thought that Reuther, with his industrial unionism, because he had helped us previously in our campaign in New York City, that he was the man we ought to push. Meany was too slow. A lot of people thought that. It is all right. But to me, Meany stood for a lot in the labor movement. I too felt that he was a little too slow in pushing ahead but he was great in many other ways.

He was a very great man for civil rights and so on. So, I felt that there was no point in fighting the man and what he stood for as an entity because we differed with him on a couple of points of issue. I think we would have lost more. The organization would have lost more if we had gone ahead with that and, that was very important to me.

As president of the AFT, I obviously made it a point to get around to as many locals as I could all over the country. The main thrust of my appeals and that is what they asked me to come for, that is what their leadership asked me to come for was to push collective bargaining and in some cases strikes when necessary. I found the leadership practically every major city in the country very receptive and it was not much of a problem for us from that point of view.

Now there were some places like Boston, for example was somewhat on the conservative side. We had to do a lot of pushing there. But in most cities it was not much of a problem at all. The local labor leadership varied from place to place. In some places they gave concrete help financially, not an awful lot. I don't think the unions had much to give really but, morally, spiritually by sending speakers in to meetings and giving their appreciative comments, they were quite helpful. In that respect, I think it can be said there was a good deal of assistance that could not be measured in tangible form but it was there in a spiritual form which was important.

On the matter of strikes which again was something that we brought along as a militant practice. We were not the initiators of strikes but, we were the big push behind it. It was much easier to pursue that activity in the various locals around the country after the example that we had set in New York state. Of course, the activities and ideologies in various parts of the

country were in many places rather complex.

I had a rather touchy situation in Chicago. Here was a new AFT president coming into the city and the Chicago local was in control of the opposing National Caucus leadership Fewkes, Megel and so on. So, it would have been very tackless for me to try to impose my ideology and my feelings in regard to how the union should be run. Here I am, an outsider in a sense coming into Chicago. How could I do it? On the one hand we had the conservative leadership that I had to deal with and, on the other hand, there was also an opposition group. A group that was opposed to the National Caucus people wanted more activity, more militancy. They wanted a stronger push for collective bargaining and so on. They came to me to ask me to work with them.

And so, when I was invited to a Delegate Assembly or whatever they called it in Chicago, meeting by the Chicago leadership, I had to tread very very carefully. On the one hand as I said, I did not think it was right for me to antagonize the Chicago leadership because we were going to have to live with them but, on the other hand, to an appreciable degree I was in agreement with the criticisms made by the opposition group in Chicago. And so I, without going into detail, I think I handled the situation as tactfully and wisely as I could possibly do by indicating in one way or another that the union ought to go ahead more strongly than it had been doing.

Dave Selden, he himself termed himself the "court intriguer." Dave brought along in his activities to the AFT where he was my assistant, the

same type of actions that he had been a master of in New York City. He thought it was a good thing to do obviously, for him to work behind the scenes without telling me giving me contacts in New York with the United Parents Association. In Washington he would make contacts and, of course, as merger talks and so on, he went around and did his negotiating without notifying the president. In my case it was I, and he sort of could work best that way.

Well he got away with it to a large extent. But it is not in my concept what an assistant to a president should do. He is a bright guy. In some respects efficient but in other respects there were serious problems. He was a very serious problem to me in another way. A very serious problem to me and to the organization. It is not a question of principal I am talking about in this case, but his way of doing things. His inefficient performance of his job. On innumerable occasions, I would find out that Dave had an appointment to be at a meeting somewhere and he did not show up or he showed up an hour or two late. And, I would remonstrate with him about it and he told me later parenthetically, that he was trying to get a job elsewhere but he could not get it. And at one point finally of course, I never had a fight with him but I happen to be compulsively a prompt person, so you see the clash there.

At one point I finally said to him, "Dave why don't you keep a caldendar, a diary of what you have to do and where." And his answer was, "And what if

I forget to look at the calendar?" And of course, that was unanswerable. So we had our problems from the point of view of operating an organization. It was rather difficult for me and the organization. Of course, Dave had strong points, no question about it. He was clever, he thought things through. As my assistant he got around. I could not get on to every place that they needed us and he would get around to speak, to organize. Now an important example of Dave as a man of strategy, as a man of activity and principle and so on, how he went about on the proposed merger.

At first Dave was a very strong labor man, there was no getting away from it but, he jumped back and forth on that question when it came to the merger movement. It started out behind our backs. Behind my back in the AFT where he made proposals for merger that faced, that veered a little bit on compromise allowing the same amount of autonomy for a local. They could both belong to the labor movement locally and not nationally. All kinds of different versions that he had until coming along pretty close to the end, he was quite willing to merge outside of the labor movement and that was going a little bit too far. And the fact that it went so far led to his organizational demise. Because when he ran for President against Shanker in 1970, I guess that would be, he received only ten percent of the vote. That is a pretty sad and almost total eclipse in an organization where you function as a very important man, where people looked up to you.

