Sandra Feldman August 1986

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Q: -- This interview taking place on August 5, 1986 in New York City.

A: Well, I think that one of the most telling and important things about me is that I grew up a poor kid in Coney Island. The grandparents who were important to me were my maternal grandparents, because they lived there also, in fact for a time we lived with them. My paternal grandparents were shopkeepers, they owned a candy store right across the way from (Neutrick?) High School in Brooklyn, and it was a small little candy store. But they were not too thrilled with my father marrying my mother, and they really were not as central to my life, because we just didn't see them as much. We used to see them sometimes, you know, on family occasions. But my maternal grandparents, we lived with them. We actually lived with them, and then we lived near them, and they were very, very central to my life, particularly my grandmother.

My -- they came from Romania, and they were poor. My grandfather was a fruit peddler. And when I was very little, he had a one of those pushcarts that you pushed through the streets, and he would push them through the streets of Coney Island, he worked very hard, all day long, very long hours, seven days a week. And ultimately got enough money to buy a horse. So then he had a horse and wagon. And he must have made enough money, or maybe it was just easy in those days, but they actually bought a house. They owned a house in Coney Island. 3110 Neptune Avenue. (laughter) I'll never forget it, the address. And they lived in the basement of it, and they rented out the two upstairs, and it was a dark, dank basement that they lived in. But they rented out the two upstairs apartments, and he peddled his fruit. Now my grandmother -- my grandfather was a peasant, total peasant. He was illiterate. He couldn't read or write, knew nothing about what was going on in the world. He read the Jewish paper, but that was it. No, he didn't read it, I mean, he read -- he listened to the -- did he read? I don't think he read the paper.

He was illiterate. He couldn't read or write at all, because my aunt, I have an aunt, who I'll get to later, who was sort of a role model for me, who was away -- went away to college and never came back, and she used to write, and she used to try to get her father to write to her, but he just couldn't. He just couldn't write to her. He was a sort of a blustery, lovable teddy bear, gruff man. Peasant type.

My grandmother -- they met here, by the way, although they came from the same town in Romania, Yassa (sp?). My grandmother was a whole different story, because although she was not formally educated, she is very smart. Very interested in all sorts of things, and what was happening in the world. She taught herself to read and write in English, to read and write in Hebrew, and she could read and write in Romanian. And I remember that she used to read Edgar Allan Poe, she always had a lot of books around, and she was very, very sort of ambitious for herself, intellectually. And she lived a very hard life. She had about eight kids. Only about five survived. My grandmother exercised a lot of influence on me, because she also was sort of a surrogate mother, because my mother was emotionally and mentally handicapped. Never completed school, was really sick all her life, and really shouldn't have had children. She wasn't able to take care of children, and in effect, I became my mother's mother, you know, as soon as I was old enough to do so. But my grandmother maintained a steady -- you know, she was there all the time. And so she was very important to me, and she was a very remarkable woman, who somehow was able to be in control of a very complex and difficult world. And I think she was a very important role model to me. Now, they were not at all political. They were not religious. They were very wedded, culturally, to being Romanian Jews, but that was it. And their lives were very circumscribed by the family. And there was a lot of unhappiness in the family.

Now my mother, I guess because of her, how she was, really, her illness -- really couldn't get anything together, so that my childhood was extremely disintegrated. And, you know, I just really didn't get taken care of much. I had to take care of myself, and then I had to take care of my sister and my brother when they were born. And we were very, very poor, and I was very acutely conscious of being poor, and I did not like it. I was ashamed of it, and I was hurt by it, and I also was acutely conscious of being

surrounded by a lot of poor people. Now, how I was conscious of that, I don't know, except I think I -- I knew I didn't feel happy, and it was not only from being poor, because a lot of poor people will tell you they didn't know they were poor, and they were happy, and they had, you know, a wonderful time.

I had a very unhappy childhood, for a whole host of reasons, having mostly to do with the problems that my mother had. Now, when I started school, that was a tremendous step for me. I remember going to kindergarten. I remember vividly my first day of school, being taken there by my mother, and all the other kids crying, and I was so happy to be in school. I was delighted to be in school, was absolutely in awe, and just totally so delighted to be there. So school opened up whole worlds to me, because the school in Coney Island -- I lived in Coney Island in a very poor neighborhood, a very poor block. But a few blocks away was a community called Seagate, which still exists, which was the middle-class, working class community. Which was surrounded by a gate, and locked, and had a security guard at the door. (laughter) So that the rabble, on our side, couldn't get in unless they had a reason to be in there. The class I was in, all the kids were from Seagate except me. I was the only kid from the other side of the gate, from the Coney Island side of the gate. I learned an awful lot, not just from school, but from my classmates. I became friends with some of them, I went to their houses, I saw how people lived in sort of a normal, regular way. Kids had their own rooms, they had all kinds of things. Their parents behaved in a whole different manner from what I was used to. And, of course, my real friends were the kids on the block, most of whom came from, you know, also very difficult and tough situations. But the kids I went to school with opened up a whole other world to me, and then so did books. They became, really lifelines to me, books.

I immediately started loving to read. I did not know how to read before I went to school. I learned how to read in school. I was very encouraged by my teachers, I guess I was smart. (laughter) And I was smart. I remember vividly a second-grade teacher who bought me books and who gave me prizes for being the top reader in the class, and that sort of thing.

I think that I developed a sense of injustice then, early on, in the gut. Because I could see that where I lived, there were a lot of poor people, and a lot of bad things, and I could see that there were other places where things were a hell of a lot different, and it wasn't that those people were so terribly different from us. And so I had a very strong sense of wanting to change things.

Now my father grew up in a family that was sort of like those Seagate families. It was a lower-middle-class family, which, as I said before, really didn't have very much to do with us, because they were terribly unhappy when he married my mother. And he became a milkman, and he did not like being a milkman. And that meant he slept all day and he went to work at night. So I didn't see him a lot. But my father also encouraged me, and when he saw that I was interested in books, he began buying me books. And he used to read a lot. He would read -- I remember he was an avid reader of Nero Wolfe, you know, and mysteries, and he had a whole big collection of Reader's Digest condensed books, and he started buying me books. And he started encouraging me, as I did well in school, and it was interesting.

I suffered a lot in school. For example, on assembly days, when you had to have a white blouse, that was traumatic for me, because I wasn't sure I could have a white blouse. Whether one would get cleaned and ironed. Unless I did it myself. If I could manage to do it myself, but I couldn't count on my mother doing it. I had holes in my socks, that's what I was afraid -- I don't know if you ever had a hole in your sock, but when you try to pull the sock down so the hole doesn't show, you know. So I was acutely aware of being of a very different -- I guess we didn't know about class then, but, coming from a very different kind of home from the other kids in my class.

Now, as a milkman, my father belonged to the Teamsters Union, and he religiously attended union meetings. I don't know whether he was committed to the union. I don't think it was -- it certainly wasn't ideological, or whether it was required. It might have been required. I had the feeling it was -- when it was a union meeting time, well, you know, you had to go to the union meeting. And he also was extremely patriotic. And he was a peculiar mixture,

because he was very much for the union, and very much a working man, even though he was resentful and I think also felt that he could have done something more, and somehow circumstances were such that he didn't, because he was a bright man, and probably could have gone somehow into something else if he hadn't gotten married and started having kids right away. And he also was very -- pro-American. At least he fed -- he inculcated that in me. And so I had this very odd -- I developed this very early, a feeling of what a great country this is, a very strong feeling of patriotism, because my father was someone that I looked to, and also a feeling like there was a terrible, terrible amount of injustice all around me.

I used to read everything I could get my hands on, about how people were and how you were supposed to be, and school, as I said, was extremely important to me, and to this day I am passionately committed to schools, because I know, from who I am, that without public schools, kids like me have no chance at all, and may not make it anyway. There are plenty of kids who drop off the edge. But at least that was there, and I had that opportunity. I had everything going for me.

I might have had a -- not a very good family situation, but I was very well loved, and I was also given a lot of responsibility, because my mother was not capable herself, able herself, of doing what needed to be done. I really became a surrogate mother to my younger sister and my younger brother, and my, kid brother sometimes to this day will call me Ma (laughter) inadvertently, you know? So I had a lot of responsibility, and I think it was good for me. As I got older, and still sort of felt this dichotomy between tremendous loyalty and feeling of patriotism to the country, and feelings also of a lot of people really getting the shaft, because I could see it with my own eyes.

I started becoming someone who wanted to write, at a very young age, and I was writing short stories in the sixth grade, and in high school I got the creative writing award at James Madison High School. And I think I -- sort of tended to go into sort of an artistic, literary, bohemian direction. When I did, I was interested, in politics, but I was confused. I had no guidance, I had nobody pointing

me in any particular direction. What I did, I was looking for some way to have an effect, to make changes. I really, I don't know, just came at it, did whatever. This background, I think, made me feel very strongly that life wasn't going to be too meaningful unless you made changes in the world.

Now, when I got into Brooklyn College, and thank God for free tuition, because I never would have gone to college. I got to Brooklyn College in 1956. And I was the only -- by the way, I was the only person in my family to go to college. The only other person, I think I said a little bit earlier, my grandmother's younger daughter, an aunt of mine, somehow out of that whole big family also was the only one in her family got to college, somehow. And she went on to be social worker, but she moved away. But she and I had a great correspondence, and she was a big role model for me too, someone who had gone to college. You know, she exposed me to things. When she would come in on vacation, she would take me to New York. I remember when I saw Manhattan for the first time, what a thrill that was. I'll never forget it, coming over on the BMT, over the Brooklyn Bridge, over the Manhattan Bridge.

But when I got to Brooklyn College, I went immediately to the literary crowd, because I wanted to be a writer. And in among the literary crowd were some people who were active in politics at Brooklyn College, some people who were in the Eugene V. Debs Club at Brooklyn College. And they were very interesting people, because they were interested in literature, they knew a lot about it, they were very smart, some of them were also involved in the student newspaper, and they had a great point of view. Their point of view was that this society had to be changed, but they weren't Communists. I knew about Communists and I had rejected being a Communist very early on, because of my father's patriotism. Even though a lot of the things they said, you know, sounded awfully good, but I said, "Look, you know, I'm for America." So how could you be for America and also be Communist? It wasn't, -- those two things just didn't go together for me. Now, these people in the Eugene V. Debs Society, they made a lot of sense. Because, said they, "We're for socialism, we're for justice and equality and freedom, and we also think that America is a lot better than the Soviet Union." And with all of its faults and all of its problems -- they had,

they called themselves Third Camp Socialism, they were neither for the west nor for the east, but they liked the west a little better. And I liked the west a lot better. And just liked what they were saying. And I liked them. So that's how I got involved in politics. I joined the Eugene Victor Debs Club at Brooklyn College, which of course led to involvement in the Young Socialist League, and that's where I met Max Shachtman, who was a mentor of mine, and I was part of -- I never actually joined the Young Socialist League, but I did go to all their meetings, and then just at that time, that 1957-1958, they merged, the Independent Socialist League, the Shachtmanite group, merged with this Norman Thomas Socialist Party, and the Young Socialist League merged with the YPSL, the Young Peoples Socialists League, and I joined the Young Peoples Socialists League and became active in it.

