

Gary Farber: Teacher Union Activist

Interview by Matt Farber

I graduated from Long Island University in 1962 and worked in private industry for two years. After that I returned to school to obtain New York City teacher certification in English as a Second Language. My family politics veered toward the Democratic Party line and during the sixties I participated in the anti-war movement as well as civil rights protests on campus. I began my career as a teacher in 1965 at PS 157 in Brownsville, Brooklyn and in 1968 I was transferred to PS 122/380 in Williamsburg, Brooklyn where I spent most of my teaching career. In 1967 there was a teachers' strike for union recognition and a decent contract, however all teachers did not support the UFT in that strike. However the strike in 1968 had wide support.

It oversimplifies the situation and gives a false impression when you talk about the strike pitting Blacks against Jews and creating a crisis for liberals. Not all teachers were Jews. Not all teachers were liberal. Not all Black teachers opposed the strike.

I supported Al Shanker, President of the UFT, and the direction he was leading the union. The 1968 strike was not about race, religion, or personal political beliefs. The purpose of the strike was to build and win recognition for a professional teachers' union. Before the UFT, teachers were treated badly and paid poorly. Teachers were now asserting their rights as educators and the UFT was leading us.

During the strike I attended all the rallies and vividly remember Al telling us that the Union will create system where teachers will have a strong voice that will be heard and respected. I became a strong advocate of teacher rights and was a Chapter Leader in my school for most of my career.

As a beginning teacher I saw teachers abused by school administrators and organizations that claimed to represent the "community." This motivated me to become an even stronger supporter of the Union. The union was especially strong amongst new teachers who felt vulnerable. I believe the teachers who did not support the strike were in most cases not union members.

1968 was a year of assassinations with political and social upheaval across the spectrum of society. Racial and religious tension in New York City during the teachers' strike has to be viewed in that context. Decentralization contained no internal checks and balances. There was wide spread corruption at all levels of administration. The only check and balance was the teachers' union.

After the strike the UFT and the teachers became a political force to be reckoned with in New York City and an equal of the other long established municipal unions. As a result of the 1968 strike and the growth of the UFT, teachers became were able to initiate educational reforms. The UFT created the paraprofessional professional ladder that increased minority hiring and promotion within the school system.

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