

An Interview with

DAVID ELSILA

In Detroit, Michigan

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

I was born in Detroit in 1939 of parents who were working-class, I guess you would say. My mother I recall worked as a waitress in some of the country clubs in the Detroit area. My dad worked for a company called Stimudents which made dental, I guess you could call them, toothpicks and worked long, long hours. They were both real working-class people and we lived in a working-class area in northwest Detroit.

I don't recall ever hearing about unions from my parents. My father was a nonunion worker although at one point he had been an auto worker for awhile at the Packard Motor Car Company in Detroit. I think that was in the days before the UAW, it was probably 1933 or 1934. Both my parents came from the

upper peninsula of Michigan. Their parents had been born in Finland and came over in a wave of immigration probably in the late 1800's probably 1880 or 1890. What is interesting about the Finish-American community in the United States is that they are very politically divided. You had the red Fins and the white Fins. The white Fins were the religious temperance socitey oriented people and the red Fins were the socialists and the communists. What is interesting today is if you go to some of the small towns in the upper peninsula of Michigan or into Minnesota or into Wisconsin, you still see two halls in every town the, red hall and the white hall or the red coop and the white coop.

My parents, I don't think were a part of either of those groups. They were very religious people, they were active in the Lutheran Church. They weren't temperance society types but they probably were conservative democrats. I think occasionally they would vote republican, more frequently democratic. They did vote but it wasn't very much discussion of politics in our household as we were growing up. I guess what interested me in the labor movement or in a liberal political approach was while I was in grade school and high school I started reading publications like the New Republic and the Nation and I got interested in a progressive, liberal, political point of view as a result.

There wasn't much happening really politically in that era when I was in high school, it was the 1950's and there was a residue of McCarthyism. More than a residue, in fact I remember one incident that really upset me a great

deal. I was a high school senior and I was in charge at my high school, Redford Union High School in one of the Detroit suburbs and we put together a series of musical programs over the course of the year and one of these programs featured the folk singer Pete Segar, who is still around these days. I remember the day after Pete sang at this wonderful concert two FBI agents showed and they asked the principal for the words to the songs that Pete had sung the day previously. That really surprised me that this kind of activity was happening, and I think that helped reinforce perhaps my political perspective in later years.

I don't think my parents spoke too much about McCarthyism or about that period. There was a fear though of communism and I recall hearing as everybody did the negative comments about the left and about the communists and there seemed to be a fear. I remember one incident where my high school librarian kept copies of the New Republic magazine in a file called "Communist Propaganda" in the library. I was a librarian's assistant for awhile and that really made me curious and angry that she would do a thing like that and try to separate from students a different point of view.

I grew up in a working-class suburb, it was the first suburb west of Detroit, a place called Redford Township. A very conservative community all white, but I think populated by a lot of auto workers and people who worked in small plants some teachers and public service workers lived there also. I really didn't know much about unions, unions were not a part of our household my father was not a member as I said and my mother was not a member. I had

some peripheral knowledge of what the labor movement was but it was certainly not something you covered in the school curricular in high school and not even in college. Later on as I became about what the labor movement had done in the Detroit area as a classroom teacher, I became a classroom teacher later I really felt the need to try to do something about that. When I moved back to Detroit subsequently the mid 1970's, I got together with some friends and we started developing classroom material and lesson plans and guidebooks to try to bridge that gap.

It was in this community of Redford Township that I first got involved in journalism. I had been the editor of the high school newspaper and about 1955 or 1956, a group of citizens in the community who were liberal republicans for the most part got together and established a fund. I think there were maybe a hundred people who contributed \$50.00 or \$60.00 each to start a fund to create a weekly independent newspaper in this community. Up until this time the community had been served by one weekly publication, I think it was called the Township News published by the McGriff family. The paper in my opinion was quite a reactionary newspaper, it tried to promote racial separation. In many of its columns it would make anti-black statements and there was a perceived need in the community for a more independent voice.

When that paper began and I think it was an eight page or twelve page tabloid, I was just out of high school. I went to work for it, I think my salary was \$17.00 a week. I would cover city hall stories, I would cover

meetings of the zoning commission, I would hit the police beat, the justice of the peace and do a little political reporting. This was in 1955 and 1956 and I stayed at that for about a year before going off to Eastern Michigan University where although they didn't offer a journalism program there, I did start working on the college newspaper and eventually became editor of that paper. My goal was to try to become a teacher and to get a major in English. In the four years that I was at Eastern, I think I wrote for the newspaper each year covered the few things that were happening in the student movement at the time and still the residue of McCarthyism, it was still the conservative period kind of the apathetic 1950's period.

I graduated from high school in January, 1956 and I continued to work not any longer part-time but full-time for the Observer newspapers. The paper by the way, I forgot to mention the name was called the Redford Observer. It later became part of a suburban wide chain called the Observer papers. I really enjoyed writing and I enjoyed being a journalist but I also had a feeling that I wanted to teach. I think that was because I had a lot of good teachers in high school and I enjoyed the challenge of working with kids and I thought that maybe I could combine the two. Maybe I could teach and do some writing and teach English and teach journalism which I eventually did and I also felt that teaching was kind of a socially important occupation and that took me into wanting to become a teacher.

I continued to work summers at the Observer newspapers while I was a college student, I would go back and work in June, July and August. I

remember one of the incidents that took place in 1959 or 1960. There was an attempt to help develop a strong civil rights presence in the community of Redford Township. A group of people including a woman who I later found out was an active UAW employee, who lived in Redford Township put together the Redford Township's Citizens for Better Human Relations. It was an all white group that had the purpose of trying to break down some of the racial barriers in this community.

Redford Township had been an almost all white community in fact I think the first time that a nonwhite person moved in was in the early 1960's. The group that I mentioned, the Citizens for Better Human Relations tried to help support that movement at least to prevent any racist attacks from taking place. We were very sharply criticized by the opposition newspaper in Redford Township. They ran photographs of a demonstration that we held and kind of ridiculed the good people who were involved in this organization, a lot of church people, a lot of professional teachers and others.

The organization continued to progress through the 1960's as I recall. I helped mobilized people to go to Washington for the 1963 Martin Luther King March and was able to get a number of churches in the organization to help support it financially. I don't think the group any longer exists, but during that period of the early 1960's and the mid 1960's served a very, very important role of trying to help one suburban community deal with racism.

I became a classroom teacher in the same community where one of the newspapers that I worked for was published during the late 1950's and early 1960's. The Redford Township Observer became part of a chain. It took on publications in Livonia, in Plymouth, in Farmington and other western Wayne County communities. As I graduated from Eastern Michigan University in 1960, I thought perhaps I would want to teach in that same community that I had known so well as a journalist and certainly there was a lot of work that needed to be done there.

So I started, I was hired, I was offered a job in the summer of 1960. I began teaching that September on a junior high school level and I taught in the eighth grade and in the ninth grade, English and Journalism and Social Studies. There was kind of a core curriculum of two hours of English and Social Studies which I taught. Starting salary back then was \$4,900.00 a year, a very few fringe benefits and there was I think kind of a paternalistic attitude by the administration.

I remember being called on the carpet once because of some demonstration I had participated in and somebody called up the principal and said you know who is teaching on your staff and what kind of person this is. I remember getting some support from the Livonia Educators Association. I yelled, "Yeah!" which was the organization which I belonged that there was no Federation in that district it was an Education Association district. At the same time I began hearing more and reading more about the work of the Federation of Teachers.

The idea of teachers being a part of the working class, being a part of the labor movement was important to me. In the mid 1960's, I think it must have been 1963 or 1964 I was part of a group that asked Henry Linne, the president of the Michigan Federation of Teachers at the time to come out and speak in Livonia to a group of teachers. It was an interesting meeting, not very well attended perhaps twenty or twenty-five teachers. Things really didn't get moving. I think most everybody felt that because the Education Association was the largest organization in the area that perhaps it was better to work within that group. In fact, I became editor of the LEA local union publication in Livonia for the teachers.

