**Interview: Sandra Feldman**

**June 2nd 2005**

Q: This is Dan Golodner, AFT Archives, Wayne State University, interviewing Sandra Feldman, June 2nd, 2005. OK, we're discussing how you got involved with the union.

A: Yeah. Well, My first teaching job was as a substitute teacher, I think it was, it must have been 1962 or something. It was 63', but I had not any training. I was a substitute, I had gotten a license, but I had no teacher training. I was hired by the school secretary and I was sent to the fourth floor to a third grade classroom. It was the middle of the school year, the teacher had gone out and it was the beginning of the second semester, February. The kids were in great shape. They came up to the door, they were curious about me. They were very, very well behaved. They walked into the classroom two by two and had obviously been very well trained by their previous teacher -- who was an experienced teacher. When I saw this -- remember I came out of the civil rights movement, and radical politics -- I thought "these kids are so regimented, this is terrible, get them to loosen up a little." Well, in about two or three months I had total chaos. (laughter) Total chaos. I decided I wasn't going to stay just to collect a paycheck.

I obviously didn't know what I was doing. So I left and that's when I saw the principal. I never had the seen the principal before, only the assistant principal. (laughter) And the school secretary, both of which I thought were in charge of the school. But then I saw the principal -- I can't remember her name. But, I left. That was that. I felt bad, because I had gotten very involved with the kids, but I was afraid that I would hurt them rather than help them. What I did then, I took courses; I went to City College. I was already a college graduate, that's how I had gotten my license. At that time they were giving licenses away because they had such a shortage. But then I went to City College and I took courses over the summer and then I looked for another a job. I was luckier for some reason. I found a school where the principal actually put me in the classroom of the teacher I was going to replace, for better money.

Q: How unique.

A: Really, it was unique at that time. He was a very, very nice man. Morris was his first name. It was first grade, and I just saw what she was doing and she taught me about what she was doing. When I took over that class, they knew me, I knew them. And I enjoyed it very much. It was exhausting. First graders, so exhausting! (laughter) But --

Q: What was your typical day like?

A: Oh, you had to be "on" constantly. You'd pick them up in the gymnasium where they were lined up and you'd take them upstairs and start them on some activity or whatever. You would give out some books. They came to you knowing nothing. It was very, very satisfying because they left you knowing how to read -- at a first grade level. We played a lot of games. We sang a lot of songs. (laughter) And you just had to be "on" all day long. It was exhausting, just exhausting. And I moved to an upper grade because (laughter) it was too hard teaching first grade.

In the meantime, I moved to fourth grade, which I really enjoyed. I really enjoyed the fourth graders. The kids were adult enough for you to be able to reason with them and let them do things on their own, yet they were still babies enough so that you could hug them and love them.

In the meantime, the teachers, who were completely uninterested in any kind of union -- and the union was doing things. The union was having demonstrations; they were supporting integrated schools; they were working with people in the community, Reverend Galamison and others. But the teachers just weren't interested. So I spent a lot of

time, first making friends -- I made a lot of good friends in that school -- then trying to convince them to join the union. There was a teacher, kindergarten teacher, who was there -- she had already retired, but they called her back because they were so short of teachers. Bell something was her name. She had been an active member of the old TU, the old Teacher's Union. She had been communist. She was totally dismissive of UFT. [mocking voice] "You'll never be like we were," and stuff. So I worked on her and worked on her. Talked to her about the teacher's union and she would be nostalgic. She was a leader in the school. "We really need to get you into the union." And so I finally got her to join. When she joined, that broke the ice. We started to have social gatherings and more and more people joined. Pretty soon, we had the whole school. It was a very, very good feeling.

I think it was a year later when they had this boycott for integrated schools. The UFT was involved in it. George Altomare had a place. He was working in Galamison's church basement. He had all his cards, with all the schools on them and stuff. Of course I signed up. I had been elected chapter leader by then. No one really wanted the job. Then

afterwards, I was challenged. Which was good for me, because I won the election again.

But George Altomare, who was organizing the boycott for integrated school. The union couldn't officially endorse a boycott for schools -- because that would be like striking. But they said they were very supportive of it, and if anyone wanted to be a part of it, they would fight for you if they tried to do something to you. So naturally, I signed up and I tried to get other teachers with me, and I couldn't get a single soul in that school. But George worked out this thing where if you didn't have any company on the picket line -- because we picketed, and we would call and say "I'm here all by myself" -- he would send people over to keep you company, which is what he did. I was there by myself, I called George, and pretty soon there were two to three teachers from the nearby junior high school came and picketed with me. The principal was a really nice guy, and he didn't do anything to hurt me in any way. So, that day was a success as far as I was concerned, because we had four people picketing outside our school. (laughter) And I think it was a lesson for the other teachers at the union, he's doing things.

Q: He was there for you.