Now, I was very drawn to Shachtman and to the Shachtmanites and to socialism, really out of the gut. I mean, it was an intellectual commitment, obviously, and an intellectual involvement as an ultimate thing, but I wanted to do something about poverty, and about poor people, and about working people getting a better shake, and I really wanted to do something about changing the world for the better. And here were these people, led by Shachtman, who were passionately and totally committed, and they were very smart, to strengthening trade unions, and building trade unions, and -- in fact, they taught me, really, about trade unions, because I didn't know anything about unions. I knew my father belonged to the union, and he went to the union meetings, but they made the connection for me. They made me see what the role of trade union is and was in a free society, before I had ever understood it. They had a vision of a just society, of a socialist society, which had its underpinnings in democracy. Which led them to reject the Soviet Union and the Soviet form of Communism, and this made -- it just clicked. It made a lot of sense to me. Now, I mean, we had endless debates over all sorts of esoteric ideological points, but the basic philosophy of being for freedom and justice, and rejecting what a lot of people on the left were talking about in terms of the Soviet Union representing freedom and justice -- which I, in my gut, knew was not true, because my father had taught me that America was where it's at -- I was just very drawn to them. Of course, Max Shachtman himself is as extremely compelling personality, probably the most brilliant person I have ever encountered, and could speak for hours in an

enthralling way on political subjects, and it was also -- he was a great teacher. Max was a great teacher. He was very, very interested in literature. He knew lots about art. He was a horticulturist. He was into music. He was an all-around interesting guy, and of course his wife, Yetta, was someone that I became very, very close to. And she, too, is a very smart person who had a very interesting life. Of course, both of them had been so much more involved in struggle than I had been, except in terms of my own personal struggle. They'd been involved in some very interesting history, in terms of -- God, I mean, we could talk for hours about world history. (laughter) You know, the Communist movement and the Trotskyist movement and the break from that. And all the other people who I was involved with, at least my generations, people whom I'm friends with to this day. Because now what happened was, we spent a number of years in the Socialist party, and then the Socialist party became the Social Democrats USA, which is an organization which continues to exist today, of which I am a member. And of course there's been lots and lots of movement, philosophically and ideologically, from the early days, but it was, I think, it all had a certain consistency. Maybe there were specific positions that were taken then that we wouldn't take now, and that sort of thing, but the underlying basic beliefs, I think, are fairly consistent. Basic to my beliefs, from that time, from the moment I started having clear and consistent beliefs, was a belief in the important role of the labor movement. Well, I knew, of course, from firsthand knowledge, without ever having intellectualized it, that it was the union that fought for, you know, a few cents more on the hour when my father worked. But I got educated at the Eugene V. Debs Society at Brooklyn College, really, about what unions mean in a free society, and what they mean to working people, and the importance of having that collective voice, and the absolute necessity and urgency of having the ability to freely associate with each other in order to do something about your working conditions and about your rates of pay as workers, so how else could you do it but through unions? And the ultimate progressive nature of that, in terms of how it helped redistribute the wealth in the society, because as unions fought for more and workers got more for their labor, there was a shifting to a more equal distribution. At least I believed that that was -- and I think it's true. Imperfect as it is, that at least it has been true.

Today, as we sit here (laughter), in 1986, one has to worry an awful lot about what's happening to the labor movement. But certainly, in terms of the role that labor has played in this country and throughout the free world, if there's been any counterbalance at all to the absolute tyranny of wealth, it's been labor, and organized labor. And plus, unions have played a very important role in the daily lives of people. Unions are caring organizations. By their nature, by their definition, they have to be. So that they provide all kinds of services, and a forum, and a family, in so many ways, for workers who belong to them. I mean, just look at unions like the ILGWU and the kinds of activities and, you know, of course not to mention the UFT. And many others. Not all, but many, many, many unions, which so -- I became a believer in unions.

When I graduated from college and I started doing some substitute teaching -- this was in 1960, and obviously the UFT was in the throes of getting itself organized, but I was not thinking about that. I really wanted to be a writer, and I was all involved in political things, and I was all involved as the civil rights movement began to grow and burgeon, and I had met Bayard Rustin at Brooklyn College at the Pilgrimage for Integrated Schools, and Bayard became a very important mentor of mine. And he, too, had come out of a socialist tradition. A different socialist tradition, which ultimately converged with Max's, but he also had a lot of those same ideas, and plus of course he was a leader of the civil rights movement, which I believed was the most compelling problem of that time and something that you had to be involved. If you were going to make change, if you were going to fight for a better world, and if you were going to be involved in having some control about -- over what your life was going to be like, your own personal life, which was very important to me, and you wanted to live in a better world, and you wanted the world to be better because of that, or for all sorts of other reasons, you had to be involved in the civil rights struggle. So I got a little involved in that.

I substitute taught here and there, but mainly I worked in the movement. I became very active in New York CORE, Harlem CORE, Congress of Racial Equality, and I was co-chairman of the employment committee. We were organizing, at that time, to integrate the building trades, and we were

sitting on cranes, and we were throwing ourselves in front of steamrollers, and we spent the whole summer sitting in at City Hill once, one year, one of those years. And, you know, we were generally supporting all of the integration activities. For one period, while we were very involved in the Route 40 Freedom Rides down the whole East Coast through Maryland, trying to integrate Howard Johnson's, and I was on those, I'd been arrested, I was arrested in Maryland, and I've been arrested many times on demonstrations. And we really believed that we were going to make a better world, and that we were going to lick this thing, and it was going to -- and everything was going to be fine -- I was prepared to die, you know, it was that kind of thing. It was very, very passionate belief and commitment.

And, of course, then what happened, I mean, history has -- I mean you find anything out, you find out that individuals really can't control history, but then the struggle in the South turned into a struggle that had to be an economic struggle once the integration thing was won. And you got into the whole economic struggle, the political struggle, and it came north, and you know, I don't want to go through all of that, but we all no what happened in terms of the changes that took place in the civil rights movement, the bitterness that ensued, the development of nationalism, and New York CORE sort of ultimately crumbled. I mean, it split into different factions, and started getting into all sorts of fights as to whether whites could be involved or not, and I stayed in till the very last minute, and then suddenly there were -- it was the East River CORE, and we had a big sit-in on the Triborough Bridge. We started -- people started advocating things that I didn't agree with, that were getting more violent, and ultimately it was very hard to stay in that organization.

And when I started teaching -- well, what happened was, I guess that this was all in a very compressed period of time, between 1960 and 1963, and the summer of '63 was a very heady summer, because we were organizing for the March on Washington, and I was working very closely with Bayard at the same time I was involved in CORE activities, -- that march was very important, and a tremendous thing to be deeply involved in, as I was. Working with Bayard was a really great experience for me, because Bayard is brilliant, and so charismatic. And I could see him bring

order to a chaotic situation. I so admired the way that he operated, and the way that he thought, his thinking process. His ability to analyze things and also to explain them, and bring people along, was really very great. And Bayard encouraged me enormously.

(break)

A: Bayard, in addition to being a mentor, and someone that I looked up to as a political leader, also became a very good friend, and someone who I identified with on a personal level, because he had achieved such great heights as a person, and he was -- Bayard had been an antique curator. He knew everything about Gothic and Renaissance art. And he also, in addition to all kinds of other art, African art, but he also was a lover of great music and a reader of books, and someone who could really -- he could blow your mind. Intellectually, he was incredible. And also could get really down, which was good for me, because basically I'm the working class girl, you know. So I felt like I identified with him on a whole lot of different levels, and always loved him and respected him very, very much. Well, right after the March on Washington, I had to get a job. (laughter) I really was sort of living hand-to-mouth. I was married all this time, by the way, I guess I should mention that. Because I had gotten --

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A: -- very sick, and he's now in a nursing home, unfortunately, it's very sad. But he and I were active together in the movement, he much more than I. Much more than I. So I had to get a job. I went out and taught, and I, got to this school -- I had taught before. I had been a substitute teacher, a regular substitute for a few months, and I'd done some per diem substituting and I'd sort of been teaching as a substitute during this period, but I took a regular job, and -- right after the march on Washington, at PS34 Manhattan. And I got all involved in teaching, because now I had a regular class of my own, and I was ready, I think, to teach. I had never meant to be a

teacher, but it was there, and it seemed to me something one could do that was in the tradition of being helpful and useful in life. I had worked for a while, also, with a freelance editor that was OK. It was sort of what I considered more in my line of work. (laughter) But I didn't like that world at all. It was a very cutthroat world, where money was the most important thing. And you know, I thought that working with kids would be good. I always loved kids, and I thought I'd be a good teacher, and of course I did become a very good teacher.

Now, I taught -- this was in 1963 at PS34, and this was a school on the Lower East Side, where the kids were very poor, black and Hispanic kids, slightly more Hispanic kids. And it was the beginning of the '60s, so that we were starting to get Title I money, and there were all sorts of programs that you could get involved in and help. But it was very, very tough. Very tough. Because the kids were so needy, and there was so much that we didn't know, certainly that I didn't know. But I was beginning to feel hopeful about it that we were going to be able to -- with more remedial reading help and with smaller classes -- we had, our class size was pretty decent in those years, because we had gotten all this Title I money.

This was a Title I school. But the school didn't have a union. There was no union there, and I knew that the teachers were organized. So I inquired about it, and there was one union member in the school, who was the assistant principal. (laughter) The only man, except for the principal, in the school. (laughter) So I went to him, and I said, "I want to join the union," and he was kind of surprised, you know, and I joined the union, and then I started talking to the other teachers about, you know, "How come you're not in the union?" It was interesting. Most of them just really hadn't thought about it, didn't care one way or the other, and a couple of them had been in the old Teachers Union. One in particular, Elle Whatman, kindergarten teacher, who was very influential in the school, had been in the old TU, and just had never joined the UFT after the TU dissolved. And yeah, there was a certain cynicism she had about the UFT, and certain resentment, because the UFT really sort of led to the demise of the TU.

And I remained active in civil rights activities during that time, for example, there was the Boycott for Integrated Schools, and I was the only person in the school who boycotted, and I picketed by myself. That was when I first met George Altomare. I didn't know who he was, but there were meetings in the basement of Reverend Galamison church in Brooklyn to organize the boycott. And I went to them, you know, because I wanted to be involved in that, and thought it was this madman there with this huge board with the cards on it, who afterwards I knew was George. I didn't know who he was then. But he sent people -- he was coordinating the picketing. And I was the only one in my school going out. And he sent people to keep me company, which was great. I guess some guys came from some nearby junior high school, because I had missed the first two strikes. I hadn't been teaching during those first two strikes. So this was, this was terrific, because he used the same (laughter, inaudible) to organize the Boycott for Integrated Schools, and that was a great experience.