It was in the mid 1960's, 63 or 64 that I got to know Henry Linne and some of the people in the Michigan Federation of Teachers, and I became the editor of the Michigan Teacher which was the MFT newspaper at the time. Shortly before I left teaching in Livonia, I became an at large member of the Michigan Federation of Teachers. During this period in 1963, 1964 I had a number of good friends who were active in the Michigan Federation of Teachers. People who taught in Pontiac and other districts where there were vital large chapter locals of the MFT. I became very, very interested in the work that the MFT was doing with the civil rights movement, with the labor movement and it was certainly a sharp contrast to what the Associations had been doing.

The Associations at that point and time were quote "professional organizations who did not feel that they ought to become part of the broader social movement to change things, to change society." That excited me a

great deal because I felt really strongly that teachers ought to be change agents that teachers ought to be part of a social movement and so I think I came to the MFT and the AFT as much of that as I was concerned about improving the economic and social conditions of classroom teachers.

I think Dave Selden in later years put it so correctly when he said that what is good about the AFT, what is important about the AFT is that it is a three part organization. It is a union, it is a professional organization and it is a social movement. I saw all of those things wrapped up in the MFT and it excited me. When they were looking for a part-time editor of the monthly newspaper which would serve the entire state, I applied for it and was hired and started producing a monthly tabloid that went out to teacher unionists throughout the state.

I did most of the writing, the layout even the distribution of it to small local unions that were trying to get themselves established in some of the suburban communities. I would put bundles of papers in my car and drop them off at teachers houses. It really had the feeling of a social movement. This was about the time in 1964 that the Detroit Federation of Teachers which was the largest local in the MFT campaigned for and won its sole collective bargaining rights and kind of set the stage for the growth of teacher unionism in the state. It was 1965 I think a year later that the state of Michigan finally passed a public employees law which permitted collective bargaining for teachers and other public employees.

In 1964 and 1965 I worked as I said for the Michigan Federation of Teachers on a part-time basis editing the statewide newspaper. It was really a great experience being part of that movement with the movement toward collective bargaining, the strikes, the activities with the civil rights movement and so on that were occurring. I think it was in the Spring of 1965 that I saw an ad in the American Teacher which was rather a stodgy tabloid newspaper at the time that was produced in Chicago by the leadership of the AFT. It advertised for a new editor for the American Teacher and I didn't think I had any chance in hell of being appointed to that position, but at the very last minute, I decided well you know, I will chance it.

The Michigan Teacher has won some national awards from the AFT's Union Teacher Press Association and maybe there would be an opportunity to try to revitalize that publication. Try to help create an organ that would help capture the excitement of what was happening in the teacher union movement at least in Michigan and in some other states New York, etc. I wrote a letter of application and sent it or in fact I think I put it under the door at night on the day before the deadline to Helen Bowers, who was a member of the AFT's Publications Committee of the Executive Council. The next couple of days, I got a phone call at home from Helen in Chicago where the board was meeting and she said, "We had no idea that you were interested in working on the American Teacher and having this job, could you come right away for an interview?" So I hopped on a plane and went to Chicago and met with the Publications Committee which was chaired by Helen and low and behold before I knew it, I was offered the job. It was at that point that I met Dave Selden

and Dave was very supportive. He at that point was the Assistant to the President who was Charlie Cogen.

My recollection of the old American Teacher which I believe came out eight times a year maybe ten times a year was that it was a dull grey, lifeless paper that did not capture the spirit of teacher unionism as I had seen it developing in Michigan and as I knew what was happening as it was happening in some other states like New York where the big collective bargaining struggle had taken place. I just saw a real potential for putting some excitement and some life into that publication.

I think I had done some of that in the Michigan Teacher tried to weld together the union news of the MFT along with the professional concerns and along with the activities in the civil rights movement and so on. I never saw that kind of feeling reflected in the national publication, I don't think it was very well read. I think that the people who were doing it at that time were an outside public relations agency that had been contracted with by the AFT to do the publication and the public relations. I don't think that having an outside firm do it really permitted the kind of spirited reporting and editing that somebody who is a full-time staff member could do. I went to Chicago was interviewed and I think people liked the kind of approach that we had taken in the Michigan Teacher. We had a good discussion about what the American Teacher ought to be and I was offered the job in the summer of 1965, I made the move to Chicago.

I showed up at AFT headquarters in Chicago which were housed in an old townhouse that had belonged to the McCormick family located on the near north side of the city. I think that my first impression was that there was a pretty vital staff of younger militant committed people who were trying to build a real movement. I remember for example, the Director of Organizing Jim Mundy, who was helping to develop a program in response to the collective bargaining legislation that had developed in Michigan and now in other states.

There was Dave Selden, who I think was the real intellectual, the real thinker, the real visionary person on the staff. Charlie Cogen was an old veteran of years and years and years and years of teaching in New York City and had led the UFT during its collective bargaining struggle there. I got the impression very quickly that Dave was the person who was doing the thinking, the theorizing and was putting together the actual programs for building the union.

Bob Porter, the Secretary-Treasurer was there at the time. He still is secretary-treasurer today twenty-two years later. Peachsuffer, the Research Director was a strong intellectual who came up with a number of innovative ideas for dealing with union education while I was there. Bob Lieberman, who was the Director of Public Relations had a flair for dealing with the media. He would do things like when there was a press conference instead of having it behind a table in the conference room at headquarters would have Charlie Cogen leaning out the window and talking to reporters who were out on the

sidewalk. He really had a dramatic ability to get the AFT and the teacher union movement on television and in the newspapers. So it was a kind of a tightly knit group of people who felt the spirit of the times. I think that the teacher union movement at that point was very much like the civil rights movement, must have been like other social movements, must have been. You felt that you had a mission that you had a cause that was worth working for and we put in long, long hours. Pat Strandt, who had worked for the Kaylors, who had been the previous PR and Publications Agency for the teachers publication stayed on and was hired as an assistant in our Editorial Department or publications department. All of us worked long hours to develop what we thought was a good research education publication, public relations part of the movement.

During 1965, 1966 and 1967 there were a number of different kinds of issues that we addressed in our publications. I think the biggest one at the time was collective bargaining because when I went to work for the AFT, the National the membership was only 111,000. I would say within the next four or five years it had probably doubled because of the collective bargaining movement. So there was a lot of opportunity to get out and walk the picket lines with teachers and do interviews and to report on the fight for collective bargaining legislation on a state by state basis. Being housed in Chicago was a real treat for us because there were a number of burgeoning locals in the suburban Chicago school districts and because we happened to be there our staff could go out and work with teachers. We were trying to organize were going on strike in fact.

One interesting story. Bob Liberman, who I mentioned was the Public Relations Director went out with me once to a school district called Thornton Fractional. The teachers there had been on strike and they were served with an injunction. One of the teachers who had not been a real activist took her injunction and tore it in half and Bob gave her the nickname "Spunky." The two of them were married a couple of years later as a result of the commitment that I think they felt for each other obviously, but also their political alliance that developed through the union. So there was that kind of activity reporting strikes, reporting the collective bargaining struggle.

This was also a period of strong activity in the human rights and civil rights field. In fact, I think one of the first stories I wrote for the American Teacher was a report on the Freedom Schools that the AFT had set up in Mississippi during 1964 with the help of Arthur and Carolyn Reece, who had gone down to Mississippi and worked with the civil rights movement there. I think that first summer in 1964 some 4,000 students throughout the state of Mississippi had been given classes in these Freedom Schools which were set up in churches and community halls where black history and voting rights and other civil rights oriented materials were presented and taught.

One of the first stories I wrote for the American Teacher was on the Freedom Schools in Mississippi. I made a visit down there and spent two days with Carolyn Reece and her husband Arthur and visited a number of these centers. I talked with students and talked with volunteers and felt really warm about the fact that here were volunteer teachers from throughout the

county who had come and were spending time setting up these schools and doing teaching. I didn't see any confrontation per se a member going to meetings in churches designed to build morale and build spirit and the movement was growing. I do remember one incident where I was there with a friend who is an organizer for the Michigan Federation of Teachers Charles Chen. We stopped by the SNCC office in Jackson, Mississippi and Charlie decided to go on and do some voter registration in Biloxi, Mississippi. At that time buses were still segregated. Charlie was a Chinese American and they were not into civil disobedience at that point so Charlie did not know whether to sit in the back of the bus or the front of the bus. He decided he would sit in the middle between.