A: Exactly. So that's how I first got involved in the union, and there are all sorts of interesting little crises. We fought for a coffee pot for the teacher's room. We got the coffee pot and then there was this big question of who was going to clean it. (laughter) No one wanted to clean it, so we had to work out a whole thing to get it clean, which we did. There was a devout Catholic assistant principal woman who was very angry at the UFT because UFT opposed tuition tax credits. I was always in discussion with her.

Q: This is you fighting for the basic working conditions.

A: These were basic conditions. Basic. And then I became the chapter leader and we had one delegate and I became the delegate as well. I went to the committee meetings and I guess I just made myself known. I was never thinking about it but when I got to the delegate assembly, Al Shanker was elected president of the UFT -- what was it? 1970 -- 1960 something.

Q: When he became president?

A: Yea

Q: 1963

A: Yeah, of the UFT in 63', right. And the delegate assembly was a fairly small group and met in a student auditorium. There was a very tight group of former TU members -- mostly communists -- who were taking him on at every turn. Now of

course, he loved it, (laughter) because he was great at fighting back. But the regular delegates were saying "Why doesn't he stop?" (laughter) "Who cares what these people are saying?" And a couple of times I made some procedural motions. I guess he got interested, like "who was that girl who knew how to make procedural motions?" which I knew how to make both from the Civil Rights Movement and the Social Democratic Movement. I had started going to the elementary school committee meeting. Pretty soon somebody came to see me and invited me to join the caucus, and then I started meeting people. Before I knew it, I was on the executive board. So I got very involved with the union. That was it. And it was very small then. This was prior to the 67' strike, prior to the 68' strike, so the union was maybe 5-6,000 members. That can be checked but it was really modest. I got to know all the activists and all the people. And then a job opened up -- I think there were four people on the staff at that time. We are sitting here on a day when UFT was going to have over 20,000 people in Madison Square Garden in a protest rally. I think there were four people on the staff at that time they offered me a job as a field rep.

Q: This was before the 1967 strike, 1966?

A: Yes.

Q: So you're doing -- as a field rep then, you're just handling grievances?

A: I learned how to do the grievances. I didn't immediately snap up the job. I had passed the exam for English -- high school English, I was thinking about teaching high school -- but I wasn't sure, because I loved the little kids. But anyway, when they offered me that job I said to myself "Well, I could always come back to teaching." So I took the job. I learned how to handle grievances; I was very good at handling grievances. Then, they taught me how to do arbitration. So I did that.

Q: Was the UFT training you? Or did you have to go somewhere else for training?

A: Well, the UFT had a training program that had been put together by Cornell. There was a wonderful woman at Cornell, who's name I forget. I can't remember her name right now. They put together a training program for the UFT. They looked at all the grievance -- first, of course, it was fairly simplistic, but then after the UFT developed a repertoire of grievances, they looked at all the grievances, they looked at the contract, and they put together a very, very good training program. They trained the instructors. Then the instructors trained other people. It was really a good program. So I got involved in that.

Q: Well what were the issues of the 67' strike?

A: Well, there was the disruptive issue, that was the big issue. Where the union was trying to get a procedure for teachers to do something about a child who was disruptive. Discipline is very difficult.

Q: Other teacher unions were developing this, and was this something that you saw in other cities?

A: Yes, in Detroit. They had to make an alliance with New York I guess. (laughter) We took a lot of stuff from them, but it raised all kinds of ire in New York. People didn't like it that the union didn't kick kids out of class. Realize they kicked them out of school and say they have to behave themselves, or their parents come and pick them up. I forget what the exactly procedure was, but it was that you can't stay in this classroom unless you follow the rules and so forth. And it raised a lot of anger. The teachers union were there to say -- and there was always that underlying racial problem of the teachers being primarily white.

Q: So is this mostly the parents complaining that the teachers have no right to discipline --

A: Well, I don't know if it was really parents so much as it was activists.

Q: Would you say that this was one of the first educational reform strikes?

A: No, it definitely was an effort to try and do something about reforming the school and making it possible for teachers to teach. I mean, it was also of an economic strike, it wasn't only that. But, it was a very important issue. You probably should go back and look at the United Teacher, put out at that time.

Q: So, what were the recourses of the teacher's union after the strike?

A: Oh yeah, they had passed the Taylor Law because the teacher's union had struck under the Condon-Waldin Law, and they couldn't really enforce Condon-Waldin, because it was so draconian. You had to fire everybody who struck -- which they couldn't do. So they changed it for public employees -- you know, big rallies and all kinds of stuff -- but the Taylor Law got passed and strikes were prohibited. That didn't stop us obviously, from striking. We felt we had to. Shanker, actually that was when he went jail I think, after the 67' strike. Check these things, because my memory isn't all that great. Yeah, that's the time Al went to jail. And we were out there supporting him.

Q: And you were out there in the snow rallying around.

A: Right.

Q: How was the membership response after the 67' strike? Was there a build up of membership or did it just have to be done?

A: I think that we gained members each time to we took a militant action. There were spurts of membership, of course there were members who thought it was terrible, and you know, but there were members who were glad to see the union standing up to them. They needed help. They needed help in the classroom and schools.