I kept talking to the teachers about, having a union in this school, we have all kinds of problems we don't have, you know, we don't have this, we don't have that, and I spent a lot of time talking to the woman who had been a strong union member in the old TU. Because I thought if I could get her, that others would come along. If she could be convinced that the UFT was where she ought to be right now, that that was where --. And you had to be in the union. I mean, you didn't work on a job without being in a union, I knew that from my father. And, of course, from my philosophy. So I got her. I recruited her. And then I recruited a couple of others, then she started helping with the recruiting, and then, well, pretty soon we organized the school.

We had a union now, in the school. I think we had 99% of -- there was one holdout who I had to work on for a very, very long time, who I ultimately did bring into the union. But I also had to be everything (laughter) at that time, so that I ran for chapter leader, and I also was the delegate to the delegate assembly. Now ultimately, it didn't take long. It took about a year for me to get other people involved, and the interesting thing is that when I organized that one last holdout, she ran against me (laughter) for chapter leader, which was good, because I

thought that was great, you know, to have all that kind of activity.

And there were all sorts of dramas in the chapter, like who was going to take care of the coffee pot in the teachers' lounge, and cliques that would develop, and so on. But I started going to delegate assemblies. That was my first contact with the union, except -- that is actual, physical contact. The only contact I had before was through the mail with Abe Levine. When I had questions, I would write to the UFT, and I would get a letter back. I don't -it was like he delivered it himself, overnight. (laughter) You know, there would be an immediate response from Abe Levine, who was the elementary school vice president at the time. And it was great because I always had a million questions, and I guess that's how I found out that I really could take a training course as a chapter leader, and that I could get it information, and I could answer these questions myself. The first training course that I went to, here at union headquarters, was before the union was taking people away for weekends. They gave the course here at union headquarters, like a week of afternoons, and I took the course, and I enjoyed it, and I learned a lot, and it made me a much better chapter chairman, and I was going to delegate assemblies, and every now and then I might even get up and make a motion or something.

And in the school, I was building a chapter. Because I had had experience in the socialist movement, organizational experience, and there were always issues in the school. I don't remember now exactly what the issues were, but there were always, and always will be, issues on the job. And I concentrated on finding out what it was that the membership needed and wanted, and getting it done. And we also developed a much closer social relationship between and among the teachers than had existed before, when they were really sort of much more -- they were just working together, they were just not friends. We all became friends during that period of time. We did things together, and we worked on making the school better.

It was great, because you could -- I guess we all became conscious union members in those years, whereas before, I mean, I was interested in becoming a member of the union,

for the reasons that I've already talked about, but most of the teachers just never even thought about the union. Even though it existed, they knew it existed, they knew that they had a contract, they knew that that's what got them their salary, but they really weren't -- I mean, no one had asked them to join. No one had tried to organize them. And the union didn't have the resources to do it, I suppose. The union was not fully organized at that time. Even after it had negotiated two contracts, I guess, by then. So that it took someone to come in and organize, and that's what I did.

Of course it was great, once the union was there, once it was a presence in the school. What the union was about, was about bread and butter, and about basic needs. What salary step am I on? You know, how do I get my differential? What are these health benefits all about? How do I apply for them? And school issues, can the principal really make me do this or that, or do I have some recourse, or, how about if we wanted to organize, so use that room for the teachers, and so on and so forth, if we do it, and could we have a coffee pot, and could we get a refrigerator, and who's going to clean it -- you know, nitty-gritty school issues. Same issues I think that are in any shop. Any place of work. And it was certainly not ideological.

Of course, this was very different from what the union had been before it became a mass movement. Because before it became a mass movement, it was made up primarily of true believers, and not primarily of the average member we now have, who was in it for basic bread and butter reasons. It was made up of people who were in it to do something about the basic bread and butter, but who also saw the union as a vehicle to a whole new world, and a whole new order. And I think that one of the great things about the UFT is that its leadership has always kept it a believing union. And it isn't easy to do, when the union changes from a 2,000-member organization to a 60,000-member organization, and now it's a 93,000-member organization. And it becomes a huge mass organization. People are in it for very good self-interest reasons, and because they need to be in it, in order to make their working lives better. To maintain that organization -- and every union does this, more or less -- but this union had a special tradition, as one which had the basic value of solidarity and brotherhood

maintained, with the understanding that you're part of a larger movement, and that there are other things that are important as well, in addition to bread and butter. Certainly it's not as ideological, but in many ways, it's idealistic. Because, for example, now the discussions that we have about trying to improve the school system are very similar. When I read the union newspaper, I remember reading the old, I guess it was the original TU, 1916, the Dewey/Counts Teachers Union newspaper. And that paper was full of calls for sanitation in the schools, for health care in the schools, for smaller class sizes, for painting the physical plants, for all of the same things that I find myself demanding now. Things that are not -- that don't go into the pockets of the teachers. Money that -- teachers don't only want their salaries, they want the conditions that they work under to be good conditions. And that basic desire, which is a self-interest desire, goes way beyond self-interest, because it also involves the interest of the kids, and ultimately the best interest of society, to make the schools the best possible place. And a teacher's union which fights for better education and for better schools is a wondrous thing to behold.

Now, around this time the school is now organized and I was going to meetings, apparently, Al Shanker asked Tom Brooks, who was a labor historian, who was also a socialist and whom I knew from the socialist movement, to write a brief history of the UFT. And Tom Brooks had arranged, apparently, for the union to pay for some research to get done, so that he wouldn't actually have to do the research. And he asked me, since he knew I was a teacher -- I had not really been involved in the union, per se, except in my school, and except for going to meetings at the delegate assembly and some committee meetings, elementary school committee, couple of meetings, that sort of things -- but he asked me if I would be interested in doing the research on this little book, and they were going to pay the minimum wage per hour. So I thought that was a very interesting project, you know, an after-school job. And I agreed to do it. And that is how I got into -- that's why I remember the old Teacher Union newspaper, because I went to the public library, which had all this stuff, and read every -- I got so immersed and so involved and so interested in the history of this absolutely fabulous teacher union movement. And I must say that a large part of that pamphlet which ultimately came out "Towards Dignity" was actually written

by me. (laughter) Ghost-written by me. I suppose that's something that could be in the archives.

It was this activity which really got me involved with the people in the leadership of the union, whom I really hadn't known. I never met before. I only saw Al Shanker when he was chairing the delegate assemblies, and Abe Levine when he was chairing meetings. I really didn't know any of these people. So of course, after I did all this reading, I had to go and interview people about the early years. And I made appointments, and I started going through each person. I think I started -- must have started with Al, because I needed his advice on who else to talk to. Of course, when you're interviewing, you end up getting to -- and here I was, a young teacher who would organize this school, they had never seen hide nor hair of me, plus I'm out of the socialist movement (laughter), which they must have been surprised, because I had never, you know, been part of this in-group. I was just off doing other things. And I sort of got to know people, and I got more involved in the union that way. I started attending more meetings of different committees and groups that were meeting at the union headquarters.

The people who were running the union then were very interesting people. Well, of course there was Al Shanker, and Dave Witties, who was a warm, ebullient, interesting man, who was very interested in me. (laughter) He -- I had the feeling that he felt he had discovered something here, you know, and I remember he asked me a million questions. I'm supposed to be asking him questions (laughter), he's asking me questions, and he was a very special character. And Jules Kolodny, of course, who was -- who ultimately -- I became very, very fond of, and who was very, very informative and informed, intellectual. And lots of the others, of course George and Abe, and there were people then around, John O'Neill, and then the people on the staff, and who I ultimately got to know because I became a staff member, is what happened.

The people who were leading the union at that time, the Kolodnys and the Witties and Alice Marsh and Abe and George and Dan Sanders and -- although he, you know, I guess George and Dan Sanders and Al were really a different generation. But the older people who had really gone through the struggle with the old TU, who'd been through so many years of trying to build something -- well, all of

them, but especially the older people were very -- they were an awesome group, in a lot of ways. They were very committed, and they were very warm. They were very -- I mean, the union was really like a family. And once you became part of it you came to sort of get engulfed in this warm bath of caring, because these were people who cared. They cared about everything. They cared about other people very, very much. They cared about -- by the way, this is a tradition which I think the union still has. I mean, this is still very much a part of our union. Everybody rallies to somebody who needs help. But that was I guess what struck me then. They built that kind of tradition in this union, and they cared passionately about the issues, and the union was everything to them. It was their entire life. They lived it, breathed it. And I think it is important to remember that they never got paid a cent. Never got paid. In fact, they kept it alive with their money, and their time, and their energy, and their effort, and their belief. They were a very, very special group of people, and they built a very wonderful organization.

Q: This is Renee Epstein. My interview with Sandra Feldman is continuing on August 6, 1986, in New York.

A: At one point during that period, a job opened up. They had a very small staff, and they were in a small office on Park Avenue South and 23rd Street, and they had a few people working, basically handling grievances and doing everything. And someone -- I believe Al Shanker suggested that I apply for this field representative position, which I went home and thought about, because I had just gotten my high school English license, and I wanted to teach English, because that was in line with my goal of becoming a writer. So I wasn't sure if I wanted to do this, because I was -- this was in the spring, and I was going to finish out my term at school, and I was going to look for a high school English teaching job in the fall. So I thought about it, and I talked to my husband and to my friends about it, and I decided, well, I could always teach. Let me see if this is something that I want to do, because I could always use my license, I could always go into the schools, if I don't like this. Because I wasn't sure that this was going to be my cup of tea, handling grievances and complaints and problems and that sort of thing. Because certainly, as a teacher, I knew I would stay active in the union. Plus, you had to -- it was a big hassle. You had to resign, but

the union was very small then, and yeah, you weren't going to make any more money than you made as a teacher, which didn't really matter to me at all, but you had to resign, and it's always a big hassle, get yourself reinstated. Because ultimately, when I -- what happened was I did have to take another examination, et cetera to get reappointed. So you were giving up the years that you'd put into this.

I decided to apply for it. I went to an interview. It was a committee, Sol Levine, Jules Kolodny, and Marty Robenthal, who I guess was high school vice president at that time, and they interviewed me, I guess for about a half an hour. And I'm quite sure that the decision was made (laughter) in the president's office, really. So I took this job as field representative. And this was a job basically helping the chapter leaders enforce the contract, teaching them about the contract, handling grievances, and attending meetings on behalf of the union. Now, when I say that I was sure the decision to hire me specifically was made in the president's office, I think it ought to be clarified that what I am saying is the final decision on exactly who was going to get the job, which of course is always a function of the chief executive.

But I know from, of course, lots of experience in the union, and I think it's just as -- it is just as true now as it was then, that the decision to establish such a position was made after considerable discussion by the officers. And I remember vividly my experiences in the union, terms of the way this organization functioned, which was of course not new to me, because I had experienced the way a democratic organization functions in the Young Peoples Socialists League. But there was so much discussion, the executive board, arguments, and I was really in awe. I started going to executive board meetings, which I had not attended before. Now, of course, the delegate assembly, which I had attended as a delegate, was a very interesting and democratic meeting. But the executive board, people would make long and brilliant speeches on the executive board. And they would argue ferociously with each other, and a vote would be taken, and sometimes votes were close.