Well to me the affiliation with labor was as important in consideration as having a one big union in the teacher field. You could have a big teacher union which would have no philosophy of civil rights such as the NEA had

none. They had segregated locals and we were enforcing desegregation long before I was in office. So you merge with somebody that has ideology and principles that conflict with your own. What purpose does it serve?

It was important to us, by us I mean the people in the Progressive Caucus, the people coming out of New York City, coming out of Detroit, coming out of a number of other cities that had the same feelings we did. It was important to us to follow an ideology of civil rights, of progressivism all along the line. And therefore, when we thought of merger, the precondition would have to be that it would be on the basis of accepting the principles that I just indicated. Civil rights, opposition to the quota system, a system in which the NEA adopted when they felt that would give them more power. Opposition on fundamental questions and in taking our position on these issues, we felt that we would be strengthened by belonging to the AFL-CIO which had positions closer to our own. So that it was a two-way street.

We wanted to belong to the AFL-CIO. We felt that we had to because (a) that was our ideology, and it would be strengthened by them and (b) just as important, we would bring our own strength whatever it was to the AFL-CIO and we had to stick with them. And we could not give up in any degree our tie with the AFL-CIO in order to supposedly bring them out a larger and stronger teacher movement which would not be union in essence. So that merger was a secondary issue by far, to unity with the labor movement.

Well the New York State example of merger or successful merger are one that can be or should be a model for other states. It is a very pertinent one. We had in New York state a state federation of teachers, and then there was a pretty substantial group upstate which was almost entirely nonunion. There was some union groups. The, oh what were they called? I don't remember, but it was a nonunion group affiliated with the NEA.

After awhile, after our collective bargaining and strikes and so on, the better heads in the NEA group realized that it would be a good idea for the strength of the organization and for the what we all stood for, if we could get together. We were very fortunate that in the leadership of that group, that is important the personal element is frequently very important. The leadership of that group Tom Hobbart and Walter Tice and so on were not to put it mildly were not bitter, anti-union people that we found in other parts of the country.

So merger talks started and at first there is an initial step. We belonged to both the NEA and the AFT. That situation existed for awhile but then the NEA tried to dictate terms requiring that the merged group accept all of the principles that the NEA stood for including the quota system in the organization. They have a quota system for election of officers. Well, that sort of turned the tide and the merged group decided to go it alone with the AFT. Now if it can be done in New York, I don't see why it can't be done elsewhere. One prime requisite is as I have implied that you have the type of people who are able and willing to see their way clear to this type of action. Not afraid to jump in and go the way that they know or should know

that is best for the organization and not to stick to the NEA just because they have been there over the heaven knows how many decades and so on.

Now when we talk about the subject of merger, it is necessary to consider a little bit of the history and background of the two organizations that we are talking about. We have to give the NEA credit where credit is due. They are often referred to in the press as a union which is very interesting. I don't know if they accept that terminology or not, I really don't know. But, we have to remember that in the old days, not so very old days before 1960 or even later than that, they were bitterly anti-union. And, their shibboleth in the collective bargaining dispute where teachers were called upon to decide whether they want collective bargaining and so which their cry was union is unprofessional, strikes are unprofessional, collective bargaining is unprofessional.

It is very interesting to see how the NEA changed after that. Well, I guess the only way in which you can explain it is that they saw they were losing power. They were losing elections throughout the country. So, whether it is personal power or professional power or what have you so little by little they took on collective bargaining, they used a different name for it. I think it was called "professional negotiations" or whatever it was called. They took on strikes. They became almost like unions.

The essential difference still lies in several different respects. First of all as I have indicated, we in the AFT for one reason or another or for

many reasons feel that we have to stay with the labor movement and the NEA does not see it that way. That is an arguable point. Certainly they have officially adopted a policy of quotas, we in the AFT have been fighting outside the union and certainly could not stomach it in the union. I don't know how the NEA uses it really concretely in every respect, but they make it a point to alternate blacks and whites in the presidency and they have certain proportions of each and certain proportions of other types of women and men and so on. That is the type of thing that we could never stomach.

To conclude this particular discussion with a question, "What does the future hold?" I don't know how others in the leadership or I in the past leadership would say about this, but I cannot see as things stand now at least any possibility of merger. For the reasons I have indicated, what we stand for and what they stand for and the two are irreconcilable. I may turn out to be wrong, but you can't see it in the offing.

A very significant question arises at this time. What had happened over the years since 1964 when I became president of the AFT and up to the present time. Well, the first place I think that in action as distinguished from words the organization has become considerably less militant. And, at this point at least, I am not ascribing it necessarily to the feelings of any one person or persons. To a large extent, unfortunately, it is a result of outside circumstances that have come about.