There is a long piece in one of those early American Teachers I believe in 1965 that I wrote probably four or five pages in the newspaper that eventually won the page one award of the Chicago Newspaper Guild for the best feature story in the best feature story category. I think people are interested in what the AFT was doing at that point ought to read that story. It is a pretty accurate full account of what was going on.

There is another real exciting event that took place in this area, Art Reece eventually was hired as the first Civil Rights Director of the AFT. One of the things that the union spent a lot of energy and a lot of time on was the National Conference on Racism in Education in December, 1966 held at the Washington Hilton Hotel. It was a vital vibrant conference with thousands of teachers from all over the country who attended workshops and

heard speeches and discussions on confronting racism in the public schools.

I remember one particular form I think occurred at this conference around the question can white teachers teach black students? There was a sharp difference of opinion. I don't recall who the panelists were at this time but it provoked a lot of discussion and the point of view that it was better to have black teachers for black students seemed to be the predominant one at that point in time. I am not sure that people going back and having that discussion today twenty years later would come up with the same conclusions, but you have to understand that at that particular time there was a real search going on for the most effective educational devices.

This of course led the AFT and teachers into the whole controversy over decentralization of school administrations into community school areas. It led the AFT into looking at model schools. There was a program that the AFT set up first in New York City called a More Effective Schools the MES Program. A fellow named Si Beagle, who came out of the New York City system was hired by the union as a full-time coordinator of the MES Program. So there was a number of different attempts being made to try to deal with the problem of segregated schooling, of racism in education, of trying to get the community more involved. There was a real fear I think on the part of some teachers that decentralization and community control which was the buzz word at the time, would somehow impact on the rights of teachers.

I recall, I think it was at the 1966 or possibly the 1967 AFT Convention a strong debate over whether or not the AFT ought to support decentralization? What came out of the convention was a statement in which there was support for community involvement, teacher involvement but the bottom line was that we are both interested in the schools we're natural allies. The community has a right to be involved, teachers need to be involved. Let's work together, lets have community participation and community input, but for God's sake don't abrogate the rights of teachers while you are doing this.

There were at least two areas perhaps more where decentralization was an issue probably the most famous one of course was Oceanhill-Brownsville in New York City. We covered that situation considerably in the American Teacher and we used as our resource person in New York Ted Bleeker, who was the editor of the New York Teacher the UFT's publication. Each month that we published during that whole period, Ted had a by-lined article in which he reported on the events in Oceanhill-Brownsville. I think we gave it quite good coverage.

We had a situation where there were two staff people at the national union trying to produce the newspaper. We couldn't go everywhere but where there were large locals like at the UFT that had their own full-time staff people, in fact they had a larger staff than we did, we were able to take advantage of that and use their reportage for our publication.

You raise the question of how a person an editor with a particular point of view on an issue deals with an organization that might have a different point of view on it? I think it is fair to say that I had points of view that differed with some of the people in the AFT leadership during this time on issues like decentralization, issues like the Vietnam war. How do you deal with something like that as an editor? I think the first thing you have to remember is that you are an editor of an organizational publication which has a particular point of view and that organization has a right to have that point of view expressed in the publication. At the same time, it was important for me at that time to remember that there were many, many different currents of thought within the organization.

The New York City local had one point of view on decentralization for example. The Washington Teachers Union, Local 6 had a different perspective and the Adams-Morgan community in Washington for example had developed a community school board with which the teachers union cooperated a great deal. So there were a number of different currents. There was another point of view in Detroit. There was another point of view in Chicago and so on. I felt as an individual working for a pluralistic union that having the ability to see that these different points of view were reflected in the union publication was fine.

I had absolutely no personal quarrel or no personal problem with seeing that those points of view were expressed in the publication. I felt that members of an organization have the right to read all of these points of view

and to make up their own minds and to be part of the intellectual ferment around an issue like Oceanhill-Brownsville, around an issue like Vietnam. I think that there were some people in the leadership who felt that maybe that was not enough that you had to express one point of view. Fortunately, those people did not try to clamp down and say the editorial staff of the publication is not doing the kinds of thing we want them to do. We had I think under the Dave Selden presidency, the opportunity to make sure that those different points of view were expressed in our publication.

One of the really fine opportunities working on the American Teacher at that time was the opportunity to go to Executive Council meetings and to write a straight report of what different members of the Council were saying on different issues. I don't know of another union publication before or since except maybe the Newspaper Guild. The Newspaper Guild still today will carry pretty straight reports of executive board meetings in which different points of view are expressed. We have that opportunity to go as reporters to the Executive Council meeting and when a debate occurred on something like decentralization or something else within the union whether it was a dues increase or whether to move the headquarters from Chicago to Washington.

There was the opportunity to report the different points of view in our coverage of Executive Council meetings. It was almost like being a reporter for the commercial press and being able to write a straight, objective news story. It was wonderful in my opinion because it meant to me that what union

democracy was supposed to be was being practiced and here is the one unifying force for these 150,000 or 200,000 teachers all over the country. The one thing that holds them together from the national union is the fact that every one of them gets the same publication each month and has an opportunity to learn about what their union is doing through that and we had that opportunity. We were able to develop a widely read large "Letter to the Editor" page, the "Teachers Mailbox" and we had points of view on all sides of the political spectrum from far right to far left expressed in that column.

We had the opportunity when there was a national election when Charlie Cogen ran against John Fewkes or when Dave Selden ran against another candidate. All the candidates for the presidency if they were known by say April or May were given an opportunity to have a page in the publication to express their point of view so that as members of local unions elected delegates to the convention, and delegates ran committed to one candidate or another, the members knew where those candidates stood and could vote for delegates who expressed that point of view.

The AFT also had a strong referendum policy. While I was editor of the American Teacher there were referenda on everything from what stand we should take on Vietnam, to should we move the headquarters from Chicago to Washington. We always prepared these two page or four page sections in the publication where advocates of the different positions had an opportunity to express their point of view. It was wonderful, it was real union democracy. I sure wish that union publications today had that same kind of vitality and

vibrancy, but for the most part they don't. I think leaderships sometimes they are insecure and don't want the opportunity for members to look at different points of view to be expressed always although, we have been able to do it once or twice in the UAW magazine over the question of reaffiliation to the AFL-CIO back in the early 1980's. There was a pro and con discussion in our publication prior to that taking place. But I really think in the late 1960's and a little bit in the early 1970's, the American Teacher really served as a strong advocate of internal union democracy.

The Vietnam issue as you point out was one of the other major issues that occupied a lot of time in the AFT during the late 1960's early 1970's, it was a subject of national referendum. There were lots of different points of view. I had a particular point of view on Vietnam. I opposed U.S. efforts in Vietnam. I was active in the anti-war movement but at the same time, I really felt strongly as an editor of a democratic union publication that all points of view had to be expressed in that publication. And I had absolutely no problem with letting advocates of a different position be expressed in there because the overriding concern to me always has been that any union publication you provide opportunities for different points of view. The leadership points of view, the rank and file points of view, points of view of different local unions. We tried to make sure that those different points of view were expressed.

Sometimes I felt that people who had a different point of view were angry that the American Teacher permitted other points of view to be expressed. I

remember that I think it was in 1966 or 1967 a group in New York City called the Teachers Committee To End The War in Vietnam or something like that asked to take out a full page advertisement in the American Teacher because there was a policy of permitting advertising in the publication. That ad was accepted but it drew some criticism and it drew some letters to the editor in opposition. I think a discussion developed on the Executive Council over what should be the advertising policy. I think with the help of Dave Selden that a policy was eventually hammered out that would permit advertising of that nature to appear in the publication as long as it was labeled as an advertisement and as long as the names of the authors of the organization appeared in it. I think we did carry one or two other ads from that same group in subsequent years, but we always made it clear that they were advertisements and we spelled out the AFT's policy on Vietnam and a policy on advertising whenever those kinds of ads appeared.