Q: Could you explain the More Effective Schools Program?

A: Yes. The union was trying to prove that if you did something about conditions, and made the schools good for the kids -- that problems like disruptive children and so forth would be solved. And it was a committee -- it had principals, Elliot Shapiro was involved in it. He was a really forward looking principal in the city and had a committee of teachers. They came up with the program where schools in tough neighborhoods would be called "more effective schools;" they would have smaller class sizes; they would have clinical services for the kids; they would have teachers who are really well trained teachers. There would be a certain number of openings for parents from outside the neighborhood. I can't remember the exact number…. Pretty soon, these schools had waiting lists of

white parents -- white middle-class parents -- wanting to send their kids to these schools in tough neighborhoods because the program was so terrific. We were hoping that it would really be expanded. Besides for being a good program for kids academically, it was an integration program. But, I guess, I forget exactly which year it was that the board of education decided two things that one: just because parents were happy, and kids were doing betters, they weren't doing better enough to justify the additional expenditures. And they dismantled them. Also, decentralization became on issue because this system was decentralized and these schools were not evenly distributed throughout the system. So some of these decentralized districts had two more effectives schools where a lot of them had none. So instead of trying figure out a way to make these kinds of schools available to all the children that needed them, they decided to dismantle them. And that's what they did. It was a terrible thing.

Q: Would you like to touch on Ocean Hill - Brownsville a bit? There was a lot you already said on the other tapes.

A: Yeah. So I don't want to go over that a lot. But, I was assigned as a field rep out there. I think I must have already talked about how we tried to support these experimental districts, and the whole IS-201 thing. We

tried to support the Ford Foundation, which ultimately betrayed the whole movement we were pushing for. We tried to develop (inaudible) around the school district. It got taken over by these, I don't know what they were, these nationalists -- they were really radical, and they really wanted the school district there for different reasons than we wanted it there. And we wanted the parents involved and the kids, and a better education. But they wanted a mainly black school district and there was all this stuff they were trying to charge the teachers, but they couldn't sustain the charges on the teachers. It was very, very ugly. First, there was a strike in the district. They called a strike to try and protect the kids in the district, and it got very ugly, so it turned into a citywide strike. It was ugly. It was black versus white, (inaudible) versus blacks. It was horrible. It was agonizing. And I was assigned (laughter) to (inaudible) teachers that were really enslaved. I was like "great!" because I had been involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and I knew a lot of the people who were yelling and screaming at us. I knew that they were not murderers or anything. So I was unafraid to go out there. I met with the teachers on a far corner, a couple blocks away, and then

walked to the schools. But it was a lousy time. The only thing that was good about it, was that we improved our --

*END OF SIDE*

A: OK, where was I?

Q: Membership grew out of the Ocean Hill - Brownsville strikes of 68'.

A: Yeah. Membership grew exponentially. It went from 5,000 or 8,000 to 50,000. Practically overnight, because teachers supported the strike. There was conflict, there were teachers who didn't support it; there was conflict with the black community. It was very painful. I thought it was very painful, but that the union had to be saved. Intimately, thank goodness, the union was pretty large, it was strong -- there are things that have been written about what happened during those strikes. I was very involved in trying to support the teachers.

Q: Which leads into a question of Para-Professionals, it's all on you. An amazing an event -- --

A: It was amazing. Para-Professionals had been hired under the Johnson Administration. The War on Poverty, they were hired, mainly thought of as a job to eliminate poverty. They started with these mostly community people, parents, they were working in the schools and (inaudible) started vying for them, to organize them. We were right in there

too; we were trying to organize them. And some of the other unions would say "you don't want to join them, racist union, UFT, you don't want Al Shanker to be your president." And we had a lot of discussions about it, and I was very adamant that we should go up there and sell Al Shanker. Because people who knew that he stood up for his members, and ultimately we did. Of course we had a whole organizing campaign, but mainly, in terms of the (inaudible) we put, we said "join a union that fights for its members." We said Al Shanker fights for its members and we want to be a union that will fight for you. You don't want to be in a situation where you can just be fired. People understood that their jobs were at stake here, and the union, the UFT really stood up for its members. That was very valuable and gratifying.

Q: How did the Para-Professionals vote?

A: They all voted for the union, strongly for the union. That was a great accomplishment. And the Para-Professionals, as you know, have been a wonderful, wonderful part of this union. Not just in New York, but then we started organizing as a country, and the Professionals are a very strong group within the union across the country. And they were ambassadors for the union in poor communities and helped start turn around some of the bitterness. Which I think we

know now, not just now -- when I became president, I really worked very hard on relating to the community, and those living in poverty, and the Para-Professionals were very helpful. They made a big change in the relationship.

Q: Was there a specific leader from New York?

A: Well, Velma Hill was the first leader. She left through some of the thickness. Then Charlie Cogen became the next...

Q: And you're still a field rep through the (inaudible)?

A: At this time, yeah.

Q: Had you gone to the AFT convention yet?