I refer for example to the question of strikes. Now, here in New York for example, we have not had a strike for sometime as distinguished from the

situation from 1960 when we started that business and to the early 70's. Strikes in teaching field and I suppose generally in the public sector are a very difficult enterprise to undertake for many reasons which, I suppose I can't go into. But, for one thing the opposition, the management of the public enterprise has become as militant as we were and they fight back with their tools with tremendous fines and jail sentences and PR work of all kinds. That is a very difficult thing to fight and to a very large extent we have well, I don't want to use the term abandoned, we have minimized that type of activity and it has been very difficult, there is no question about it. I don't think we have given up the principle of the strike, I don't think we have given up the principle of collective bargaining but, well I must mention a situation that arose how some people at least may handle that question.

I was at a meeting of the Delegate Assembly in New York City. This is after I have been out of the situation as an official, I am now active as a volunteer. I was in a meeting at the Delegate Assembly when strike talk came up and one of the delegates got up and asked, "Well, how can we strike? We gave up the right to strike which we should not have done. It is in the contract." And, Al Shanker who was in the chair said, "No, we have gotten that out of the contract," which is a statement completely out of old cloth. I have checked it out, it is still there and the position that we used to take on that matter was well, we had to accept that clause or we knew in our own minds and our own hearts that for all practical purposes it did not mean

anything. We struck anyway when we felt we had to.

Well now I said I shifted largely to political action with great supporters of COPE and of PAC, Political Action Committee. We tried to work it along that way. But, I have got to mention a couple of other things. Two very important changes that have taken place from a positive point of view rather than a negative. And I say positive, I mean something that has been done not necessarily that I, positive from the point of view of my approving of it. And those are the philosophy and activities along two lines namely merit rating and professionalization of the teaching staff. Those have become the shibboleth of the AFT and of its leadership.

Well, the first one the merit system, I don't think that they would admit that they are for it. But if you read the literature, if you read the convention resolutions, the least that you will find is equivocation. I got up at a convention floor at a national convention of the AFT three or four years ago after several resolutions had been passed which were well I don't like to go back to the question - which were skirting around the issue of merit rating to which our movement in the past had been very strongly opposed. There is some wording and to me it was very ambiguous. And, I got up and made a motion that in all our PR and literature that goes out, we should eliminate all reference that might be interpreted as being for merit rating. My motion was ruled out of order. Then a vote was taken. I forget exactly on some aspect of it and my motion was defeated overwhelmingly. But, I give this as an example of where we may be going. To what direction we may be going. And my understanding is that unhappily the NEA is strongly opposed

to merit rating. So they have taken away our thunder in that respect.

To me it is a very dangerous situation. I can't go into detail on it. The other thing is professionalization. Al Shanker and the AFT have gone on gung ho for professionalization. Now I am not opposed to wanting to strengthen the teaching as a profession. The record will show that way back before the 1960 strikes certainly during the 1960 and 1962 strikes and collective bargaining situations, I talked a lot about my belief that contrary to the NEA argument that unions are anti-professional, that unions can strengthen teaching as a profession by being more involved in decision making and so on. But, it is very hard for me to put my finger on specific things but the union literature it is all gung ho for professionalism and I have difficulty understanding what the thing is all about.

I am going to attend a conference that the UFT is conducting in a week or two on it, and may be I will find out. Well, I hear talk about teachers should control entry into the profession which I think is ridiculous. I may be wrong. Teachers are opposed to punching a clock for coming and going which also I think is absurd, certainly to make a point of it. What do they want? Do they want the teachers to be on their own, to come in whenever they want and not to be checked? I mean, these are segments of the acts right. Teachers should not have to be accountable to their supervisors, should not have to show lesson plans. I don't know or even make lesson plans. I am

having difficulty finding out what they are saying on these things.

Teachers should run the school. Have a committee of teachers running the school and so on. Some of the things that they are saying are so way off in my mind in my reactionary mind may be that is why it is giving the AFT a lot of room for propaganda and publicity and PR. I am wondering whether that is really what it is all about? You get in an AFT convention where under Al Shanker's leadership, a couple of years ago, where merit rating was to be a major issue four of the major speakers involved. I mean the major speakers from the floor, from the platform, stood for merit rating.

Four of the major speakers from the last convention, men who had participated in this Carnegie Study For Professionalism, businessmen mainly, no labor people. So, I started wondering where are we going? We are so enamored and proud of the fact that we are tied in with business. You look at the literature and see the types of people that we are consorting with, I say this without any exaggeration. They will talk about our ties with business people, may be with civic leaders or this and that, nowhere will you find a reference to labor leaders. To me this is a worrisome problem.

Now if anybody were to say, look why should they mention labor, why should they bring in labor to talk about these things? I think there is a simple answer. A simple several answers. Number one, we have tremendous number, I don't know how many but a tremendous number of men in the academic world who are pro-labor. Thousands of them who are members of the union in fact, why haven't we brought them into this discussion? Why haven't we

brought them in to being our speakers? In addition, many of the unions especially the more progressive ones with whom we would like to be allied, normally have their own educational set ups. They have what amounts to almost semi-colleges. Even the AFL-CIO has one, the Meany Center. Why can't we get them involved? What is the trouble? What are we running away from? What are we running to? I am worried about that.

cb

opeiu2

afl-cio

10-5-88