Education and Politics: Emerging Alliances

Albert Shanker

The President of the American Federation of Teachers traces the historical evolution of "teachers' political muscle." Today, he notes, teachers are mobilizing to put a pro-education candidate in the White House, since they recognize that the financial crisis threatening education is political in character.

Anyone who doubted the potential of educators to assume a strong role in national politics had those doubts dispelled this summer as teachers and college professors made up a visible and important presence at the national party conventions, particularly the Democratic convention. In addition to getting themselves elected as delegates, teachers did their homework in evaluating the candidates and in making sure that at least the Democratic Party Platform represented educational needs accurately and thoroughly. Leaders of the teachers organizations met with the leading candidates and framed programs that the candidates felt obligated to address themselves to. Phrases like "powerful teachers unions" and "education interest groups" began to find their way into the public press.

To some long-time observers, the widespread political involvement of educators came as a surprise. Admittedly, there is a degree of journalistic fascination in a matronly school teacher's sporting a "Ford Is a Pain in the Class" button. But no one who has followed the rise of teacher militancy or the economics of public education could view teachers' political muscle as anything but the logical culmination of a long historical evolution.

The very institution of public education originated in a political context. Organized workers and immigrant groups in the early 19th century demanded the opportunity to learn the skills needed to improve their own lot and give their children a better chance to advance. Horace Mann's system of "free common schools" in Massachusetts was designed to provide precisely such opportunities. During the Jacksonian period and through the 1840's and '50's, there occurred an unparalleled opening of the frontiers of both the American West and of social aspiration.

The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 reflected the recognition by the U.S. Congress of the need for federal action to ensure that the states met their educational responsibilities. Six million acres of prime land were donated to the states for the endowment of colleges to teach the agricultural and mechanical arts. The Morrill Act may be taken as a paradigm of political decision making in the area of educa-
tion, since Congress was responding to both popular pressures and to considerations of the national good when it enacted the law.

During the last quarter of the past century, it was clearly the labor movement that served as the catalyst for bringing politics and education together. The development of the high school, of vocational education, and of such special services as guidance counseling and school sports came about as a direct result of labor’s persistent efforts. During the Progressive Era, the unions were joined by crusading journalists and other reformers in a broad-based and vocal constituency for good schools. The American Federation of Teachers, founded in 1916, took shape in a highly charged political atmosphere, as Chicago teachers exposed massive tax evasion by Chicago corporations and mobilized public support for adequate and sanitary learning conditions.

Incubation Period

A case could be made that public education was depoliticized somewhat after the heady days of the Progressive school reformers and the young teacher unionists. Indeed, the Progressive forces had all they could do to hold their own against a conservative reaction that began with the postwar Red Scare and continued through the 1920’s. The very fact that the conservatives found in the schools a convenient target, however, indicates the extent to which the schools were permeated with politics.

There did occur a lessening of public teacher activism all through the middle years of this century, as the teachers directed their efforts toward such goals as passing tenure laws, seeking uniform certification standards, establishing pension systems, and petitioning state legislatures to establish minimum salary levels. The protection of academic freedom, whether through tenure or in other ways, continued to occupy a good portion of the teachers’ agenda.

The turn to these issues marked a kind of incubation period for teachers in politics. The teaching force was not entirely quiescent, but the teachers did feel that they had to construct a pro bono publico case for their issues in order to meet with success. And they met with a very
large measure of success, to judge from the number of tenure laws and other basic teacher rights that were secured through these middle years.

Schools as "Turf"

Although never free of turbulence, the schools during the post-World War II period reflected some of the placidity of the times. The teachers coped as best they could with overcrowding and new curricular demands, while school administration techniques blossomed as practically a new branch of the sciences. It was this growth in administrative bureaucracy, coupled with the exclusion of teachers from decision making, that partly paved the way for the great sea-change of the 1960's: collective bargaining.

The teachers' demands for collective bargaining represented an assertion of power, confidence, and expertise by people whose services and whose tractability had previously been taken more or less for granted. It is important to note that the rise of teacher militancy occurred in a context of self-assertion by numerous other groups, most notably black Americans. Thus, while teachers were exercising their rights as workers to organize and bargain collectively, the schools themselves were subject to increasing pressures from parents, community groups, and—somewhat later—from feminists and ethnic organizations. The schools, in other words, were viewed as "turf" to be battled over for the sake of group identity of one kind or another.

The hallmark of 1960's politics, of course, was conflict and often violent conflict. As for collective bargaining, school boards and school administrators reacted to teacher unions in much the same fashion as industrialists and tycoons reacted to private sector unions in the years before the National Labor Relations Act: They resisted and cajoled and tried to punish. Lacking a legal sanction for withholding services, the teachers struck anyway and increasingly came to see vindictive school boards as "the enemy." Likewise, parents who had organized "unions" of their own to make demands of the system frequently took adversary positions vis-à-vis the teachers.

The net result of all this conflict is still somewhat difficult to measure, but it's clear that the fragmented school constituency was ill-prepared to deal with the common problems that were soon to emerge in the 1970's. Those infighting on the main deck were oblivious to the iceberg that lay ahead. That iceberg was the crisis in school finance.

The Nixon-Ford Years: An Education Disaster

By now, all of us are familiar with the basic history of Presidents Nixon and Ford with respect to social service programs. It is a history
of vetoes, impoundments, and a “new federalism” that promised and delivered huge sums to the states and localities while undercutting important and needed social and educational services. As a result of the Nixon-Ford approach, the federal government right now is spending less in real terms for the public schools than at any time since 1966.