The organization really did function by majority vote. Of course, a lot of authority was always in the office of the

president, as it should be, and the president basically led the governing of the organization, as still happens now. And I think over the years, the difference basically is not that wide. It's not that great a gap between then and now, except that over the years -- well, I'm just starting out, but over the years, Al developed so much credibility as a leader that he almost always was able to sway people to his opinion. But he had to do that. He had to make the arguments.

The kind of people who are in the leadership of this organization are people who have to be persuaded. At least, it's been that way. I think it's still that way. Sometimes I worry about where the union's going, and whether it's going to change tremendously, let's say after I'm gone whether I'm really such a transitional person in terms of having at least a toe in sort of the old world, or having had some contact with that tradition on my own, you know, having come to it on my own, not having come to it through the union. In that sense, I'm quite different from everybody else who's left here with me.

The fact that I had an independent involvement with a democratic socialist tradition when I came to the union -- and I came to the union basically because, as a teacher, as a worker, I needed a union, and I wanted a union, and I was committed to unionism -- there are people here who have come into contact with that tradition through the union, which is of course a very legitimate way. But there is a difference. There is a difference. I think there is a big difference between an organization that is small, the way the union was in the early years -- even when I came to it, it didn't have a huge membership, because the membership didn't really burgeon until the '68 strike and afterwards -- but even if you had several thousand people, they are the vanguard, those people, and they were very involved, and there was a close relationship between the leadership and the people who were activists in the union, and every member, practically, was an activist, in a sense. Which is very, very different from now, when the union is a mass organization and there are many, many people out there who are not at all conscious of the fact that there is a union, although you still have a group of a couple of thousand people who are the activists in the union, and who play a

very intimate role in terms of involvement with the leadership.

When I came to work for the union that year, -- because I remember vividly, I got to say this, the summer before I had the entire summer off. And that was the end of my teaching, and the beginning of my work on leave for the union, when I came to work in September, I of course needed a lot of orientation, which I got. I was very well trained by the people that I worked with. But what was interesting was that I also began to get asked to do some things that other people weren't asked to do, because I did have certain abilities. For example, I could write. So I was asked to do a lot of writing, whether it was to write to the membership or compose something that the president wanted to send to the membership, or to respond to a particularly difficult letter, or to work on a pamphlet or brochure. You know, there was no public relations department. And so that everybody did everything, and so I was often asked to do that sort of thing, and I was good at it, and I was asked to do it more and more, and then I began to get asked to represent the union in a variety of different forums, and work with groups, outside groups that I had contact with out of my own relationships previously, whether it was the civil rights movements or just being involved in politics, the kind of politics I was involved in.

END OF TAPE 1

A: -- the union at a time when so much was happening in society. You know, 1966, you had the changes that were taking place, which I talked about before, in the civil rights movement, which was sort of really disappearing, as it had been, and the advent of the Black Power movement, and nationalism in the black community, and the very beginnings of the call for community control. And that fall was when the IS 201 crisis happened. Now, IS 201 was a school which was being built in the, I guess, late '50s, early '60s, and the community there had been demanding an integrated school. The school was built in the middle of a totally segregated neighborhood. The board claimed that kids were going to come over, over the Queensborough Bridge or over some bridge, over the Triborough Bridge, to this

school in IS 201, and they were going to be able to integrate the school that way, and that of course was just hogwash. There was no way that that school was going to be an integrated school. They built a building -- it was a horrible building, totally windowless building, which -- you know, modern monstrosity, which sort of said "We're building a fortress here, against the outside world." And I think that the whole fight over trying to get an integrated school, which failed, led the people who were fighting for an integrated school into a very bitter fight for community control.

Now, I guess the early demands were for making the -- they wanted a black principal and a black staff, and control over the school. And I remember going up there with Al to meetings with this group, and efforts that were being made to -- and I guess all the officers were involved at that point in this. There were efforts to try to work out a compromise, because the staff there was totally integrated. It was really like 50% black staff. Principal was white, and he was someone who had recruited the staff and who was a very good educator, the staff respected him, Stanley Lisser. And there wasn't total unanimity, certainly, on the community side, and there was an effort to just try to make it a good school for the kids in that neighborhood who were going to go to it, and there were a lot of discussions about how to do that. Now, I mean, this history has been written and it's around and I don't go into it in detail, but I think that what happened there was, on the one hand -- well, there was finally an agreement to try to do an experimental project, in -- an experimental project in some form of community control or decentralization, and it was highly encouraged by Mario Fantini at the Ford Foundation, who led everybody to believe there was going to be a lot of money to make this school into something like a more effective school, more effective schools which had been pushed by the union earlier, were saturation programs where kids did very well in much smaller classes with clinical services. And there was a feeling that if we could do that, and it was governance of the school by a community board, that the combination of the additional resources and the ability of the professionals in the school to make it a more effective school, together with input from the community, could work.

Of course, what happened was the rug was pulled out from under when the Ford Foundation said "No, we're not going to give more money, we're not going to give any money to this thing, we really just want to see -- make an experiment in community power, community empowerment," and at the same time, when this started happening, out in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, a little movement started happening of the same kind. Now, what was interesting was that in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, we didn't really know what was going -- you have to remember that the union was a lot smaller. We were not -- we didn't have the system of district reps, of course, so the system wasn't decentralized itself. It was very central, so that you didn't always have -- you know, one of the things about decentralization is you do have a closer -- more of an ability to know what's going on in the system.

Then there was an article in The New York Post during this period, by Bernie Bard, a column by Bernie Bard or an article, which described a junior high school in Ocean Hill-Brownsville -- it did not name the school -- said that it was a school in terrible disarray, kids were running around the halls, that the halls were filthy and full of paper and crap and that the principal was a wino and that the school was out of control, and that there was a small community who was trying to take it over so that they could bring some good education to that school. On the day that that article appeared, Al got phone calls from the teachers in that school, saying, "How could you let them write this about our school?" and "You better come here and help us, because they're trying to take over our school." And of course, the school wasn't named, but they knew, you know that it was their school.

What Al did was, he sent me out there -- I remember this because it was my first experience of that sort. Now, I had been involved -- he really, of course, was the leader in the negotiations around the IS 201 thing, and I was sort of sitting at his side watching him operate. And so he sent me out there to a school meeting, and we talked about it before I went, and the position that, you know, that I was going to take, and I believed we should take and he agreed, is that if the school is in such bad shape, and if the principal is a wino, that we should not defend this wino principal, and that we should say to those teachers, "Look, there may be something that has to be done about

this school, and maybe we ought to work with the people who are saying that this is not a good situation." That was our attitude then. And we were trying to do it at IS 201 at the time. This was before the whole thing exploded into, you know, into the mess that it ultimately became. So I went out there, and there was a chapter meeting. The whole faculty was there, and here I was, this kid, and I had thought very carefully about what I was going to say, I made notes for myself.

I went there, and here's this angry group of junior high school teachers -- however, it was a very integrated group. It was junior high school 271. And I... made a speech. I think it was 271. I made a speech along those lines. I said, "Look." Well, actually, what happened first was they took me in to meet the principal. When I came into the building -- let me just go back, because I remember this vividly. I came into the building, the building was a mess. The kids were running around, the floors were filthy, and I went to the office and I met the principal, and the principal was clearly a wino, at least he looked that way to me. And I was sent up to where the faculty was waiting. I went up there, and here's this -- it was, very scary, I was nervous about it, but I was determined that the union would do the right thing in this thing. And so I had a talk with them. I said, "Look. I just walked into this building, and I know I can't make an assessment of the building, and I just met your principal, and I don't want to make allegations about anybody, because I don't know, but the point is, it's pretty obvious to the naked eye that this school could use a lot of improvement. You cannot deny that." And of course they couldn't, and they wouldn't. And I said, "Why don't we have this sub-committee that sits down and starts trying to work out a way to get around this conflict and to cooperate with people who, I hope, are out there who are well-meaning, who really want to see improved education?"

So we started -- they agreed to do that. It was a lot of discussion. I'm obviously capsulizing it. But they agreed to do that. A lot of the teachers, first of all, felt that since the major demand of this group was to get rid of the principal, that if they could get rid of a principal that way, by the demand of a community group -- they were right about this - that it wouldn't be too far behind that that

they would start demanding to get rid of certain teachers, and of course they were absolutely right. And so they were very wary of this group, and what it was demanding. And they had lived with this situation, you know, at that time, I guess expectations were low. I mean, they couldn't dream of getting out of this. They didn't come to the union and say, "Do something about my school," the way we do now, because we represent some power. At that point, the union really didn't have any power to make a change in a school like that. You know, there were schools were the union had big campaigns to clean them up. There had been, I'm sure, other people who were around at that time can talk about even walk-outs in particular schools because of the conditions of those schools. But usually, those were schools where there was a union leader in the building. And this was a school where there really was not. There was no union leadership in that building. They weren't really organized. I don't know what the membership was at that time in that building, but they only turned to the union at the point when they saw this in the newspaper, and they really got frightened and they didn't know who else to turn to.

So they were very correctly -- and certainly history has borne them out -- but they were correctly wary of this group that was making those demands. On the other hand, what was the solution to this? Because if the school was obviously just getting worse and worse, and the protest about it in the community was only going get bigger and bigger. So we talked quite a bit about it, and ultimately they agreed that there would be a sub-committee, and we would try to meet with the leaders of this group. There was a Catholic priest involved, Father Powis. There were parents of children, mothers, involved. I mean, it was not -- it was a group that was a legitimate group, even though they were very angry, and ultimately a lot of other people got into it who turned it into something that it hadn't started out being later on. But we started meeting there too, and started talking about doing the same kind of thing there as had been -- we modeled it basically after what happened at IS 201, and it was at a time when there was still hope that there could be a real cooperation and collaboration between the professionals in the community to share in the governance of the school, and to use that cooperation to get more resources into the schools that needed them so desperately. Because these schools really -

- see, these were both junior high schools, and the kids were really in need of an enormous amount of help that they weren't getting at that time. The classes were too large and there wasn't enough remediation, and I think also they just needed leadership and they needed better organization, which just didn't exist then, the whole system. I mean, there was something, I think, to the point that was being made by people who started calling for decentralization, that the system was unresponsive. It was terribly bureaucratic, much too centralized, that it was run by people who really had no sensitivity or connection to poor communities, and that poor communities did get short shrift in the school system. There's just no doubt about it at that time.

I certainly believed it, and the union was an idealistic organization that believed that poor communities should get more attention and more resources, and that's what led us into an effort to try to develop some sort of a compromise program. We didn't believe in community control, we didn't think that the professional educational decisions should be made by laypeople in the community. We felt always, throughout our history, that those decisions should be in the hands of the teachers, the professional staff. But we thought that we could work out compromises with people, and that we could separate the line between policy-making and implementation decisions that had to be made in the school. And of course, theoretically, I still believe that that's possible, and to a certain extent the decentralized system has done that. Of course, the policy-making is done by boards, and the implementation is done by supervisors that we're fighting now, part of a long fight that we've been doing for many, many years, but we're sort of on the verge now, I think, of a consensus that's happening in general, in education, that the teacher should have a lot more to say about what happens in the school, and that there should be professional decisions. But at that time, the issues were really joined by the whole historical moment, and the demand for community control, and for more black teachers as role models, and all of these demands were very, very threatening to the people that we represented.