I think that people like Dave Selden felt that there ought to be opportunities for the union to take positions on different issues on controversial issues. There was discussion at the level of the Executive Council, certainly at every convention the issue of Vietnam was debated and discussed. I can't recall what year the resolution changed. At one point the AFT's position was that we, the organization would support any effort by the administration to reach an honorable peace in Vietnam. As the anti-war movement grew, I think the New York City local actually was the first one to take a position of neutrality and that position eventually became the AFT's position. Because of the divisive nature of the issue, the potential

divisiveness that perhaps the AFT's position ought to be one of no position which passed at the convention.

Subsequently there was another referendum, I can't recall for sure when it might have been. In 1971 another national referendum in which people were asked, "Do you want to reaffirm that position or do you want to take one of three alternative positions?" Again the no position won, but it seemed to a number of people that they might have been copping-out a little bit. In fact, I think there was an editorial I think Pat Strandt wrote in the American Teacher kind of questioning whether the position of "no position" was an honorable one for any organization to take. I think in her editorial she compared it to the words that were used often in stories about fiftieth wedding anniversaries. What is the secret of your long happiness? Well, one of the secrets is we never said an angry word to each other. I think Pat questioned whether or not that really makes for a good relationship. She drew the parallel to the union. If you can't have disagreements with the union and if there is one cause that's right, why not take that position even though it might be unpopular if it is the right position?

It was really interesting because it was an editorial in the union publication that departed from the official position of the union even though it was kind of an implied reading between the lines kind of position. It proved I think that we had a really democratic organization and an organization which appreciated some level of independence for its publication.

I think that one of the other interesting things about that period is that people like Dave Selden recognized that in order to produce a lively, credible publication, you had to give the editorial staff an opportunity to do the job themselves. During the years that Dave was there nobody ever read page proofs of publications. Let me qualify that, during the late 1960's and the early 1970's nobody ever read page proofs of publications prior to the paper going to press. We had a good sense of what could be published and what couldn't be published. We really tried hard to make sure that our points of view were expressed, but we felt that as editors we had the opportunity, the obligation to do our best job without somebody looking over our shoulders constantly.

I don't think we were ever called on the carpet for anything that we printed except in one incident in the late 1960's or early 1970's, I am not sure quite when. We carried a short letter to the editor in a whole collection of letters in one issue. This particular letter, I have forgotten even who wrote it was critical of a position that Local 2 the United Federation of Teachers and I think it may have even mentioned Al Shanker by name and we printed the letter. I think it was at the next Executive Council meeting that Al Shanker expressed a great deal of anger and opposition at least I was told this. I wasn't at that meeting with the printing of the letter and I think it resulted in a policy statement of some kind that said that when locals were criticized by name that they be given an opportunity to respond or maybe those kinds of letters shouldn't even appear. I don't recall for sure what had happened but I think in retrospect

that was probably the right thing to do that we probably should have requested response from the local when that kind of criticism occurred. My recollection is very vague on this, I think the criticism was kind of a minor one. It didn't appear to be a very substantive one, but I think that one of the practices that I have always followed since is to make sure that people do have an opportunity to respond. But again you have to look at this in the context of what the American Teacher was at that time. It was a newspaper that had a feeling of going out and reporting the news and the commentary of what was going on in this big pluralistic union during a period of a lot of social ferment, a period of growth, a period of the teachers union trying to find itself and the newspaper really reflected that whole period.

You are asking me about the dynamics between the UFT and Al Shanker on one hand and the national union on the other hand during the late 1960's and early 1970's. It is really hard for me to speak to that because as the editor and staff member for the national union, we were concerned with what was happening every place and New York City was such an entity unto itself. It seemed to take care of itself pretty well and I didn't sense at least in the late 1960's, any real attempt by the local in New York City to try to dominate the rest of the union. There were things going on all over the country, San Francisco State teachers going out on strike, the Newark Teachers Union strike, the jailings of teachers, the continued activity in the civil rights movement. It is hard to recall any attempts I think from Local 2 to show its dominance in the rest of the union at least from the perspective of where I was sitting.

Some of the strikes that occurred during this whole period included one at San Francisco State University where the professors who were represented by the AFT went out in 1970 over the right of collective bargaining. S. I. Hayakawa, who was the head of San Francisco State at the time was vehemently opposed to it. It was a long, long, bitter strike a number of teachers were threatened with being fired or disciplined for alleged picket line infractions. I went out there I did a lot of interviews did a two or three page story in the publication about the strike, and felt once again that this was perhaps a continuation of the movement of the 1960's. Where in 1965, 1966, 1967 collective bargaining had been a revolution within the K-12 system, now it was coming to the college and university system.

One of the things that attracted me about the strikes at universities the one at San Francisco State especially was the fact that the professors there who were leaders of the union and who were striking, saw the union not just as a vehicle for getting them bread and butter but saw it as a social movement as an organization to help give more democracy to teachers and to students. They saw themselves as allies with students and with the community that was a major part of that strike.

I would say that what happened at San Francisco State was replicated at a few other institutions probably because the leaders of teacher unions at the college and university level ones who I met had similar political and social outlooks as to what unions could mean for the academic community. I think a lot of people who were active in building a union saw it as an opportunity to

hit back at some of the elitism that had developed at the university level. While there was never any other strike that I can recall covering that had the vehemence of the San Francisco State strike, certainly you would see currants of that thought in other areas in the university and college community.

A question arises from time to time over whether there is a difference in organizing college and university professors as opposed to K-12 teachers? I don't know how well I can speak to this, I didn't have that much of an opportunity to talk with a lot of college professors during the period of organizing. I recall one opportunity I had, I was working for the AFT in Chicago, to go to an organizing meeting of a University of Illinois faculty group that was seeking help from the AFT in getting organized. I felt a little nervous, a little self-conscious about going to meet with a group of college professors and trying to sell them on the union.

I discovered when I got there that they were concerned about the same kinds of things that the K-12 teachers were organizing about and that was salaries, that was job security and the opportunity for a grievance procedure and the opportunity for a voice. After fifteen or twenty minutes of conversation with them I realized that they might be professors working in a high academic situation, but they had the same kinds of bread and butter concerns that the K-12 teachers had, and the fact of being part of a trade union movement didn't seem to phase these folks at all. They saw themselves as people who were workers. Now this was a group of fifteen or twenty people

from the faculty. I don't know how widely reflective it was of the entire faculty because I am sure you find, as you find among teachers, a kind of an elitist group that are professionals who won't touch unions.

It goes back to something I wanted to talk about a little bit earlier and that was the difference in the 1960's between the AFT and the NEA, a difference which has really changed over the years. Back then in the 1960's, I guess Helen Bowers here in Detroit really captured it well in a cartoon that she drew for the Michigan Federation of Teachers or it might have been for the DFT that showed a kind of a stuck up elderly woman teacher with her nose in the air and the caption was "Some Teachers Don't Need A Union." She was making the point that there are those elitist, those professionals who felt that unions were beneath them. That certainly was reflective of the NEA's point of view many of the people in the NEA at that time.

One of my duties as editor of the American Teacher was to go to every NEA Convention every year and report on it and to write stories about what they were doing and the points of view that they were taking. Of course, at that time, the NEA structure was dominated by school administrators and principals, assistant principals and deans. They were obsessed with professionalism to the point of not wanting to take a stand on social issues and, of course, not wanting to have anything to do with the labor movement which they saw as a special interest outside of the interest of themselves as professionals.

One of the things that really pleased me being part of the AFT was that we are a professional organization as well as a union. Certainly our overall approach was to win democracy and higher wages and higher standards of living for teachers. What really pleased me was to see the work that the AFT started to do in the 1960's around the More Effective Schools program around the opportunity to lower class sizes. To make the point clear that one of the reasons we wanted teacher power at the bargaining table and collective bargaining was to be able to negotiate lower class sizes and to negotiate more effective schools and to negotiate a say in dealing with racism in textbooks and to have an opportunity for real democracy to occur. That was the road to professionalism that I don't think the NEA with its de-emphasis on collective bargaining appreciated. That certainly has changed over the years and the NEA I think partly because of the pressure of the AFT in the late 1960's and the early 1970's, and the rubbing off into teachers inside the NEA from what they perceived the AFT doing has helped change the NEA a great deal. The NEA now sees collective bargaining as a vehicle for reaching a professional approach in many areas.