What is perhaps less immediately evident is the way in which the Nixon-Ford fiscal and economic policies decimated public education. Schooling is financed through a combination of local property tax assessments, and state and federal aid. The level of state support for education is a crucial component, ranging from a low of about 20 percent of total expenditures in Massachusetts to a high of as much as 80 percent in some Southern states. What the Nixon-Ford economic policies accomplished was to squeeze local school districts on all three levels of support: federal, state, and local.

As federal programs for the schools were cut back or vetoed, rampant inflation took its corrosive toll on districts’ buying power. The impact of inflation was particularly acute on schools because of their already high fuel costs, which tripled in the aftermath of the 1973 Arab oil embargo and Nixon’s support of domestic fuel costs. Aggravating the inflationary bombshell, Nixon’s man at the Federal Reserve System, Arthur Burns, actually raised interest rates and made it increasingly difficult for units of local government to borrow money or to pay off debts already incurred. Most damaging of all, however, was the Nixon administration’s readiness to accept very high levels of unemployment as productive facilities closed down and their tax contributions, together with those of the workers, were lost to the community.

The impact of a 10 percent unemployment rate, with joblessness running much higher in places like Michigan, Cleveland, and New York, was nothing less than catastrophic for the schools. Instead of collecting taxes for distribution to school districts and other services, states were forced to spend every available dollar for unemployment, welfare, and Medicaid payments. It has been authoritatively estimated that for every percentage point in nationwide unemployment, a minimum of $16 billion in revenues is lost to all units of government through a com-
combination of reduced tax receipts and stepped-up payments to idle workers and their dependents. Property-tax collections likewise faltered as workers lost their homes or sought hardship abatements in the midst of the crisis. And of course, with buying power sharply cut, the states that rely on sales taxes to meet educational budgets found themselves with much less money to send back to the local districts.

The final bitter irony of Nixonomics in the public sector is that budget retrenchment eventually forced public employers to lay off large numbers of workers, thus critically compounding the depressed economies of New York City, Detroit, Chicago, and even such Sunbelt spots as Phoenix and San Diego. In most places where layoffs occurred, teachers were among the most vulnerable. In New York, for example, layoffs in the school system amounted to over 20 percent of the total work force, whereas the fire and police departments were cut back approximately 11 percent. All public employees became whipping boys, but teachers were the hardest hit.

Rude Awakening for Teachers

So much for the inquest. Organized teachers quickly realized what was happening to them, but they were not prepared to deal with it immediately. Teachers in many states were
still struggling to secure bargaining rights, while teachers in the states with bargaining laws still faced the severe handicap of legal strike prohibitions and poorly framed dispute resolution procedures. Added to these disadvantages now is the discovery that collective bargaining means very little when there is no money to bargain for.

The key element of the teachers' rude awakening is the recognition that the financial crisis is political in character. It is not an Act of God—but rather a function of the political process—that there is no money for the schools. Likewise, it is not an accident—but a direct result of Nixon's political appointments—that the Supreme Court recently shut the door on a federal collective bargaining bill in League of Cities vs. Usery and upheld the right of school boards to fire teachers without appeal in the Hortonville case.

In short, the teachers have learned that what they have won in years of struggle for bargaining may be taken away almost overnight through the workings of politics. It has been a painful lesson and one that will not be soon forgotten.

Emerging Alliances

Teachers are responding to the new political challenges as they once responded to the challenges of academic freedom and collective bargaining. In this national election year, they are mobilized as never before to put a pro-education candidate in the White House. The American Federation of Teachers at its August convention endorsed the Carter-Mondale ticket by an overwhelming margin. At the Democratic National Convention in July, the AFT had the most member delegates of any AFL-CIO affiliated union. The teachers intend not only to give pro forma endorsements to but also to go out and work for the candidates in their local communities. Raising substantial sums of money for internal political education is one important part of this effort; another is joining forces with other labor unions at the state and local levels to coordinate canvassing and get-out-the-vote work.

The labor connection, whether in political action or in lobbying or in bargaining support, is one of the most important emerging alliances for education. It is emerging insofar as teachers, university faculties, and other education workers continue to turn to the AFT in order to enjoy the benefits of labor affiliation. Teachers who have attempted to promote education through an "independent professional association" have found that it just doesn't work, that the independent route is one of sterility and isolation.

Then, too, the labor movement is a key component of an even broader alliance that has grown up in Washington among all the constituent groups in education. I refer to the Full Funding Committee for Educational Programs, an umbrella group of some 80 education and labor organizations set up specifically to see to it that education bills get passed and adequately funded. The Full Funding Committee coordinated the override of President Ford's veto of the 1976 education appropriations bill—a feat that in and of itself began to make observers aware of the new alignment in support of education.

Of even greater long-range significance than the Full Funding Committee in the political scene may be the evolution of the Forum of U.S. Educational Leaders created in 1974 as part of the U.S. delegation to Europe's Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). The forum includes representatives of the AFT, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the American Association of School Administrators, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of State Boards of Education, the National Congress of Parents and Teachers, the National School Boards Association, and the Education Commission of the States. The forum has developed as a true policy forum, with an agenda of educational issues and plans to adopt joint positions on as many items as possible. As an index to the new political and economic sophistication of education organizations, it should be noted that one of the important issues on the forum's agenda is the federalization of state and local welfare costs.

Politics is indeed the new challenge facing education. [E]

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