So then, and of course these demands -- remember, we had the Bundy report that the Ford Foundation had sponsored, and they'd come out for really a total balkanization of the

school system, and here we were, building a union. And there was certainly a fear that this balkanization -- they were talking about hiring and firing in individual schools. You know, how do you -- and that would put us right back to square one, as a union. So there was a threat to the union, at that time, which had not yet really established itself. Now, maybe if we had been a strong, established union at that time, we could have -- we would have had a different response. We would have been responding from a position of power. But we were in the throes of growth, and a lot of the proposals that were being made were terribly threatening to us. The whole thing, of course, as it heated up and ultimately led to that agonizing, terrible strike in '68, was very, very difficult. It was for me personally, and it was very difficult for the union in general, because here -- this is a union that had always been on the side of the civil rights struggle. And suddenly, it starts getting attacked as racist. And we were not racist. This union is not racist. Now, it was impossible, however, to convince people in the black community that the union was right. Except for Bayard Rustin, or Velma Hill, people who had broader views and who came at it with kind of tradition, and who -- or A. Philip Randolph, people who understood trade unionism and believed in trade unionism, understood that we were right. But people who didn't have that tradition, and only saw the union as another institution in society that was in their way, or trying to block them, felt that the union's opposition to the demands that were being made, and the opposition to total community control, was basically a racist opposition. It was not. Now, I'll tell you something, though, I do believe during that period, during the worst of it, that there was a lot of racism on the part of a lot of people. Not in the top leadership of the union, but as it burgeoned and as it got bigger, it brought out, I think, the worst instincts on both sides. And during that period -- well, it was horrifying for me. I never wavered in my loyalty to the union or my belief that the union was right. I had a lot of differences with Al on -- not principle differences, but on strategy, on language. I remember having a tremendous fight with him once on the use of certain slogans that we were putting on picket signs, and I didn't think we should use. I remember particularly one was "End Mob Rule", that Al came up with, and I thought that was horrendous. Because, one of the things that we were saying was that -- when the demands started getting really ugly, like, "Get rid of white

teachers," and "We don't want them," and that sort of stuff -- we were saying, "Well, you know, this was the converse of what whites did to blacks in the South," and I think that was rather simplistic. I thought that what was happening here was complex and complicated in its own right, and had its own -- and it wasn't so -- I mean, it was a good point to make, in the speech, and there was a certain parallel meaning that could be drawn out of it, and certainly you had to keep certain standards and keep certain logic. But it wasn't exactly the same, because the whole northern situation was a very different one from what had existed in the South, in a wide variety of ways. And the "Mob Rule", which sort of alluded -- which definitely alluded to Bull Connor and to the to the whites who would try to keep youngsters out of schools in the South, and comparing, however misguided and wrong, the community control movement to that, I thought, was really wrong.

Now -- and also there were big differences within that, you know, because once that thing got started, you started getting the involvement of gangsters and hoodlums. You had Sonny Carson, who was really basically a hustler running a protection racket out in Brooklyn. You had people who really had murder on their minds. And then you had, you know, the whole black community, which had very legitimate grievances. And it was a very big hodgepodge, and I felt that -- all along I felt that total and complete confrontation was wrong.

Now, in those arguments, I used to always run to Bayard. Because Bayard was steadfast in his support of the union, and by the way, I think he has said that initially -- I mean, he had trouble, in his own mind and his own feelings, and he said that he went to Randolph, and Randolph said, "Bayard, the union has to come first." That you have to support the trade union, even if it makes mistakes. Ultimately, you have to be on the side of an institution that is going to be the ultimate reason why this whole system can survive. But on arguments like should we use "End Mob Rule" as a slogan, when I argued with Al -- and I mean, I was just a rookie, you know. I had just got there (laughter), really. I started with the union in '66, this was '68. I had been promoted, but -- no no, not yet. Not till after the strike. But I had been promoted in terms of --I was more involved in the -- I was a field

representative, but I was much more involved in what the leadership was doing than others who had that same position, because I was helping to, I guess, represent the union in a wide variety of ways, and I had a particular ability to do that. But I was against -- I mean, I remember that vividly as a particular fight that we had, and I went to Bayard, and he agreed, and we argued with Al, and Al was determined this was right.

Now, I can't second-guess his decisions, because I can tell you this, that it has a very -- I'd been executive director, I had been executive director of this union before I became president, and I've been president now for six months. And I can tell you that there is a very, very big difference between being even in a top secondary position, that I was in, and being the president of the union. So certainly, at that time, a kid, you know, working for the union as I was, just for a couple of years -- I really couldn't second-guess Al. Al, I think, had much greater sensitivity to the membership, and being the person who was ultimately answerable to the membership, I have to assume that he understood better than I what he was doing, even though I disagreed. And I still think that it was the wrong slogan to use. I don't know what I would have done in his shoes.

The whole conflict, ironically, of course -- although for so many years to come, it had created this terrible chasm between the black community and the UFT, which is very painful for most of the leadership of the UFT. All of it, I would say. And for most of the membership of the UFT. But the conflict built the union, at the same time. I think -- well, I want to say that the union took the position that it did, it had to absolutely take that position. There is no way that this union could have survived as an organization if it would have allowed those people to be forcibly dismissed, aside from the fact that it was totally the wrong thing to do. And of course, that history is out there. But I mean people were trying to dismiss teachers they didn't even know. They had the wrong Goldberg. (laughter) The charges against one teacher were saying that he couldn't keep control of his class, that the kids were throwing chairs at each other, and it was a classroom that the chairs were bolted to the floor. I mean, and Judge Rivers' decision, which I hope certainly

becomes part of any history that anybody ever does of that conflict, was total exoneration of the union, as far as I'm concerned. So that the support of the membership, and the growth of the membership -- because here was the union, taking on -- what more basic struggle could a union take on, but to fight for the jobs of its members? And against such a formidable opposition. The whole society, it seemed, was against us. Everyone in New York was against us, it seemed, except for the ordinary average person out there. The entire liberal establishment of New York City. All the newspapers, God, the New York Times. Every goddamn article started with "The conflict between the predominantly white, Jewish UFT and the black community...", which of course was not what it was about. It was really a trade union struggle to prevent people from getting fired. And it got caught up in everything else that was happening in the society at that time.

You've got to remember, this was 1968, this was Chicago, this was, this was the whole fight over Hubert Humphrey. This was -- I mean, there was so many other things going on during that time. And in the black community, the people that I knew in the black community were totally against the union, and I think wrongly so, but paralyzed in terms of being able to think any other way. Well, first of all, how did they know what was really happening? Because what they knew about what was happening was what they read in the papers, basically. I'm talking about teachers that I talked to, whom I knew, people who I had known in CORE, who I still maintained a friendly relationship with, but who were obviously in every demonstration against the union, were taking part in it. And there was a tremendous amount of racial solidarity, I would say on their part, in terms of being against the union, almost as much as there was union solidarity on the union side. And for those people who, let's say, who were in the union, and who found this extremely agonizing and difficult to stand up to that, took enormous strength if you were black. Because the pressure was horrendous. The accusations of disloyalty, of Uncle Tom-ism, of opportunism, it was just terrible. It really was. And I guess one of the things that I fought with Al about - because -- Al was brilliant, Al of course is an absolutely brilliant orator -- but during those times when he defended the union on television, in particular, and he was brilliant, and I think made the best case that could possibly be made, but he really -- I think that there were

things that he could have said that would have maybe helped people who wanted to be with the union, be with them. I don't know, maybe not. Maybe not. But I felt that way at the time. I could have been wrong. Maybe it was hopeless. Looking back on it, I think I was probably wrong. But at the time, I felt that we could have reached out more, or we could have tried more. But the thing was so confrontational, so polarized. And, of course, as far as I was concerned, you know, I was ready to lay down my life for the union. I mean, I was passionately involved in it, as passionately involved in this as I had been in the civil rights struggle before. I mean, it was -- for me, I mean, I was convinced the union was right. I might disagree on particular formulations or a particular slogan or that sort of thing, but there was no doubt in my mind that the union was, contrary to popular analysis, it was the union that was fighting for a liberal tradition and for democracy and for what you needed to have in a free society, in terms of the ability to defend due process, as against what I thought was basically a reactionary call for community control, and for making those kinds of decisions on the basis of divisions in color. So that there wasn't any question about that, but I also felt that there were, you know, there was a tremendous amount of misunderstanding and misguided people on both sides. And even today, people whom I have friendships with, people who I -- let's say if somebody like Milton Golambosun, who was a big no-no at the time -- you know, I mean, he was the pastor of a church in Brooklyn, and he ultimately became a member of the Board of Education, and we ended up having as a union a relationship with him, but before that, he was a leader of this, you know, onslaught. I mean, not just against the union and the strike, but don't forget there was at the same time going on a big effort to change the Board of Education, change the way it operated.

(break)

A: And today, when you talk to people -- when I talk to people, like Milton Golambosun or Basil Patterson or, people who were in positions of responsibility at the time and who were totally opposed to the union, I just wonder what -- how different it would have been, if the union had been more established, and if it had had relationships

already, on a different basis... you know, the fact that I really think that the media had a tremendous part in --

END OF SIDE A, Tape 2

A: -- education -- well, all institutions in society at that time. And there was tremendous change, the whole poverty program and the onslaught against what had existed before, and the efforts to take over communities in a wide varieties of ways, was going on. And the union got caught up in all of that. It was a period of time, you sort of wonder if there wasn't some sort of stark inevitability to all of this. On the other hand, as a person who always believed very strongly that you could control your life, and that you could work very hard and ultimately make things happen in the direction that you wanted them to happen, and I was always feeling that maybe there was something more that we could have done to avoid this. Ultimately, what I ended up getting very involved in, after the strike, was rebuilding those relationships. And I think that it's terribly unfortunate that, aside from Bayard and A. Philip Randolph, that there really was no strong leadership in the black community, at least that the union could go to -- I'm talking about at the local level in New York City -- who would stand up and say, "Hey," you know, to its own constituency, "this is wrong. Let's back up for a minute. Let's see if we can't do something about this." But it wasn't being done on either side. I think there would have been much more willingness on the union's side to bridge that tremendous gap, even during the entire crisis.