Just a little bit about the More Effective Schools program which Si Beagle pioneered. I think it was in ten schools in New York City, there were some MES programs in the Detroit area as well and they emphasized a reduced class load.

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DAVID ELSILA INTERVIEW

April 6, 1987

Tape 2

The schools that I visited as I recall had much lower class sizes had groups of team teachers. The teachers that I talked with were enthusiastic about what they were doing. I think there was a real hope in the AFT that these models would serve as success stories to the point where boards of education all over the country would start using them as a means of providing effective education in the inner cities in the public schools. They really never caught on unfortunately, I think partly because of the financial crunch that boards of education were facing.

Dave Selden later on tried to develop a program called the Twenty/Twenty program which had its roots I think in more effective schools. It was to create for every teacher, every place a twenty hours of classroom time per week with a maximum of twenty students per class to provide real effective education for everybody. I know his vision was to try to set that up as a model in some areas but the whole idea of the AFT using its collective bargaining power to improve the professional conditions of teachers was very important. The idea of teacher centers, places where classroom teachers through collective bargaining could win the right to set up building some place in a school district where teachers could come after school and take classes or just chat and meet

other teachers and talk about professional concerns was all part of this. I think what differentiated again the AFT from the NEA was the AFT's perception that you use teacher power and collective bargaining to win these kinds of professional improvements through teacher power.

The AFT's set up of the More Effective Schools experiment in New York City where it went I think from ten schools one year to twenty schools a couple of years later as a way of the future. We put out articles in our publication about it, we put out pamphlets about it. Si Bealge went on speaking tours around the country and tried to interest other AFT locals in promoting the idea with their local school districts. I believe that Detroit was one of the areas that a couple of More Effective Schools were set up in. I can't recall the other cities where this was done but it was seen as a national movement. The idea really started to fade out I think in the mid 70's and I honestly don't know what has happened to it since I left the AFT but it certainly was a good movement, a good idea.

In Newark, New Jersey I believe it was in 1970, it was a serious confrontation between the board of education and the teachers which we covered for the American Teacher. And being relatively close having been based in Washington, D.C. at that time, our staff Pat Strandt, myself, photographers were in Newark during the strike and in fact we were asked

by Dave Selden to produce newspapers more frequently about what was happening there. I think we ended up putting out a weekly paper, it might have been twice a week to alert teachers throughout the country to what was happening in Newark and to get local unions around the country to adopt a strike.

As you know as a result of what happened in Newark, Dave Selden ended up in jail and a number of other teachers were also jailed. As I recall there was one problem with some of what we covered in Newark. I got the story secondhand or thirdhand that Al Shanker's photograph that we used on a cover of the American Teacher which made the New Jersey state troopers look like Nazis. I don't know why he came to that conclusion because we just took a picture and ran it of some state troopers confronting teachers. It was a problem with him on that photograph and I heard about it secondhand or thirdhand about how upset he was but I don't think anything ever came of it beyond hearing that.

I have to say that I don't recall all the specifics that were going on in the Newark Teachers Union strike. I would have to go back and reread some of the stories that I have written about it. What occurred was that the president and several rank and file teachers in Newark were thrown in jail and there was the development of a nationwide campaign to support these teachers. My guess is that although I was not privy to all of the behind-the-scenes discussions, the fact that so many teachers were in jail and that the force of the community was coming down so hard on the

Newark Teachers Union that the AFT decided it had to make a national cause out of it. This was the reason for a national campaign and the publication of special issues of the newspaper and for the development of a speaking tour by Dave Selden after he was released from jail.

When Dave came out of jail we had a big reception for him at the national headquarters and he talked about his experiences in jail and about trying to learn new songs. He was a guitarist and a folksinger and it was after that that Dave went out and did some of these Bread and Water or Bread and Roses receptions where he talked to teachers throughout the country about his jail experiences and about the need to get stronger rights for teachers. He brought in the question of prison reform as well. I think the focus was really on improving the rights of teachers through collective bargaining.

Some people may have felt that Dave was focusing too much on the issue of prison reform. The one or two rallies that I attended my recollection is that he spoke about teacher rights and the need to defend teachers and protect teachers against going to jail for what private sector employees always have had the right to do, to go out on strike as a last resort. That to me was the major focus of the receptions the Bread and Roses campaign that followed his release from prison in New Jersey. But, if he had talked about the need for prison reform and had gone on to talk about it, I certainly wouldn't have thought that to be anything that we shouldn't be doing because the teacher union movement is a social

movement. There is concern about social issues as well as collective bargaining and teacher issues and for God's sake if you are going to be a leader of a social organization of a social movement, you are going to talk about teacher rights, you are going to talk about prisoners rights, you are going to talk about human rights, about civil rights about all these issues and there is nothing in the world as far as I can tell that is wrong with that kind of an approach.

I guess it was at about this time in maybe 1971 and 1972 that some tensions began to develop on the Executive Council. Those of us on the staff although I want to emphasize we were not privy to all these tensions, we went about doing our job reporting what was happening in the AFT. It became clear that there seemed to be a growing estrangement between Dave Selden and Al Shanker, the president of Local 2. I think it was over perhaps a number of issues. One of the things that comes to mind is the whole question of an attempt by Dave for reproachment with the NEA. To try to develop some teacher unity between the two organizations that was not an extremely popular view with a lot of people in the AFT at the time.

A fellow who had been a national representative of the union a guy named Ken Miesen picked up on that issue and ran against Dave in 1970 and in 1972 ran against him both times. I think he came within one hundred or so votes in one of those elections of defeating Dave. It was a pretty close vote.

There obviously was some opposition to merger. In fact, a number of people on the staff were not really comfortable with the idea of trying to seek merger with an organization that we had fought for so many years over the question of administrative control and its lack of support for collective bargaining and its lack of support for the labor movement. There are people who were uncomfortable with it. I was uncomfortable with it to an extent but I think maybe Dave saw more of the potential of what could happen and maybe he saw the opportunity to go in and negotiate this kind of a merger and help bring the classroom teacher wing of the NEA into a greater sense of power within that organization. I think he had a vision that a lot of us may not have had.

The opposition probably crissed wise round Ken Miesen, who was as I said a national representative who ran against Dave on an anti-merger ticket. I am really not sure where a lot of the members of the Executive Council stood on that. It has been a number of years since and I don't recall the arguments. I think people were changing their positions from time to time. Tensions did start to develop between Dave and Al after the 1972 election probably foreign policy points of view might have been one of those tensions. One of the culminations of this is that the Executive Council designated Al as the first vice-president of the AFT and as a result Al was therefore able through protocol to become a vice-president of the AFL-CIO as opposed to Dave. Most cases you would have assumed that the president of the international union would represent the union on the AFL-CIO but for some reason Al was designated as the first vice-president

and then moved on to the AFL-CIO Executive Council and the tensions continued.

It was obvious to me that Dave was being eased out and my perception at the time was that it was over political differences and over tensions in terms of perhaps how close the relationship ought to be with the AFL-CIO on foreign policy questions maybe on some domestic questions. It was unclear to me and to some other members of the staff that talked about it. We felt that perhaps it was a feeling by Local 2 that because it was the largest local in the AFT, it should perhaps have a greater degree of power in the organization. There were probably as I said political differences of ideological differences that led to this.

One of the outcomes of these tensions that particularly affected the editorial department was that in probably early 1973 we were told for the first time ever that we had to submit page proofs of everything that we produced to Al Loewenthal, who was the Assistant to the President of the AFT to read and pass on prior to publication. That really upset us because we felt we were doing a good job that we were reflecting all points of view of the union within the publication. I think an attempt to stop that and to create a publication which would reflect only one point of view, the point of view that Al Lowenthal was supposedly reflecting.