A: I went to the AFT convention in 1968. I was a field rep though, I didn't go as a delegate. But my first convention, I went a staff person, as a field rep. It was in Cleveland and it was a very small convention (laughter) -- I mean, compared to now -- there were maybe a couple hundred people or something. But I was really taken with it. There were all these debates and Charlie Cogen was president and he was kind of a conservative. Carl had been the president before.

Q: He was president up to sixty --

A: Three.

Q: And then Charlie won in 63'?

A: Yeah. But Charlie, he was being challenged, and I'll never forget he had to stand on a step stool. But when he spoke, he spoke with a lot of authority. But then I Shanker in action and Cogen in action -- it was very exciting for me. So that was my first convention. Then I started going every year. Then I became a member of the executive board, and then a delegate to the convention. I forget when he was elected. Al became president of the AFT in 1974, I think it was. He stayed president of the AFT until about 1996. I was running after him basically. I was doing all the public relations, doing the TV stuff. I was the Staff Director, they had to change my title to Executive Director because that was the title that -- the media weren't interested in talking to the Staff Director, but they were interested in talking to the Executive Director -- so I became the Executive Director. It was the same job, I was basically running the UFT in every way, and of course going to Al for advise. No questions, the buck stopped with him. But I made it possible for him to get really involved with the AFT. And as we know, he ruled the AFT, expedentially [sic]. In 75', Al -- I think he has said afterwards, that the fiscal crisis was so bad and so big that, and then there was that strike in 75' that he did not deal with and didn't want. I can't say that I was as (inaudible) as he was. (laughter)

But, the New York City school system had never seen anything like it. There were 12,000 layoffs in one fell swoop, at the beginning of the school year. Class sizes shot up to like 40 students. And the teachers were infuriating. There was no holding back.

Q: Did it broadside the union? Did you see it coming?

A: Well, we saw during the summer that there was this terrible fiscal crisis and that that they couldn't control the (inaudible) to run the city. Al saw it really -- he saw it coming. And he thought it was a big mistake and he argued with the executive board director, but the teachers were so angry that most of us felt, you know, defeated. But he was right. (laughter) It was one of those things. There was no -- when we went on strike, the governor disappeared -- our governor disappeared, our governor, Ed K. The mayor was helpless. These were friends. The control board just wanted to get the city back on its feet, that's all they cared about. And they weren't going to give teachers raises. So it was very, very rough, very rough. We had to move heaven and earth to get back. And we got back with some promises for the future. I think we were out for four or five days, I don't know exactly. It was pretty scary, how are we going to get back? We got no money, but we had salaries withheld. There were some promises for the future. But we were just

lucky to go back to work. That was a horrible Fall, just all those layoffs and such bitterness, and teachers were bitter because they thought going on strike would save those jobs and it couldn't and didn't. The fiscal crisis was just too big. It was a very, very painful time.

Q: Whose idea was it to go across Brooklyn Bridge? That was a wonderful PR stunt.

A: Well, we did that a few time, that wasn't just one time.

Q: Oh, OK.

A: (laughter)

Q: There was that one picture.

A: Yeah, well, it was after the 75' strike. Well yeah, this was -- the Board of Education was in Brooklyn and City Hall was in Manhattan, so it was just logical. (laughter) We would gather at the Board of Education and walk across the bridge to City hall and we would continue our protest that way. I have no idea whose idea it was, we had all arrived at it. We had done it, we had done it before, we had done it afterward several times.

Q: It worked so well.

A: It worked so well, it's convenient to have the Board of Ed in Brooklyn and City Hall in Manhattan. (laughter)

Q: So then, you go back to work, but there's also a way to save the city. Did Al bring that to the executive board?

A: Well, they asked us -- the Control Board asked us -- to invest our pension funds in the city, to save the city from bankruptcy. Al was very, very reluctant. There were people (inaudible). No, because it wasn't the Executive Board that controlled the pension funds, it was the pension people, and he was talking to them. But he was very, very reluctant, because he wasn't sure whether it was worth investing our pension funds. So there was a lot of pressure on him, tremendous pressure. I think he exacted some things, I don't remember what they were. Have you been reading (inaudible) books?

Q: Yes.

A: He's a great author. But, we had the officers and top staff Dick Lavinger's (sp?) apartment and they were controlling us and pressuring us. We had to decide what to do. Finally, we agreed -- the pension people agreed. They wouldn't have done it without Al's -- you know, without bringing him on board. So you know, he saved the city. (laughter) But, it put us in good stead for a short, very short period of time, because the next contract negotiations were tough.

Q: Who was mayor then?

A: Who was mayor after Dave?

Q: I think it was Koch. Very different management style, wasn't it?

A: Very, very. Well, unlike today, he wasn't out to kill the unions, that wasn't his thing. He was going to fight to give as little as possible, but he wasn't -- I often tell people today, we had some tough fights with tough nails, but basically we never had a mayor or chancellor that wanted kill the union. That was not their thing. They disagreed with us, but they understood that the union was helpful. We got money for the schools and we would fight for the schools.