Look at the role the mayor played. Look at the role the superintendent of schools played, the people who were supposed to be in positions of authority, who abdicated totally and who caved in, out of their own, I think, really condescending and patronizing attitudes towards these demands. I mean, their own guilt, whatever it was. One of the things that the union didn't have was -- didn't have the luxury of, was liberal guilt. I mean, the union was fighting for its life, for its existence, and operated out of a gut instinct. But the people who were in positions of power, which the union was not -- it was rapidly developing

an awful lot of power, but the people who should have been able to do what was right, and they knew what was right, because privately they made it very clear that they knew what was right, they were afraid of alienating the whole liberal establishment and the whole black community. And in being afraid, and in not playing an appropriate role as leaders, I think that they contributed terribly much to the very disastrous circumstances of that strike. Now, when we were in the midst of the battle, when you're embattled that way, you know, you can't look at things too coolly. As I look back on it now, the role of the mayor and the role of the... well, whatever the political establishment -- and the role of the rest of the labor movement, it's interesting; I feel that the mayor, the Board of Education, the superintendent of schools, the liberal establishment, were disasters. Every sense. And that what they did was not only disrespectful of the union, but disrespectful of the entire community. I really felt that they should have stood up and said, "Look, this is not a racial issue. You can't fire people without due process." You get a judge here saying that these people have been exonerated --a black judge, by the way. I mean, these people were exonerated. The charges that were brought against them -- when charges were finally were brought, because initially they were just dismissed without charges, and finally charges were brought -- the charges were totally fabricated charges, and were totally dismissed. And the people who were in positions of authority should have put their foot down, they should have said, "This is the way it's going to be," and they should have held out. You can imagine -- imagine present-day Ed Koch (laughter) as mayor during a situation like that. Well, you know, I mean, I think that John Lindsey really did -- by not standing up the way he should have, and I think that there was a lot in that. Not just having the sort of a guilty liberal reaction because, it was this white Jewish union against the black community, but I don't think that there was much love for unions. At all.

Now, the labor community supported us. Of course, there was just so much that they could do. Except for certain unions, who -- either whose membership was very largely black, and therefore more sympathetic to the other side, but even there Vic Gotbaum, I don't think it was basically so much that his membership demanded that he say something, but he himself had feelings about it, as a person who is on

that side, really, in the struggle, intellectually and philosophically. And I think he was torn, as a trade unionist, I really do. I remember attending -- he invited me to come to a meeting of his union. It was a large meeting, -- I think they were shop stewards, and I spoke. He introduced me very warmly, as someone whom he knew had been on every picket line, and in the struggle when she was representing UFT. And I got a warm reception from them, when I talked about the union and the union's view of this. And so I think that, if there had been stronger leadership on the part of each of the constituent groups, whether it was the black community, whether it was in that segment of the labor community that opposed us, certainly stronger leadership at the citywide level, this would not have happened.

I just got finished reading a book called _Common Ground_ by J. Anthony Lukas about the whole Boston situation, and there, Kevin White really tried to broker the forces that were opposing each other in the school integration fight, the Irish community and the black community, and of course there they had a court order to have forced busing all across the city, to integrate the schools. The city was in a tremendous conflagration, it was violence, and he did try very hard to exercise leadership, and the thing that was valuable to me about that book -- and of course, how could you being in the middle of the struggle and being in the maelstrom of it, the way I was at that time, or even now looking back on it, I think anyone from the union is going to look back on it from a certain limited perspective -- when you read that book, and I recommend it to anybody listening, you get a very good picture of all of the different forces at work, which gives a sense of inevitability about such conflict, almost as if there is a growth in the tides of men that just has to take place. Change has its own momentum, and I understand that things are just now beginning to get a little better in Boston. You now, they're behind us maybe by a decade. But there, there was an effort by the mayor, initially. He ultimately gave up, but there was a real effort by the mayor to try to bring the sides together, to try to broker the conflict. There wasn't a -- the Boston teachers' union was sort of nonexistent in that struggle. I mean, it was there, but it didn't have -- it wasn't a force, and it wasn't the kind of situation that existed in the strike, but the issues were all similar, and the sentiments were very similar, and the

constituencies were quite similar. Lots of parallels. So I think it's very hard to second-guess whether or not anything could have been done, but it's very hard also not to think about, did you do something wrong there?

Could it have been different? I constantly was in that kind of... agonizing... during that whole thing, at the same time, feeling very, very strongly that, that there was no alternative for this union. Now, I spent a lot of time, of course, with the teachers in Ocean Hill-Brownsville when I was sent out there as their protector, as the union liaison there, and since I had been on Freedom Rides, and I'd been in mass demonstration type things, and I'd been in lots of conflicts, I wasn't as afraid. Here were teachers, and the teachers were wonderful. Here were teachers who basically had spent their lives really trying to do their best for kids. They really did. Most of them. Not saying -- there are always a few people who maybe shouldn't be where they are. But these teachers were great. They were. They were liberal teachers, they were caring people, they -- all of them, you know, you take a man like Fred Nauman, you couldn't get a better person than Fred Nauman or Jim Hands or Harriet Clark. Teachers who were not only good at what they did, but who really cared, really cared about the kids, and really cared about educating them. Here they were, being vilified, being treated in the most heinous, awful, unjustified way. Well, you know, I mean, my back was up. That was -- the injustice there, it was so clear when you were there. Now, it was one thing to be operating on a citywide level, and it was another thing to be there, and I was there. And in that situation, I mean, to hear a hoodlum and a crook like Sonny Carson, or Leslie Campbell, whatever his name is now, shout epithets at decent people... them and their gangsters who were around them. There was ugly, it was horrible, and God, if I had had my way, I would've really -- I mean, the whole liberal establishment should have had to walk through that.

We used to meet on a street corner near the school and march in together, past all of this. Now, a lot of people want to know about Rhody McCoy. Rhody McCoy, despite his reputation, really wasn't that much of a player in this, frankly. Because he was so weak and incompetent. Now, before the whole thing broke out into a major strike, when he appeared on the scene -- I don't know how the hell he --

I really don't know how he got there, because he just suddenly appeared. And he was hired by this community group to be the administrator of this project. So I really don't know what his connections were, but I met with him many, many times, and I was singularly unimpressed. He was a very nice man who, I thought, didn't know what he was doing. At all. And I also feel very convinced -- I was at the time, and I still am -- that he was doing what he was told. And there was a Black Panther group there, there was this group of young gangsters, I forget their name, what it was, if it was Five Percenters or... and he was scared to death of them. This was a middle-class man, you know, he bred thoroughbred dogs or something, and he didn't know what the hell to do. He was the one -- he screwed up the bringing of those charges, even. He was just not competent. And he -- weakness in a situation that requires leadership is terribly dangerous. And therefore, his role was very, very bad. But it wasn't out of an overt, strong malevolence. It was out of weakness and inability to do anything. Now, of course, any decent human being wouldn't have allowed himself to be used that way, and I don't think he should have. I think that that was just awful. But so be it, that was Rhody McCoy. I don't consider him even that much of a major player. He wasn't a major player, but he was, of course, a spokesman for the people who were major players, and I think for the worst elements of them, actually. And as I said before, one of the great tragedies of all of this is that there was no leadership in the black community that was going to stand up and say that this was wrong, or even to try to moderate in some way. Except for Bayard, who is special and extraordinary. Even in the union, and of course it was very hard for the blacks in the union, but a man like Dick Parrish, who was a totally committed unionist and who had come out of the socialist tradition, and who had -- and who tried very hard, I think, and of course I wasn't privy enough -- I didn't have close relationship with him -- he was a real, he was a genuine leader of the union, at a certain point, couldn't stand up anymore to the pressures. That's how enormous they were. And I think that that was a terrible loss to the union, the fact that he ultimately caved in. I don't remember the circumstances, but I think ultimately he just went over to the other side. And that was to this day the union has a problem in terms of developing black leadership. And at that time, there was real black leadership. Dick Parrish was an important leader of the organization, and Sid Harris. And other people of course, we had Pionte Hammond,

but, you know, Pionte came out of Philadelphia, and she just never, she really wasn't... a New Yorker. Sid Harris hung in there, and that was good, but of course he's gone. And I think that is one of the major, how should we say, negative things that happened out of that strike. A lot of positive things happened out of it for the union. The membership soared, to practically every teacher in the system; it created a sense of solidarity and involvement on the part of everyone in every single school; it got the union organized in terms of being able to really have a real network for strikes. You know, the strike itself, internally in the union, was -- well, it was a builder.

Out on the picket lines, and of course, what I would do, I would get up, five every morning, drive out to Ocean Hill-Brownsville, meet the teachers, and march with them to the picket line and walk the picket lines all day long. And even during those periods in between strikes, I was out there, in the school or in front of the school. During one of the periods of respite between strikes, I was in a command post with John Doer, who came in with a whole operation he'd had in Mississippi, with people appointed in each school to call in on a regular basis, and I was the union representative with him in a command post right outside the district.

And, well, I mean, that's also all history. I kept a diary, which is in our own archives, but it's also in the archives of the Columbia University Teacher's College.

It was interesting, during that time -- of course, John Doer and I had all kinds of rip-roaring discussions that were very interesting, and I didn't agree with him on a lot of things, but on a lot of things, of course, we did agree, and he had all that experience in the South and as a representative of the government in the civil rights struggle, as a representative of the federal government. Al once told me, and I think this is a funny story, that he was having a discussion with John Doer once -- this was when we were talking about getting back in, trying to figure out how do we -- very close to a settlement, and there was the issue of the scab teachers, because they had hired a lot of teachers while our people were out. And our position was, those people had to go. They were scabs.

And Doer was trying to convince Al to try to make some sort of an accommodation, and in the course of the discussion, (laughter) he said, "Look, these are young, idealistic people. You may think they're misguided, but they came here because they wanted to help the black community, and they saw this the exact opposite way that you see it," as a civil rights struggle, and he said, "They're terrific young people. They're like Sandy Feldman." (laughter) "Except that they're on the other side." Al told that story, you know, enjoying it very much, laughing a lot about it. But in a sense that's what you had. You had people on both sides, very idealistic, each thinking that they were fighting for everything that was right and perfect. At one point, we did have, I guess it was the final settlement, when we did have dual teaching going on, and it was really very uncomfortable and kind of an awful situation. It ultimately worked its way out. Now, you think about the fact that the union went out on strike three times. I guess you could say four times, because we -- at the very first strike action was in the spring, that was limited to the district, and we hoped that it would just be limited to that district, and it wouldn't be a citywide action, and that that would just be enough of an indication to the powers that be that they'd better do something about this, because the teachers had been exonerated and they were still being kept out, and they had -- well, there's the whole summer to get their act together, and that they would take it very seriously, there was going to be a big strike in September, and that the mayor and whoever would get things worked out, but they didn't.

So there was the strike in September. Now, that strike in September... I know this. I was very wary and frightened of a strike, of a full citywide strike. And I remember, at the AFT convention that year, that summer, there was a discussion that I sat in on, I really wasn't a heavyweight participant member, between Al Shanker and Dave Selden on what to do. Because we'd had that district-wide action, and Lindsey and the board and the superintendent were doing nothing. They were scared, they were wishy-washy, I mean, they were not taking a strong stand, and we were going to end up going -- and they were not putting those teachers back where they belonged. What was our recourse? They kept wanting us to accept a transfer, and they would give them preferences, and they would do all kinds of wonderful things for these teachers, and what should we do? And I

remember thinking, "Oh, well, Dave Selden, he'll never want to strike in this kind of a situation." Because, you know, Dave was -- I mean, he was ultra-liberal. And when Dave Selden said, "I don't think you have any choice"... well, you know, that was heavy. That was really it, for me. In the course of that discussion, because I certainly didn't know. I couldn't really know. All I knew was that it was going to be hell. That was, I think, that was where the final decision was made.