It was really puzzling to us it was honestly puzzling that the Assistant to the President of the union who had been appointed by the

Executive Council was going to have this power over the president. This wasn't Dave Selden, the nominal president who was going to be reading the page proofs, it was Al Loewenthal. We had a lot of fights verbally between our department and Al Loewenthal, the memos flowed back and forth with every issue. One thing that stands out in my mind in terms of Al Loewenthal's reading of the magazine was we covered a strike of teachers in Connecticut, I think it was Hartford. We ran a photograph of the teachers in front of the Board of Education building raising picket signs and clenched fists which in that point in history everybody did that. Well, I got back the marked up page proofs from Al Loewenthal in which he said, "Why are you running the red front salute in your publication?" And I did not know what to make of that. It was obviously something out of Al Loewenthal's political struggles of the 1930's or the 1940's. He was somehow transforming to a hidden message or hidden agenda of the 1970's.

At one time Al Loewenthal had been the Public Relations Director for the AFT. He always struck me as a very quiet, unassuming person except when he had a conflict with a member of the staff. I recall some incidents where he would chew out people on the staff over the way in which the staff conducted itself. One example that comes to mind was that we had a staff meeting which he often chaired and even though we were working sixty and seventy hour weeks, he wanted assurances from everybody that they would work from nine o'clock to five o'clock and be there at those hours and I guess that's the kind of guy he was.

We were all sitting around a table once and he went around to each person and said, "Will you so and so be here from nine o'clock to five o'clock every day? Will you? Will you?" And he went around this table and when he came to me I said, "I am going to live up to my contract my contractual obligation." We had a written contract negotiated by the Newspaper Guild with which we were affiliated which said I think the language was that staff members will work the normal full-time week. We were certainly doing at least that and so I just reminded him of that contractual obligation and he continued to go around the table trying to press people for that kind of a commitment. There were other incidents like that but I think that is the one that really stands out in my mind in terms of the kind of individual he was to work with.

I really don't know what his political backgrounds were. I guess I got the impression that he had a particular ideology and that he perhaps saw some kind of a sinister approach that people on the staff were trying to create in what the staff were doing and what we were publishing. I remember even once, one of the stories that we ran in the American Teacher that he censored was a story about the - this had come from the AFL-CIO as a matter of fact. It was a story about how the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer and had some statistical back up information for it. Al sent it back with some strange comment about how this is promoting conflict. I don't think he used the word class conflict but it was similar to that, so we had to take that story out. So there were these small and big changes that he would make in the page proofs and

sometimes we would fight back with memos justifying why we had written something that took up a hell of a lot of time just to keep this argument going back and forth. Of course, he had the final word on it and it became very, very demoralizing because we continued to work hard, we had a sense of pride, we wanted to put out the best publication possible. We were winning awards from the Educational Press Association, from the Labor Press Association and we thought we had a really good publication and suddenly this kind of crap starts and we get really demoralized.

I remember going home feeling day after day after day, why are we continuing to put forth our efforts, our best efforts like this when we have this guy down the hall who perceives something different from what we are trying to do and clamps down on us? I think that some people on the staff were really intimidated by Al Loewenthal and really felt that their jobs might be in jeopardy if they didn't do what he wanted them to do. I would have to say that it was such a departure from what the AFT was in the 1960's and early 1970's that it made a big big difference in the way we felt about our jobs and the way we felt about our organization. And it may certainly have been the intent of those people who gave Al the power that he assumed on the staff but it certainly led to a lot of demoralization and I think that was one of the worst decisions that could give him the kind of control that he assumed and that he used.

When this kind of stuff started coming down, we tried to fight back on an intellectual level. There was a certain structure in the union, we

respected that structure but we felt that what we were doing, we were producing, what we were writing was correct was honest was reflective of what the union movement was all about and what it should be. The way of fighting back for us although it may not have been effective, but it was an honest way to fight back was to argue with Al Loewenthal through written communication, memos back and forth and back and forth. We tried to make the point that the reason we are writing this story is because it is something that a local union has done. The local union is part of the AFT and it should have its point of view expressed or that this is in keeping with AFT Convention policy etc., etc. Al would fire back memos back at us and this kind of dialogue would take place but he always had the final say.

The question of whether Dave Selden had power to intervene came up in our minds. The way that things were structured was that Al had the power to take something out or not to take something out, and Dave recognized that and Dave was I think, ashamed and embarrassed that Al had that power. There was only one time during this whole period where Dave overruled Al on something, and it was at a time I think in the early part of 1974 where Al again was continuing to read everything and pass on it including Dave Selden's column.

Well Dave had been asked in early 1974 by the Executive Council to resign. There was a meeting of the Council and out of that Council came a motion that they asked the president to resign and Dave didn't. We were about to go to press with the, it might have been the March issue or the April issue of the American Teacher and Dave called me at the printer and

said, "I have a column that I want to have appear in this." And I said to him, "Well has Al Loewenthal looked at it?" And he said, "No, but I want you I am the president of this union I want you to put it in and I don't want you to tell Al." So at that point in time nobody had ever told me outside of Dave Selden that Al Loewenthal had to review the publications, this originally came from Dave Selden a year or so previous to this. So I felt if here is the president of the union who is saying, put my column in and don't show it to my assistant fine, what could I do? So we did it, and his column appeared in the publication. He and Al must have had it out separately because I think Al asked me about it subsequently to that, and I explained to him what had happened but I never had any problem any criticism of that decision directly.

It was always a puzzlement to me and to Pat Strandt and to other people on the staff why Dave permitted this, and as I said earlier he seemed to be ashamed, embarrassed of the power that Al Loewenthal had over the publications including over his columns. There were probably things going on behind-the-scenes tensions between Dave and the Executive Council that explained this. I guess what we accepted at the time was that those tensions were so overriding and there were conflicts going on that we didn't know about or that we weren't privy to that created this kind of a situation. We had been told by Dave Selden that hereafter this was sometime in 1973 everything would have to be reviewed and approved and proofs edited by Loewenthal prior to being released to the printer.

How did those of us who were responsible for the publication feel about what was coming down in 1973 and 1974? I think we were disappointed, we were depressed. We had seen what had been built over the 1960's and early 1970's, a strong vital publication suddenly subjected to this kind of censorship by the assistant to the president who even overruled the president. It disturbed us but how do you get through something like this as a professional, as a believer in a teacher union movement? I think the way we got through it was to keep reminding ourselves that the AFT is a very decentralized organization and there were some good things, some vital things happening in different parts of the country that we continued to report. Certainly some of that material wouldn't make it into print because of Al Loewenthal's objections from time to time, but there was enough continuing, enough going on that we could say to ourselves that we are getting vital information out and we are helping advance the cause of teacher unionism.

I don't mean to paint too negative a picture of what was happening. We had our quarrels. We spent a lot of time and a lot of energy arguing with Al Loewenthal over particular stories. We were genuinely puzzled over why he would do what he did to stories that appeared to us to be very innocuous. It wasn't as if we were considering using the American Teacher to nail particular people or to take particular points of view or to even be advocates of our point of view. It was that we saw that publication as a pluralistic publication reflecting the nature of the AFT. But, I guess what was happening at the same time was that the AFT was moving more and

more to becoming institutionalized and bureaucratized and some people began seeing it as an organization which ought to express one point of view. Perhaps Al Loewenthal was an overly enthusiastic exponent of that point of view and had a particular point of view that he felt he had to advance.

I would be surprised if everybody on the Executive Council including the people who appointed Al knew the kinds of things that he was doing. Occasionally when we had some real problems with Al, we would send copies of our memos to members of the Executive Council in hopes that we would get some support from them. I don't think we did, I don't recall. They may have looked upon this as a little tempest in the teapot in the international headquarters in Washington and not that big of an issue. We did keep ourselves going our morale up by trying to report what we could report in terms of some of the social activities that were going on in the union.

Dave Selden was a very easygoing fellow who did not run the organization while he was president up until the problems with Al Shanker with any kind of an iron hand or iron fist. He let departments pretty much act on their own. He had trust in the people he had appointed to office. He was a kind of a person he was pretty approachable and if you had an idea for a story or for a new way of handling a publication, he was very, very easy to sit down and chat with. You could drop in his office and I guess maybe one of the problems that some people may have perceived

in him was that he was too easy going that he didn't clamp down on the staff as people thought he should. He didn't run a "tight ship."