Q: Now what kind repercussions happened with the strike?

A: The 75' strike?

Q: Yes, the 75' strike.

A: No, he didn't do anything.

Q: But, were there any penalties against the union or --

A: Well, we did, I'm trying to think, we did lose (inaudible) in 75' or was it the prior strike, when we lost (inaudible) and we had big fines levied on us? You'll have to look that up.

Q: OK. I think it was late 70's when you lost (inaudible).

A: I think it was; it was horrible. It was very, very difficult. Because we had to drop everything and just develop a way of collecting dues, which we did. And the members responded, I think we collected over 100% of dues.

Q: That's amazing!

A: The members supported the union; they were wonderful. But, we couldn't do anything else. I had to -- I remember going over the union's budget with a fine-tooth comb, looking at every nickel. "Do we need this? Do we need that?" If the answer was -- going so far as to not pay for -- turn the lights out, you know what I mean? It was really horrible, we had to save every nickel that we could, and we did. We did. We didn't lay off people. We needed everybody to go out and collect dues. Besides not wanting to lay off people, the chapter was hit with bad news and the members responded. It was wonderful.

Q: What was the size of the staff then?

A: Well, we had district reps. So, it was decentralization, it was 32 then. And I think there must have been another 20 people or so.

Q: Through the 70's we see also this anti-(inaudible), the tax issues, and the tuition tax issues keep popping up. Were you getting more and more involved with AFT's national programs?

A: Yes. I was on the executive council, and I was getting more deeply involved in UFT programs and playing a role there. But I think a lot of -- we had at the UFT, in the beginning there were some other locals who did the training -- but

the AFT began to develop that teacher training and paying for courses, and labor training.

Q: And what kind of labor training does the UFT do?

A: Well, as I told you, we started very early on, developing with Cornell, with the study school, teaching the staff -- because it was a small staff and we got a bigger staff, I handled grievances -- we taught chapter leaders then. We got chapter leaders involved when the movement got big. We trained chapter leaders -- and even before it was big. As a chapter leader in a small union, I took chapter leader training courses. So we did that, we did a lot of labor relations early on, teaching chapter leaders how to enforce the contract, and how to bring grievances and how to handle them, how to run meetings, how to book the members. There were a lot of training of staff, chapter leaders and district reps. And we had a very effective staff, very effective.

Q: Still do. (laughter)

A: Still do, yes.

Q: And you started early with the teacher training too.

A: We did. The teacher center -- Al, as AFT president, he got involved in this other meetings on the international scale and he went to visit the British Teacher's Union at the International Union of Teachers. And they had something

called the Teacher Center -- which they paid for. It wasn't anything like the Teacher Center we have now. But it was just a place where you could come and be a headquarters, where they sometimes went to seminars with experts, and Al was very taken with it. Now, they also had a pub. (laughter) They could do that there. They had a pub. Teachers would sit away and drink a pint of beer, and talk to each other about schools. And when Al came back after seeing that, he told us all about it and he said "we should try to do something like that." Well, we talked about having a pub and... (laughter) And then we decided it would really be better to find a way to provide the support for the teachers in their schools, and then we could also have a place where they could come and learn. But we should have both. So we started to develop the Teacher Center program. I was heading that committee. We developed a whole (inaudible) and then we hired someone, Lena Cooper (sp?), who had done some stuff for school district, (inaudible). So she knew a lot about how to train teachers. We started developing this great program.

Q: What were some of the first programs offered?

A: Basically, we were doing a lot of stuff. Some of the first programs were having like, keeping order when you discipline a class. That was very important. We taught the

teachers what the system was trying to teach them -- the system wasn't very good. How to teach math, how to teach reading, how to -- I mean, all of that. Stuff that the system wasn't doing well.

Q: And here's the union doing it.

A: And here's the union doing it and the teachers really loved it. They really loved it. They'd come and take these courses.

Q: It sounds like you were building a teachers community.

A: We were building a community, and then we began worked the city university and other universities. We arranged for our people to become adjuncts and we arranged to get course credit for the teachers, this over a period of time. And we built what was truly, what I think now, is a university.

And the teachers loved it because we had teachers teaching them who understood what they needed to know. We tried to get it -- it started off mainly as teachers getting together and learning certain things and having learn in the school -- similar to the British version. But it clearly became not enough. The teachers wanted to know more. So then we developed a program called "Individual Professional Development," IPD. And there we had teachers actually going into the classrooms with other teachers and

helping individual teachers. That was expensive. We kept that going for quite awhile. Because it was so helpful, we got support from the school districts. We began to see that while we got money from the State Legislature -- well, the teachers (inaudible). I mean, we got money first from the Carter Administration. When Carter lost his election, Reagan eliminated that money. So then we went to the foundations, (inaudible) and then we kept it going and we went to the City Council and the State Legislature and got it statewide. And it just grew and grew. So now it's really an acknowledged success.

Q: It sounds like part of this program could turn into a mentoring program.