Dave -- Dave had come in, I remember during -- I was there during the '67 strike, which was basically a strike for more effective schools, and then we had the disruptive child thing, which was a slight forerunner of what was going to happen in '68. And I admired Dave. I'd seen him in situations. He came into the negotiations, he was... he was quite a formidable presence when we had negotiations, or when serious problems for the union came up, and there was always a lot of consultation between Al and Dave during those years. And so -- at least as far as I could see. And he was a respected leader. And when he -- in the course of that discussion, when he said, after a lot of talking about it and listening to what the situation was, he said, "Well, there's no choice," I think that really sealed it, in terms of going to the membership and saying we had to strike. And that's what happened.

I think each time the union went out, it was because the union had no other recourse. There was nothing else the union could do. What could we do? We had no political figures on our side. We didn't have the kind of political operation that we now have. There was no one who was taking up our (inaudible). I mean, we were basically alone. We were very isolated. And that was the one weapon.

I think now, we would be in a position to influence the people who are in powerful positions, the people who -- the legislature, the governor, the city council, the Board of Estimate, members of the Board of Education who were appointed by borough presidents. Whether we could influence the mayor or not, I can't say at this point. Maybe not. I think that, on that issue, this mayor would have been for us. Now, on an economic strike, I wouldn't

take that position now. But certainly on this kind of an issue, I think now, we would be in a position -- at least I hope we would be in a position to get something positive done.

The fact of the matter is that our involvement in politics, which came after this, has made us a great deal stronger than we were then. You know, a lot of people think that -- and I suppose, and there is a lot of truth to the fact, that having strike leverage is ultimate power, and that we're in a lot of trouble now because strikes are lot harder to make successful than they ever were before. On the other hand, we've done quite a bit to substitute for the kind of power that strikes give you, political power.

Well, once the '68 strike was settled, and the union -- it was one of the things that happened during that period that I think was very significant -- Al's thinking was that during the strike, the Humphrey-Nixon election was going on, and that election was so pivotal to where this country has gone. And we could see it then, that whoever, you know, whether Nixon or Humphrey won that election was going to be the future. Don't forget, the strike was going on September through November, and it was exactly that period when all of the campaigning over the national election was going on. So in essence, what happened was, Al, who, you can never say that Al Shanker doesn't have guts, he put to a delegate assembly, in the middle of the strike, the issue of whether or not we want to make an endorsement. We had never made a presidential endorsement. And it was voted down. Because everybody was just so concerned with the immediate struggle. And there was a situation where if Hubert Humphrey had been elected president in 1968, this whole period that we have just been through might have been a very, very different time for the country, let alone for education and for unions. But after the strike was over, Al started leading this union into becoming a political force.

And of course, that period was one in which politics was really coming to the fore. Well, I guess politics was always in the fore, but for the union. And the Vietnam War issue was a major issue at the time, for the country, and it got fought out on the floor of AFT conventions. Of

course, this was -- this came later, I guess, it was 19 -- we're talking about now, when McGovern was nominated for election, which was '72. So between about 1969, '70s, '71, '72, '73, the Vietnam War was a tremendous issue. And there was a lot of sentiment in the country to pull out totally, just to get the hell out of there. Of course, I don't have to talk a lot about that, because most people know. That sentiment was a combination, certainly from my point of view, of conservative isolationist American attitudes of just let's not be fighting anybody else's war, and sending our boys over to get killed, where there were lots of people who we don't understand and we don't care that much about anyway; and a lot of liberal sentiment, which had all sorts of illusions about the political system that this country was fighting in that war. And there were tremendous debates in the AFT about what position to take on the Vietnam War, and for a number of years, the leadership took the position for a negotiated settlement, and against an immediate unilateral withdrawal. Which, of course, I completely agree with the position that the leadership took on that, and I don't think is the place for a long discussion of why, but -- and it was basically the labor movement's position, that there should not be a unilateral withdrawal. I mean, that we would be abandoning all sorts of, however weak, democratic forces that did exist in South Vietnam. We had contacts with people who were struggling to keep labor organizations alive, even if they were undercover; with people who were struggling to keep dissident organizations alive, in an authoritarian society which would put them in jail, or, you know, do terrible things to them. But where there was still a possibility of maintaining democracy, and we felt that if the North Vietnamese rolled in, that would be it, and we believed in the Domino Theory. So that discussion took place inside the union.

END OF TAPE 2

A: Ultimately, the Vietnam issue was settled by a referendum of the membership, and which I think by a narrow but comfortable margin, voted for advocating a negotiated settlement, and against an immediate unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam. But aside from that issue, substantively, I guess, we were raising the whole issue of, what kind of

subjects does a union take on? What kinds of issues does a union get involved in? Where do you get to the point where you're going to be so divisive that you endanger your internal solidarity, and where you end up losing members or losing the support of your members because they don't really want to talk about this stuff, or because they disagree with the position that the -- or so many of them disagree with the position that the union has taken, and it's not a position which is central to the union's basic need for being, which is to get them their money. And that's been after all, a question which has been a question for the trade union movement since its organization. And, I suppose, since the debates between the old AFL and the CIO.

Now, this union has always taken positions on political and social issues, and to a certain extent, there has been some resentment within the rank and file at the local level, when we get too involved in foreign policy issues. Because they don't -- they see that as a diversion from what their basic needs are. But it's always been accepted that the AFT, nationally, would certainly have to take positions on this. Now, of course, the AFL-CIO does. Why do we do it? And part of it, of course, we have to constantly educate our members internally. As to why we do it, we do it because it's in our basic self-interest to maintain freedom of association in the United States, and to maintain an atmosphere in which unions can organize, and the United States isn't going to stay free much longer after Europe and South America goes. Let's face it. There's no way that the United States is going to, with all of its faults, going to remain a democracy if all the rest of the world is totalitarian.

And the labor movement has a basic self-interest in wanting to be able to fight for its members, and so it has a basic self-interest in maintaining the kind of society which allows you to do that. And there aren't that many. There are very few societies where labor unions really have the right to fight. You have Western Europe, you have maybe, in South America, you have Costa Rica, maybe Mexico a little bit, although there it's difficult. You know, the whole Third World, unions are for the most part not free. You have Japan, which is where you have a free trade union movement, but most African countries, you do not. You do have some, Kenya and some others, where the unions are free, and then you have countries like South Africa, in

which the unions finally won the right to organize, and, you know, which ultimately I think is going to be the foundation for the changes in those societies.

The labor movement in the United States has always been very, very involved with its counterparts around the world, every time there's a labor union struggling to maintain itself in a difficult environment in another country. The AFL-CIO, to the extent possible, has tried to help. The AFL-CIO was very involved after World War II in rebuilding the unions of Western Europe.

I remember when I first became involved in the union, and I was sent down to a conference that the AFL-CIO was holding on foreign policy. And at that conference, and this I'm talking now, twenty years ago, were South Africa trade unionists who were there secretly, and who were getting educated, as I was, in trade union organizing by the AFL-CIO. So we're part of that tradition. I think it's a very important part of who we are.

Now, at the local level, our major mission is to fight for our salaries and our working conditions. But by definition, our working conditions have everything to do with the conditions of the kids that we serve, and therefore, the conditions of their families, and therefore the condition of the city, so that if there's lousy housing and poor health care and unemployment, we're directly affected. We fight for improvements in the schools, and we fight and support -- fight for and support all of the needs of the people who we are in alliance with, and those are basically other working people, people that we serve as teachers. So to me, it's all one ball of wax. And basically, what you do is, you have -- you take each situation as it comes. There was no way that the union could avoid getting involved in the Vietnam thing, because it was a major issue of the time. There were people who would have liked the union to completely stay out of it. In fact, leadership tried to keep the union out of it, because it was so divisive internally, for a brief period of time, and then it was impossible, and so then the leadership took a position, it was fought out, and ultimately was decided by a referendum.

Not every issue of that sort has to go to referendum, because I think we've matured, as an organization, to more of an ability to handle things in a representational democracy, for delegates to be able to vote on a position which really represents a consensus of the membership. And every once in a while this comes up, just at this last convention in the AFT, we fought over Nicaragua and aid to the Contras, and a position was hammered out. We fought over the -- what else were we -- we didn't fight, we had a resolution on South Africa, which of course did achieve a consensus. But there is, in each of these, a role that the labor movement is playing, and we are part of that, and that role is to support in every way we can legitimate trade unionists in these countries, and forces that are fighting to maintain the kind of atmosphere in society that a trade union can organize in. Whether in some instances it's the church, whether it's the farmers, whether it's organizations that exist for that purpose only, that's what labor's foreign policy has always been. And we're in that tradition.

Well, after the '68 strike, there was the whole legislative fight over decentralization. And during that period, I made my first trip to Albany, because Al was up in Albany and there was a big effort to try to reach a compromise on a decentralization bill. And he needed, I guess he needed some help. They were actually writing the law. And Alice Marsh was there, and there were some other people up there, I don't remember exactly who else. And a group of us, he called back and said, "I need some of you," a group of us went. Ann Keisler was there, and Joe Agan, and I went up with them also, to help do the writing. And it was supposed to be for a day, because I guess that he called when they were on the verge of making some final decision. But, of course, it fell apart, and I went up for a day, and I ended up staying in Albany for two weeks. That was my first introduction to Albany. I was at the Dewitt Clinton Hotel, and I've maintained an aversion to going to Albany ever since then. I was not in love with Albany. I had to go out and buy some more clothes to wear (laughter), and that was a very interesting experience, because ultimately, when the efforts by the Democrats fell apart, the governor, Nelson Rockefeller, at the time just said, "OK, guys, I gave you a chance to do this, because this is your thing, this is a New York City thing, but since you can't," you know, and they -- "The session's coming to an end, and you

guys can't, you know, come up with anything, I'm going to take care of it." And oh, we went to the Republican side, and ultimately there is where the compromise was hammered out.

Q: This is Renee Epstein. My interview with Sandra Feldman is continuing on August 12, 1986, in New York.

A: -- centralization law changed the face of the New York City public school system, and it also changed the face of the union, and deserves a little bit of speculation -- attention. Because what it did was create 32 separate, semi-autonomous school districts in the city. And it took away a lot of the powers that a highly centralized board had previously had. It put considerable enforcement power in the hands of a chancellor. They changed superintendent from superintendent to chancellor, to make this person very important. And, of course, this was something that we had fought very hard for, because we felt that if you're going to have 32 different school boards, that you had to have somebody there who could enforce standards and make sure that people didn't just go off doing their own separate state's rights type thing in having total community control. But the school board, the central school board, that was created was essentially the school board which we have now, as we're talking in 1986, which was a board made up of two appointees made by the mayor and one by each of the borough presidents. And that school board, the initial one, really did everything it could to delegate as much authority as it could to the community school boards. It took the intent of the legislature to mean that, and so at the very outset, a lot was delegated out to the community school districts that needn't have been delegated out. And they already had, within the statute, considerable power. They could hire and fire a superintendent, and they had a lot of ability to move things around within the budget allocation that they got. They do get an allocation based on the numbers of positions, rather than just on dollars per capita, and there is a need formula. And all of that took a lot of hammering out, in terms of how to work out getting the budget out to those districts.