This period led up to the 1974 convention in which Al Shanker was nominated by the Progressive Caucus of the union to run as a presidential candidate and Dave ran as an Independent. The vote was overwhelming for Al and he became the president of the union. Although he maintained an office in Washington, he spent most of his time in New York City and came down on occasional visits. There was very little contact actually between the editorial department and Al and his office. We continued to submit page proofs to Al Loewenthal for reading. We continued to try to produce a good publication and there wasn't that much of a difference in the way we operated from the last year and a half of the Selden administration to the two years of the Shanker administration that I was there.

We thought that there would be some changes and things would have changed but they really didn't to any great extent that I can recall. We continued to report news from throughout the AFT for the American Teacher. We didn't have as I said very much contact directly with Al Shanker our contact continued to be with Al Loewenthal. Looking back at the issues that we produced in 1975 and 1976 both school years I think that we did a remarkable job of continuing to report what was going on in the union. There was a period I guess of increasing institutionalization of the AFT. There was an emphasis again on organizing, things seemed to go along pretty much as they had before.

It was during this period I think it was late 1975 early 1976 that I had been approached by somebody at the UAW and asked whether or not I might be interested in a position as Managing Editor for the UAW magazine Solidarity and that appealed to me on two different levels. One I felt that the AFT, if it was going to continue its period of institutionalization, that maybe the change would be so great that I wouldn't be happy with it given my personal political perspectives and what I had seen in the union in the 1960's and the early 1970's, it was becoming a little less of a movement. The UAW and the leadership of Walter Reuther had always struck me. The leadership of Reuther's successors had always struck me as a good, strong, progressive union that had links with the community and that had been one of the leaders in the trade union movement for social causes, for civil rights, for the human rights and peace movements. From a distance the UAW looked good to me from that point of view.

The second reason why I wanted to consider it was that I was born in Detroit my family was here. My wife was born in Detroit her family was here. We had just had three children and it was an opportunity to come back and have the kids be close to their grandparents and as I said earlier to work for a progressive union. In the Spring of 1976 when the offer to move back here became firm, I decided I would accept the offer. I think I put to bed the last issue of the American Teacher in June, 1976 and took about a month off and then came to work at the UAW in Detroit.

Growing up in Detroit, the UAW was really the dominant labor organization. Although I never had any direct connection through my family or through my early jobs with the UAW of the labor movement, I remember as a kid, as a teenager coming down to Cadillac Square in Detroit and hearing Walter Reuther speak on Labor Day activities and just marveling at what a wonderful vision this man had and I felt so inspired. He had the same oratorical gifts that Martin Luther King had in being able to talk about the needs of people and the ability of people once they became organized to help change society and create a better life for all human beings. As an idealist high school student and college student that kind of vision really turned me on and I think that had something to do with my vision eventually of what the AFT could become and what it did become.

When I was a teacher in Michigan, we had these Institute days. Every Fall, teachers were given a couple of days off to go to either an AFT or an NEA Institute MFT or MEA. I remember hearing Walter Reuther speak at one of the MFT Institute days. He wove the connection so effectively between teaching as a profession and workers as a group, his wife may have been a classroom teacher as well. It was always this close relationship between the Federation and the UAW. When I went to work eventually at the AFT in Chicago and later in Washington, it was clear that Walter Reuther believed in this point of view to the point where he made big grants of money to help through the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO and through the UAW to help the teachers around the country organize.

I think Walter Reuther had a gift that very few other labor leaders including those in the AFT had. Walter Reuther was able to capture the spirit and the imagination of people through his oratorical power through his powers of communication. That never seemed to come out of the leadership of the AFT to a great extent but their hearts were in the right places. Charlie Cogen, I don't think was a very inspiring speaker and Dave Selden, although he said the right things and had the vision, certainly had the vision was not an especially effective public speaker. He was a marvelous writer and he could sit down at the typewriter and compose his column or write a speech and do a beautiful job at it. I think his book that he recently published is an example of the kind of lively, clear, personalized writing style which he had and which I often wished I had. He was able to just sit down and the words would flow while I had to struggle and I always admired Dave for having that ability. As a public speaker, he was no Walter Reuther neither was Charlie Cogen and yet the spirit was there in those years in the AFT. I think a lot of it came from watching people like Walter Reuther and Martin Luther King, who certainly influenced the labor movement. I think that spirit was there.

Al Shanker, I would say was probably a better speaker than either Charlie or Dave but I don't think he had the charisma either of somebody like Walter Reuther. So the personal style of leadership was certainly different in the AFT. You know it really didn't bother a lot of people that much because what was being said by these people and what was being written by these people and the excitement of the times was very

important. I think there was some disappointment that was alternatively disappointment and also perhaps some hope when Walter Reuther pulled the UAW out of the AFL-CIO. I think I remember expressing some disappointment that you would not have this vigorous leader inside the House of Labor to help push it forward but there was also some hope that may be Walter Reuther and the UAW could build a stronger alliance or stronger organization and may be put some pressure on the AFL-CIO to become a little more active and more imaginative.

There was an attempt at one point to organize what was called the Alliance for Labor Action in which the Teamsters and the UAW participated. I recall covering their following convention for the American Teacher and being impressed by the vigor of that meeting, of course, that never went any place, I think it was disbanded three or four years later.

I remember also covering AFL-CIO Conventions over this period of time for the American Teacher and recalling how deadly dull they were. An AFT Convention was something to be really proud of because there was open debate, there was discussion and different points of view were expressed and there was real democracy that took place on the Convention floor. An AFL-CIO Convention everything was cut and dry and there was hardly any debate or discussion. There was a real difference in terms of how the AFT operated internally than certainly how the AFL-CIO did.

The AFT had come out of the old AF of L as a craft union and so there was still some ties with that more conservative wing of the AFL-CIO. On the other hand, the AFT was also part of the Industrial Union Department led by Walter Reuther. In many districts, not many but in some school districts, the AFT had tried to become an industrial union by organizing not only teachers but paraprofessionals and bus drivers and school custodians, etc., although that was not really a high priority at the time. I guess for both those reasons: One, the early craft union ties and influences. Secondly, the affect that the AFT was able to work within the Industrial Union Department of the AFL-CIO were one of the progressive (for lack of a better word) unions congregated gave probably little motivation for pulling out of the AFL-CIO at that time.

I think that the labor movement for both public sector and private sector workers is about the only major social movement in this country in terms of advancing workers interests. Now it is the biggest movement, it is the most viable movement, it is the movement that has been able to accomplish more than any other group for workers interests in our society. That doesn't mean that everything that the labor movement has done over the years has been the best thing that could have been done. Certainly there have been more conservative trends and strains within the labor movement, there have been more liberal, progressive, even radical strains over the years. I am not a person who believes that the labor movement has failed workers. I really think that there are some strong advances that have been made.

The whole collective bargaining movement for public employees for example was a result of the commitment of the labor movement to help organize those employees. I think that in the last couple of years maybe three years since the AFL-CIO's report on the "Future of Labor In This Country," there is a new realization that the labor movement needs to be more vigorous and needs to expand its activities. I think a lot of people in the labor movement are hopeful that this is going to catch on and that there is going to be this new spirit. You see it expressed itself in some of the organizing projects that are going on around the country. I certainly don't think that the labor movement has reached its full potential. I think people in the labor movement in the bureaucracy of the AFL-CIO would admit that but, I think there is a stronger and stronger commitment being made to help advance the cause of workers in this society.

I think in the industrial sector today there are a great, great number of problems that labor has to confront and is dealing with. One of those problems is the disappearance of jobs overseas, jobs in the industrial sector and the creation of a service economy where wages are maybe half of what they are in the industrial sector. I think over the last three or four years unions in the industrial sector like the UAW and like the Steelworkers have tried to work with the industrial firms, with the companies, to try to create a better industrial environment forte in order to save jobs and in order to protect jobs.

I think a lot of people in the trade union movement however are disappointed that the companies although asking for the workers support and getting it are not practicing any quality of sacrifice. The UAW, the Steelworkers have done our part. We have made adjustments at the bargaining table. We have given up wage increases. We have given up COLA. We have tried to cooperate but the headlines over the weekend, for example, of General Motors opening new production facilities in Mexico, Ford and Chrysler going overseas to Taiwan, cooperation has got to be a two way street. I think that if the companies here in this country that we have been trying to cooperate with turn their backs on American workers, there is going to be a great deal of anger expressed in the coming months and coming years toward those companies and certainly working to develop an environment that is conducive to industrial expansion has got to be one of the labor movements activities.