A: Part of it was mentoring. What you saw upstairs is the program. Yeah, the mentoring -- it had so many changes, but you had to also find a way to make it cross-cultural. That was part of the issue. So we figured it out by having some master teachers work after school with other teachers. And that worked very well for a while, and they learned some things from that. So anyway, we were totally committed to helping our members in ways that the Board of Education wasn't interested. And it just grew and grew and grew.

Q: And this includes (inaudible) as well, right?

A: Absolutely.

Q: And were you bringing some of these innovations into the team and say "these are the educational reforms we are trying to initiate or are initiating?"

A: Yeah, we always included them in on it and people came and looked at it, and locals tried it. But it took a lot of political clout to get the funding for it. And they didn't have the authority to do that, and some did. They did it in Florida, they did it in -- Detroit had a program, Boston had a program. They were locals, a lot of locals in the area who began to do it, and do it well. Of course UFT is so huge. (laughter) It has many more sources than most locals have, there's just no comparison in terms of size and ability to put money into programs and time into programs. So that program is still going strong. It's terrific.

Q: (inaudible)

A: -- It's amazing, it's wonderful.

Q: Yeah. Which leads me into, what were the first responses to those programs?

A: Well, when it came out in 1983, and of course a lot of school people had this reaction, they were criticizing the schools, "it's terrible, it's not fair." But Al had a whole different take on it, he was very, very brilliant as usual. He said "Look --

*END OF TAPE 1*

Q: -- with AFT Archives, speaking with Sandra Feldman, on June 2nd, 2005. And we were just talking about Al's reading of the *Nation at Risk* report.

A: Yeah.

Q: Did you all separately read this?

A: Well, it was reported in all newspapers and we got copies of it. We didn't read it all together or anything like that. It was reported, and it had a lot of criticisms of the schools and we all said "Hey, a lot of these criticisms are correct."

Q: What was your first take on the report?

A: I said, "you know, it is correct." In a lot of ways, I agreed with it. And he had the clout as a leader to bring people along, and that's so important, and he did. He brought this whole convention along. They listened to them. They were worried and weary, but it made a huge difference in terms of him being able to reach out in making education policy at the national level, and for the AFT to start developing the reputation as an organization that really had an effect on kids. So that was good.

Q: This was definitely a shift in AFT.

A: It was. Remember, we were doing the Teacher Center, but the AFT was still very small and trying to win contracts and fighting for bread and butter. It was very consuming. So yes, it was a shift. It was a shift. And as in all of these kinds of radical shifts, not everyone subscribed to it. But ultimately, AFT become an organization at the national level as an organization that cares about education and cares about kids and has ideas. And that was that.

Q: One story I was hearing was when Al brought Dal Lawrence to the executive council to explain to explain the Toledo Plan.

A: Yeah.

Q: Do you agree with how that was set up?

A: Well, the Toledo local had developed a program that, what was that name? Do you remember?

Q: The "Toledo Plan" is the only one I know of.

A: They had this plan that would help failing teachers, that would use the skills of experienced teachers to help new teachers and it was very successful. The school system in Toledo bought into it and they were doing very well. They were making a difference. We teachers are always running into problems and they were making a big difference especially. So Al brought Lawrence to describe it, and I think people were like "you got to be kidding. We're just

trying to survive here." But ultimately, they got a little competitive and thought "let us try this." Certainly in New York we tried it, and I think a lot of other organizations did too.

Q: It spread to Cincinnati and --

A: Yeah. That's right. So, that was good. Now, we're going to get moving here.

Q: OK, let me start with your UFT presidency. So, Al decides it's time to step down.

A: Yeah.

Q: So how was that brought up to you?

A: Well --

Q: Did he give you some wine, a nice French dinner? (laughter)

A: No. (laughter) I think he just told me that he thought it was time. He didn't say that "I want Sandy." He wasn't like that. We had a meeting of the caucus leadership and he said that he was stepping down as president.

Q: [mockingly] Oh no, what are we going to do?

A: But everyone immediately turned to me.

Q: So at this time you're secretary of --

A: I was secretary and also at the same time still Executive Director. So they knew I had been running it and been involved in every issue. I was a leader in negotiations, so I think they were very comfortable with it already.

Q: So you were leading negotiations already.

A: Oh yeah.

Q: You took over right in the middle of negotiations.

A: Yeah. I had been...

Q: And you managed to not go to arbitration on that contract.

A: Yeah, I'm trying to remember that contract. We negotiated a good contract. It was a very good contract.

Q: Do you remember some of the gains in that contract?

A: Well, that was my first contract. We got rid of time clocks.

Q: Explain that, time clocks.

A: Teachers still had to punch time clocks like blue-collar workers, and they hated it. They absolutely hated it. I don't know, other things. But that was a big one, a very big one. Oh! Wait, was that the contract where we got (inaudible) every two weeks? I don't remember if that was the one before. But I mean, we got those kind of dignities that were extremely rare and we got a good raise, which was helpful. Yes, the contract was very popular with members, it had all sorts of stuff in it; I'd have to look at it. I'm trying to remember what was in it.