But the school boards are elected, and of course from then to now, we've had a number of very serious battles in certain school districts. Certainly in District One in

Manhattan, where the superintendent was a man named Louis Fuentes, who took a very separatist and anti-union view, and there were school board meetings that were violent, and it was a long fight over a series of, oh, three or four elections in that district, which the UFT played a very heavy role with the community to try to get a school board that would care about education, as opposed to caring about the superintendent's career, and who else they could put on the patronage rolls, and so on, and we finally did succeed, and that's a district now, which is one of the best districts in the city, which has an Hispanic minister who is the chairman of the school board, which has a superintendent who is doing all sorts of interesting and wonderful things in the school, and the education situation there is excellent.

But the union -- let me get back to that -- had to be responsive to this tremendous change that took place in the school districts. Now, of course, the union -- this is 1969 that the law was passed, the union had just been through the '68 strikes. And the membership shot up from whatever it was before '68, which was probably maybe half of the potential, to full membership. 90% of the teachers and others whom we represent joined the UFT.

And also, in '69 and '70, we fought for the organization of the paraprofessionals, and we competed with District Council 37 for the paraprofessionals, and that was a very interesting effort, because the paraprofessionals were mostly black and Hispanic women who had been brought into the school system as a poverty program, and I remember they were making $45 a week. 45 cash dollars a week, they get nothing else. No rights, no benefits, no sick leave, no health, no nothing. And DC 37 organizers tried to capitalize on the racial strife that had taken place in '68, portraying the UFT as a racist union, and urging them to join DC 37, which of course was much more integrated union. And interestingly enough, the UFT won that election, and we won it substantially. And we had a lot of discussion about how we should approach this, and it was my view, and the view of others, that we should sell Al Shanker, not hide him. There were some people who were saying, "Well, you know, maybe we should try to play down Al, and maybe we should create some sort of a different structure," et cetera, et cetera, and I was convinced, and so were other people, and I think Al of course believed

this, that people were interested in a union that would fight for its members, and that they weren't going to be taken in by the ideological fight over who's racist or who isn't racist, and here's a union, how racist could we be? I mean, we wanted them to come in as members. And we had really, we put ourselves, life and death, on the line for our members. And I think that there's just no doubt that the fact that the UFT had been in the kind of struggle that it had been in was instrumental in convincing the paraprofessionals that they should go with the UFT, because we're a fighting union.

The campaign was run out of the union office by the then-director of staff Vito DeLeonardis, and I was an assistant to the president, and very involved in the organization. And also, we had very good leadership for the paras, because Velma Hill, who really was a civil rights activist and who was interested in becoming a part of the trade union movement, had become a paraprofessional. And in order to do that, she had spent a year as a paraprofessional in a school, and this was a totally unorganized group, and naturally, with her skills, her political skills and her verbal skills and her smarts, she was very able to become a leader of this group. And that was very important, so that having Velma as someone who -- as a spokesperson in the forefront of the organizing effort was extremely helpful to the UFT.

The teachers were very, very wary of organizing the paraprofessionals. Now, you have to remember, I think it's important to remember that when the UFT was first organizing, and some people, as George Altomare will tell everybody constantly, maybe a couple others, had the idea that the school aides who were brought into the school system to do the menial chores that teachers were relieved of in their first contract -- different from paraprofessionals. Paraprofessionals do instructional work with teachers in classrooms. The school aides do non-instructional chores that teachers are relieved of. At that time, the union leadership rejected the idea of organizing the aides, because they felt that the teachers weren't fully organized, and that the teachers would not like this, and that it would cause problems in organizing the teachers. You know, there's no point in -- I mean, with hindsight, whether they were right or wrong, the fact

of the matter is, they decided not to do it. Now here, the decision was made at a time when the union was fully organized, just newly fully organized, and Al Shanker had led the union through those strikes, and of course had enormous credibility with the rank and file. But there was tremendous wariness on the part of the teachers, that this was a group of people who ultimately were going to take over their jobs, and be a cheaper version of a teacher. And especially coming at the same time as the schools were decentralized.

It presented a very scary threat, because the paraprofessionals were from the community, they were mostly minority, and the teachers were very, very wary. And I must say that this was another time when Al really put himself on the line and fought for a resolution, that was adopted in referendum by the rank and file, that said that if the paraprofessionals had to strike in order to get their first contract -- this was after they were organized by us -- that we would support their strike, by striking ourselves. Now, it wasn't only for paraprofessionals. The resolution talked about all of the, quote, "functional", unquote groups that we represent, because -- other large groups that had come into the UFT, like the counselors, the psychologists, the social workers, school secretaries, and so we had this resolution, but everybody knew that it was really all about the paraprofessionals, which was this huge group, and for whom we had to negotiate a contract, during which time the teachers already had a contract. And what leverage did they have? Because if paraprofessionals went out on strike, what would it mean? Nothing. I mean, they just weren't that essential. If the teachers kept teaching and the paras were on strike, well, they had just come into the schools. The schools had operated for a century without paraprofessionals. So Al pushed it, and he put his leadership on the line. And he said, "If we can't do this, then I can't be president of this union." And he got that vote. So that was a very, very important time, and a demonstration of Al's willingness to take risks.

It was extremely important to the union to organize the paraprofessionals, primarily because the schools are our jurisdiction. And really, if the union had been strong enough at the time -- for example, if the school aides were in -- I think that anybody now would say, "Oh, of course,

we should have the school aides," and now, you know, teachers' unions all over the country are organizing the school bus drivers and the matrons and the janitors and the custodians, and I think that's right. I mean, the schools are our jurisdiction, and we worked to have within the same union all of the people who were servicing and serving kids. And I often think now, as we get into this whole issue of professionalism these days, that if the union had been at a more mature stage some years ago, when the supervisor were kicked out, we wouldn't have kicked them out. I'm not so sure about principals, but I think that assistant principals, department chairmen who are teaching supervisors, really ought to be in the UFT. That a lot of the opposition that we're getting for the whole notion of teachers teaching teachers, and a lot of the fear on the part of the supervisors, the supervisory ranks, wouldn't be there, because we'd be able to work out these jurisdictional problems as colleagues, and that we'd be able to create a more collegial atmosphere if we were all in the same union. Up to a certain level. But history has to move at its own pace, I suppose. We -- with leadership, you get ahead of your time, and you can move a little faster than or make things happen that wouldn't have happened, but the union could do just so much, given its age and its level of maturity as an organization.

So those years, right after '68 into '69, when the decentralization law was passed, and '69 and '70, when the paraprofessionals were being organized, were very heady years for the union, and it was necessary to adopt, or adapt -- adopt the policies and adapt the union -- to a very changed situation suddenly. First of all, the union was suddenly huge. Second of all, here we had these school boards out there, and Al came up with the idea of electing district representatives out in those districts. That is, like business agents, that we would elect staff out in those school districts, on the rationale was that they would then be -- they would have certain standing in their own districts, as elected people, and they would be responsive to the membership, and we would have to figure out a way to keep them responsive to the union centrally. It was a very controversial proposal. I thought it was brilliant, and I supported it from the beginning. And I still support it, by the way. Every now and then, very often over the years, the discussion comes up again, well, shouldn't they really be appointed, and do we have enough

control over the district representatives, and is this the right thing to do? And I still believe that having them elected in the districts is the right way to be. And even though they do operate in a very self-directed way out there, ultimately, I think the union has been tremendously strengthened. Even though you get people in those positions who you might not pick, look, you pick some good ones, (laughter) you pick some bad ones. You know? I mean, if you're in a position of hiring, you know that you don't always make the right choices. We've had a lot of discussion about whether there ought to be changes, and the only thing that ever tempts me is maybe to broaden the electorate. Right now, they're still elected by the chapter leaders, and the only thing that I ever think about doing is having the membership elect them in those districts, because sometimes it gets a little cozy between the chapter leaders and the district reps, and we don't get enough responsiveness to the membership. But that isn't the rule, though. For the most part, the district reps work very hard. But in the constraints of their own limitations, and of course, they were each individuals, and they were good at different things. But I think that they've served the union very well, and that that whole idea has served the union well. But the union got huge, again. The bureaucracy of the union began to develop at that time, because we opened up our offices, so that the union would be closer to the membership. At the same time, it necessitated having supervisors out there that we never had before, supervising the borough offices, and having a central grievance department as well as grievance handlers out in the district, that it did create a much larger staff, and it did create some bureaucracy which did not exist in the union before. And of course, I think that it was necessary, and for me, it's a constant battle, now that we have this very large organization and we provide so many services for our members, and there's always more to do, it's a constant struggle to keep reminding ourselves that we exist for the membership. And that's something that is absolutely, constantly on my mind. Because when you're in -- look, we have 300 people on the payroll of this union now, today. We have two buildings that we own, prime pieces of real estate. We fill up both of them, practically fill up both of them. And we have an office in every borough. And we're doing a tremendous amount, I think we're providing a lot of service, but sometimes an organization that big begins to exist for itself. You know, we have a lot of people on the payroll, in

secretarial and clerical staff and administrative people, people in a print shop and a mailroom who have no contact with members, and who are working for something that they see as a little cooperation. I mean, they see the UFT in a totally different way from those of us who see it through the eyes of the membership see it. And it's a constant struggle to remind everybody who pays their salaries, and one of the first things I did as president was take every last person on the payroll away to a retreat, and when I spoke, I put it to them very bluntly that the membership has the right to hire and fire every last one of them. And basically, if they vote us out, they're all out. You know? And if they don't -- if they're not responsive to the membership, and if they're not polite and courteous and helpful, that they're --that this goes beyond -- that these are not our customers, these are our bosses. And you just have to keep working at it, because we are a huge organization. This union local is larger than a number of international unions that exist in the United States. And it's very, very important -- because it is a local union and not a federation, really, not a statewide or a national union, but a local union, which deals directly with members -- to constantly keep people apprised, the people who work for the union, apprised of the fact that what they're all about is what the membership needs.

So we're much less of a movement, in a sense, and much more of an organization and an institution, than we once were. And it isn't as much fun, really. So I try very hard, and I'm trying very hard, and I intend to work even harder at it, to give a sense of cause, to keep that alive. Because I believe it is still a very important cause, and I think in the fight that we're making right now to change the way that schools are organized -- the fight for voice, which we're making now, which is just an extension of the fight the union has always made -- has a real potential for coming to some sort of culmination. And I think that's a good way to keep alive the feeling of movement and cause in the UFT.

Amazingly enough, despite this very rapid growth and the need to adapt to this tremendous change in the school system, and despite the constant struggle against bureaucratization within the union, and sometimes, you know, some weeks are better than others in terms of how people get treated, but I think that the union has very

definitely, very proudly maintained the democratic tradition. Now, there is a difference, and I think that that has to be noted, between the staff structure within the -- which the leadership puts together, and the democratic processes in the organization which give rise to a leadership, which then runs the staff. And I think that that's something which has to be understood.

End - Sandra Feldman 1986