One of the real interesting approaches that the UAW, for example, has taken over the last three or four years is trying to create an industrial policy in which companies are held accountable to the public for the investment decisions that they make. We helped create three years ago what they call a blueprint for a better America. A blueprint for American industry in which we call for the development of committees at the national level and at the local level where workers, government agencies and industry have input and where the bottom line is that you don't make investments purely for profit but you look at the impact on the community and on jobs in making those investment decisions.

We keep pointing out what the experience has been in a country like Japan where Japanese executives in the big auto companies make far, far less proportionally to their workers than American executives here do. It is not a question of cooperating our union or our workers rights out of existence. It is a question of getting some cooperation back from the companies and it hasn't been as forthcoming as we would like it to be. There is one danger from my point of view in the movement toward creative management and the movement toward cooperation and that is that workers interest might be submerged by much more powerful forces. I think that looking at the AFT today, an incident happened a couple of years ago that bothers me a little. I think I understand where the AFT is coming from on this issue but I don't necessarily agree with its point of view on it.

I was asked by the Texas Federation of Teachers to go to Austin and do a workshop for editors there. I still pretty frequently go out and do work for AFT unions and for other unions as well. I was talking to this AFT group in Texas about the importance of unions like the UAW and the AFT cooperating, and how we in the UAW didn't see ourselves as a union only looking out for the interest of the auto workers at the Rouge Plant in Dearborn or in the auto companies. We really saw ourselves as part of the community and we wanted to work with teachers and defend the rights of teachers because we were all part of the same movement together.

I held up a copy of Solidarity magazine that I had done recently which the cover story was "Reading, Writing and Reaganomics." The whole thrust of the story was how a number of corporations were putting their own lesson material into the classroom. The story provided one example of how a town in Indiana which was a one company town had such a close relationship over the years with this company. The company would every year provide lesson materials on what a great company this was and how the whole town was tied to it and it was used throughout the schools. Well low and behold when the workers refused to give a wage concession to this company, the company shutdown and moved out and left the community in a lurch. I said, "This is a danger and we want our kids in the public schools to be given objective information, to get labors side of the struggle, labors side of the story and we ought to be concerned about and we in the UAW are concerned about company propoganda floating into the classrooms."

Well I was followed by somebody from the AFT national office who was talking to the group. He was putting forth the approach that the teaching community, the education community has to create partnerships with industry. I am beginning to be aware that for the past couple of years now this has been an AFT approach of developing partnerships with business and industry. It worries me to the extent that can we trust corporate America? Can we trust these companies to give money without having strings attached? If you can see the kind of lesson material and classroom material being used because the public tax money isn't there to

provide objective, honest or pro-labor side to classroom material, we might be in for some real problems.

I thought of my own experiences as a classroom teacher in Livonia, Michigan where I would take my kids on field trips to Greenfield Village which is this outdoor museum that Henry Ford set up in 1920. This is where he brought Thomas Addison's Laboratory and the Wright Brothers Bicycle Repair Shop and all of these buildings to Greenfield Village. You go through that and you get the idea, the kids get the idea that America is the product of industrial leaders with vision. You find out very, very little about workers and their problems and their contributions to building America that is kind of untouched. I worry that if we start developing this kind of a partnership with industry that same ideological point of view is going to begin to color again the curriculum content. That was an experience I had at the Texas Federation of Teachers meeting a couple of years ago, and I guess from what I read that point of view of cooperation between industry and the public schools is a continuing one.

Let me respond to the point of view that says you have got to have the corporations and businesses as partners with the schools in terms of providing resources that can help clear up some of the problems in public education today. I think that the real answer has to come through a public financing method. You start getting into a system where public schools and public education is going to depend on the largess of corporations and their grants, you run into a lack of accountability. Much much better I think, to create a taxation system where those

corporations and those businesses are taxed. The money goes through publicly elected, publicly accountable boards of education and other groups like that to the public schools so that there is accountability to the public.

There is a real problem here in Detroit. I was just reading in this mornings paper in Highland Park, Michigan where Chrysler Corporation is headquartered, the company is asking for permission to get a big, big tax abatement in a new suburb where it wants to move its headquarters. The companies keep asking for these tax breaks and these tax abatements and they decide where they are going to build their new plants on the basis of where they are going to get the biggest tax breaks. What that does is create real problems for the public schools. If we are going to get money from the business community and corporate America to help solve the problems and there are a lot of problems in public education, it ought to be funneled through publicly accountable boards of education.

If the companies are going to be willing to give money to the public schools through some kind of a partnership arrangement where they target particular schools with gifts, why the hell aren't they willing to provide that money directly to the public authorities through a taxation system where there is some kind of a public control over it? If you set up a private partnership with the corporation, you don't have the accountability built in that you do through a publicly elected board of education. I think that corporations are worried about the quality of

education that their employees are having to look for the answers and ought to be willing to pay through the tax system to improve that system.

Let me give you a parallel example. Right there across the river less than a mile away, they have a system of health care that is so much, much better in Canada than it is in the United States. It is funded primarily through the taxes which the big corporations pay. We were just doing a story for Solidarity magazine comparing health care in the U.S. and health care across the river in Canada. We interviewed a UAW member in Canada whose son was born with spinabifida and who has had hundreds of thousands of dollars of health care bills paid for completely by the system. If that happened over here with one of the fifty-one or sixty million Americans who don't have insurance or are underinsured, they would go bankrupt and let me tell you that is one of the advantages for industry in Canada right now.

We have auto companies who operate on both sides of the border. The costs of labor are much less in Canada for General Motors or Chrysler or Ford because they don't have to pay the health insurance premiums that are paid here which can amount to consideration around this whole question of accountability. In trying to create better educational opportunities and better educational results has got to be a system in which those of us who are parents and those of us who are corporate presidents and who want our kids to grow up with a good education or who want our employees to be well educated have to understand that it is not a job that you can do by

yourself. It has to be an accountable collective and that collective in this country has historically been boards of education and certainly they have done a bad job in many, many areas and we are not getting the kind of quality education that we deserve and our kids deserve.

The dropout rate is tremendous. The whole scandal this weekend in Detroit about faked grades at one of the high schools just speaks of a real serious problem. The way you solve that problem I think is through providing more money through instituting the kinds of programs that the AFT was trying to institute in the 1970's. The More Effective Schools Program, Dave Selden's Twenty-Twenty Program providing enough resources and those resources have to be funneled through an accountable system. Even though we have let boards of education get away without enforcing that kind of a system, I think it is still much, much superior than putting the control of educational finance in the hands of a so-called corporate school cooperation program of some kind where there isn't accountability.

You look at Ford and General Motors and Chrysler how accountable are they to the community? At the first chance they get, they run off to exploit poor Mexican workers where they can pay them eighty cents an hour and make their product much, much cheaper than they can here. That is not being accountable to the community to throw twenty-nine thousand workers out of jobs as General Motors is doing. I want accountability and as bad as the system has performed in this country, I think that elected

boards of education and elected bodies are much more accountable than corporations.

I think that what the collective bargaining movement of the 1960's and early 1970's promised was an opportunity for teachers to use the bargaining process to win greater professional control over such things as class size, over such things as curriculum materials and ending of racism in textbooks and issues which were important then which are important now. I think that there has got to be the continuing kind of commitment to working with the community. That AFT resolution back in 1970 talked about the need for community input into the educational process, but the need for teacher input at the same time.

I think that the one worry that I would have though is that the teaching profession not become an elite profession like doctors and the American Medical Association have become. In our society where doctors have assumed so much power in terms of licensing and in terms of professionalism, that they have become a class apart from the people that they are supposed to serve. I don't think most teachers are elitist. Most teachers are going to work with their students, with their parents and with the community, and I hope that that kind of approach continues. I would really hate to see the day where we created an elite profession among teachers as we have in the medical profession.

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