Q: Give me an example of how your first month was in UTF presidency life.

A: How was --

Q: How was your first month? What was your first action as president?

A: You know, I think the main thing was to assure the staff and the members and the delegate assembly -- well, I used to come in for every delegate assembly, the delegate assembly, that was a big thing, because the opposition was still there. So I had to show that I could handle that. I could, and I did. What was important to me -- you know, Al had been criticized for, and it was right to a certain extent because he was president of the AFT, so it was impossible for him to give his all to both organizations -- but to go to schools. Members loved him, but he did not spend time, it was pretty rare, he did once in awhile. So I decided that I would go to school meetings on a regular basis. So I did, and they loved it. They loved it that I came. Because I also loved to go to schools, I loved to be in the schools and smell the kids and be with the teachers. And that was a very big thing and Randy does it to this day.

Q: Did you ever face the union again?

A: Yeah. And I required the other officers to go to schools. I must gone three or four times a week to schools. So that was a big deal. That was a major change. And then, I was there.

Q: You saw it.

A: And that was a big deal for the members. When I was there, I started doing stuff that Al always hated to do, like I attended community meetings and political meetings. I just spent all of my time on UTF stuff, which he wasn't able to do as president of both. It just wasn't possible. So I think it made a huge difference, because it became apparent to members and also to the city, to the opinion makers in the city. "Wow, this is something else when she's around." So I think that was a big change when I first came.

Q: What were the conditions of the schools that you went in?

A: They were terrible. The schools were terrible and filthy. Not all of them, but the schools the poor kids went to. I made a huge fuss; I did a lot of things that some people considered crazy.

Q: Like what?

A: Well, first there was a high school complaining that there weren't paper towels or toilet paper and so on. So we hired, I hired a U-Haul in, and filled it up with toilet paper and paper towels and soap and Cold Press, and did a whole thing where we were bringing this stuff to the school. The Board of Education was (inaudible). Then I would go into the schools and I'd go into the bathrooms. I always went into the bathrooms, the teacher's bathrooms and

the children's bathrooms, which was crazy. I would bring in a New York teacher and photographer and take pictures and plaster them all over the union paper that "look at the conditions of these schools, look at what we're asking teachers to go to the bathroom in." (laughter) Plus I got all these requests and invitations to go visit schools. One time I went to (inaudible) Park High school -- which is right across from City Hall, so very close -- and it was falling apart. The ceiling was falling down. There were holes in the floors. The gym was a disaster area. It was dangerous for the kids. So I asked the mayor to come with me to that school, I said "look, it's not going to take you a long time, it's right across the way," and he came. I had a good relationship with Ed Koch, until I didn't support him in the end. (laughter) But I had a good relationship with him, we fought about things but basically I think he respected me quite a bit, and I respected him. So I took him to that school and I showed him -- this was after school, I didn't want to interrupt the kids, but the teachers were there -- and I showed him around this school and all the horrible things: a room full of computers that didn't work, all kinds of terrible stuff. And then I brought him in to meet with the teachers. These teachers were extraordinary. They used to get very dressed up, the

men would wear sports jackets and ties, so the kids would understand that the even though the school looked horrible, the teachers had a sense of importance, there was importance to the activity they were involved in. And so they talked to him and Koch made arrangements for the school to get fixed. So that was really good, and I did a lot of stuff like that. I went out to Queens where they were, the school was just a mess, and just publicize it. And people used to say "here she comes! Here she comes!" and they would clean up the school before I got there. So people fought for me to come, because their school would get cleaned up because I was going to be there. That was a lot of fun.

Q: So you're bringing a new face to the union basically.

A: Yes. Remember that we had Al for a long time. And even his predecessor too, you had Al, you had Charlie Cogen before him. Then you had Velma, wait, was Velma president before...

Q: She was president of the AFT local.

A: Yeah.

Q: And was vice president later.

A: So anyway, it was a whole big thing, a whole new thing. And then I got very active in the labor movement. Harry Van Arsdale loved me; I had a great relationship with him. I

was the first female president, the first female grand marshal of the labor movement. And that was Harry. Harry asked Al to step down off the AFL central labor council, the executive council, because Al was mostly in Washington, he was still president of the UFT, and so he could put me on. He was very forward with me. And Al was happy to do it.

Q: Right. It seems that the UFT has come into it's own now. The larger labor movement of New York City and all of New York, (inaudible) and transit workers, your seat's at the same table with the (inaudible).

A: Oh yes, absolutely.

Q: I just want to go back to the grandmother --

A: Yeah.

Q: -- that must have been outstanding.

A: It was really fun. I was very honored. You know, the whole labor movement was there of course, and there was Grandma (inaudible)! (laughter)

Q: (laughter) Was AFL (inaudible) there?

A: Oh sure. Yeah, Lynn Kirkland (sp?) was there, everybody was there. All of the other unions were there, no question about it, it was a very big deal.

Q: That's excellent.

A: Yeah.

Q: And it brings to the forefront that women are leading the labor movement.

A: Yeah. That's right.

Q: Did you get any responses from the other women?

A: Oh, the women loved it.

Q: Yeah.

A: They loved it. I was in very good relationships with women of the labor movement. Rank in file and leadership, I had a very good relationship. I think they looked to me, and I was very proud of that. Yeah, I became president in 86'. That was a big deal. It was a very big deal. So, I have 15 minutes and then I have to go.

Q: How much longer do you have?

A: 15 minutes.

Q: 15 minutes? OK. Well, you sent me a tape about the 90' contract. Would you like to talk about --

A: I did send you a tape?

Q: Yeah. It was a delegate assembly.

A: Oh, the delegate assembly.

Q: Yeah.

A: Yeah. God, I haven't listened to these things in years.

Q: I'm reading about it.

A: Oh, good.

Q: Again, were you prepared for what was going to happen? Did you see the fiscal problem in 1990 coming around the corner?

A: To a certain extent, well, in what way? What do you mean?

Q: Immediately Dinkins said you were given a raise and then he retracts stuff because there's no money.

A: Dinkins was very ill served by the people in that term. Remember, we elected him basically. Ed Koch, it took a long time for him forgive me, (laughter) it was really rough. He was furious. Because I've gotten some pretty good contracts from him, I mean I don't have anything bad against Ed Koch, but I think it was time for Dave Dinkins. I worked for about six months with the membership to get acceptance of the endorsement and I think it was our endorsement -- we were a major white organization in the city, endorsing black mayoral candidate, and the other unions were much more than we were. So it made a huge difference that we endorsed. When we went to negotiate the contract it wasn't so much a fiscal crisis, it was the power. He didn't want to do something different from what he had done for 11 years. He was getting advice from Normal Steisel, who was deputy mayor, which he should do that, but he couldn't do it. But we just needed like a percentage more. Just something that would acknowledge who we were in the city,

as teachers, and acknowledge that we played a very important role in his elections. He was very stubborn. (laughter) I know Dave Dinkins, just being involved in New York City, and being involved in the civil rights movement for years. He just dug his heels in, and he's really stubborn. It wasn't until -- I was so furious. I killed him in TV ads. That was a very different time because he cared. Not every administration cares. But he cared that the union was mad at him and was attacking him. I went up to the brink of a strike, and I knew if I had to strike he would not want to bust the union. And I hoped, and rightly so as it turns out, that he would (inaudible) let the union go to strike. Because he cared about the labor movement and he was getting very bad press. What he did that saved the situation was he put Gotbaum on the Board of Education. And Victor really helped us negotiate that contract, because he trusted Victor. He trusted Victor. So we did OK with that contract.

Q: How did he come around to put Victor on the Board of Education?

A: Well he was, by that time, retired. But he was a good friend of David Dinkins, and still is. I think there was an opening; I forget who created an opening. Somebody left the board, and he pointed to Victor. And Victor was really

(inaudible) with him. Because I went through the whole thing with Victor, "I can't see why he can't do this," and he let him know.

Q: And that turned out to be a good contract?

A: Yeah. When I was talking before about the good contract, with the first one.

Q: Your first one has precedent.

A: Oh yeah, that one was especially a good contract. But no, this was a good contract. It's a good contract. A little more than others, and it's got some things that the teachers liked and some conditions.

Q: Excellent.

A: Yeah. You've got a lot of questions here about -- I could tell you a funny story about Ed Koch, and -- I think we're going to have to leave the AFT questions, unless there are some burning ones.

Q: OK.

A: Well, Ed Koch was furious with me. When I brought the union along to an endorsement of Dinkins, he was really angry. I called him and said "Ed, look, I hope that we can still be friends." He said "no, we'll never be friends again, you are finished." (laughter) And of course, Dinkins won the election and Koch wouldn't speak to me for years. Then, at a wedding -- Stan (inaudible) got married, I was good

friends with Stan, my husband was good friends with Stan. Ed Koch was at the wedding, and I went and sat down next to him and said "Ed, you can't still be angry at me." He said "no, why not?" I said (laughter) "because I did what I thought was right for my members. How could you fault me for that?" He says "well, that's a point." I said "it wasn't so much against you as I thought it was good for the union to Dinkins for a whole bunch of reasons, you've got to understand that." He said "OK. Let me think about it." And about a week later -- and remember, this is really a great atmosphere of a wedding and Stan was his top deputy, and I had known Stan since the civil rights movement. He was in core. Anyway, about a week later I got a letter from him, from Ed Koch, it said "I thought about what you said and I'm ready to begin anew." (laughter)

Q: (laughter) And the friendship comes back.

A: Yeah.

Q: That's excellent.

A: Yeah. He'd come to our house for dinner, and we'd go to his house for dinner. I haven't done it in awhile because when I went to New York I didn't have time for it. Yeah.

**End - Interview: Sandra Feldman**