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### Militancy In Many Forms: Teachers Strikes And Urban Insurrection, 1967-74

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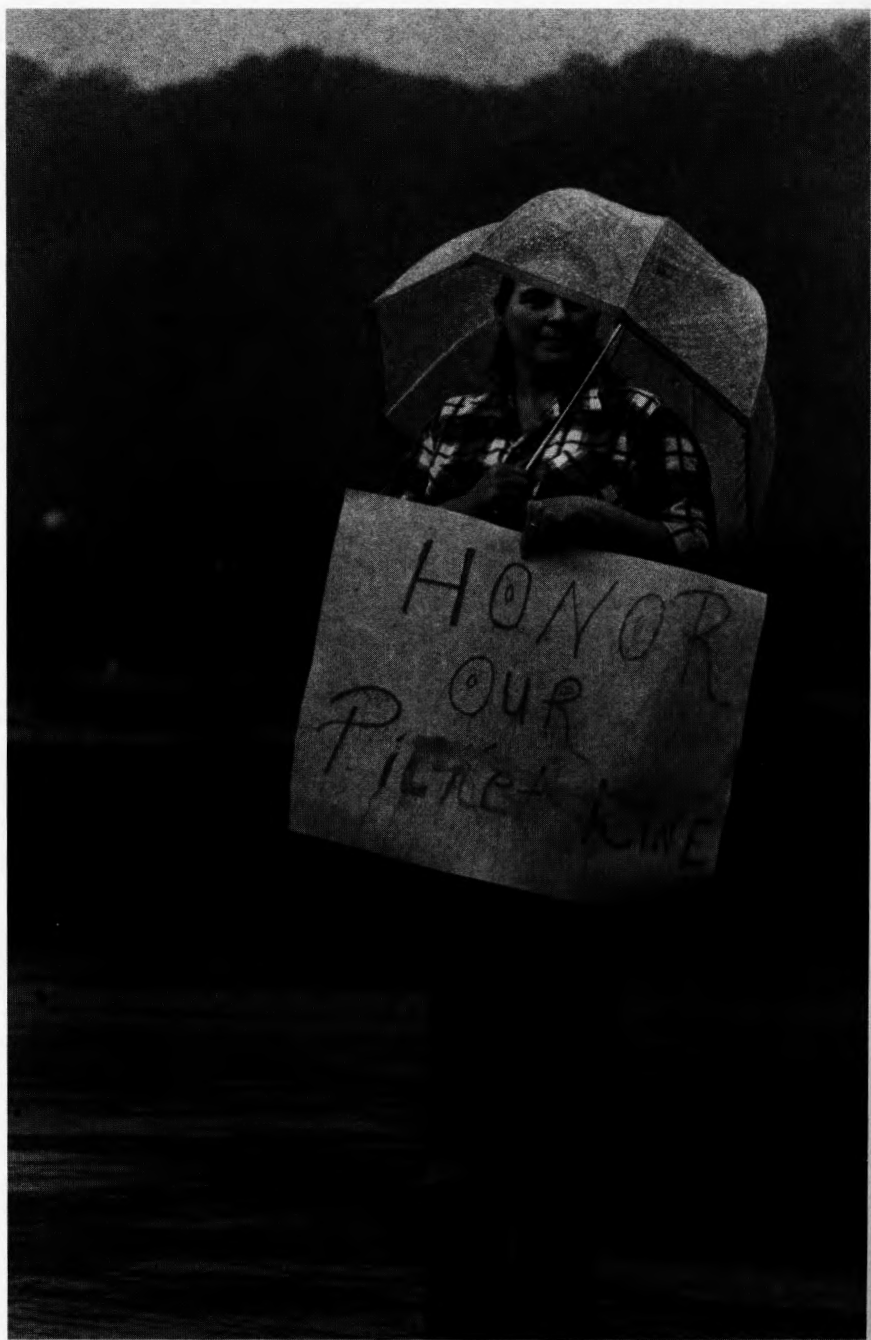
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## *Militancy in Many Forms: Teachers Strikes and Urban Insurrection, 1967–74*

Marjorie Murphy

Public school teacher militancy appeared suddenly in the late 1960s, though the movement for teacher unionism was quite mature, dating to the early twentieth century. Like the rank-and-file militancy in other sectors, teacher activism drew some of its strength from a new, younger workforce, very much dedicated to the social issues of the day, including desegregation and ending the Vietnam War. The examples of civil rights activists, student antiwar demonstrators, feminists, and other social movement protesters inspired teachers to confront school boards, mayors, and state legislatures in a wave of strikes and protests demanding better wages, improved working conditions, and more funding for schools. Unlike most workplace militants in other sectors, teacher activists mobilized in an environment—the public school system—that was the locus of struggle for another powerful social movement, namely that of African Americans. Inevitably, teachers and their unions would encounter African American public school activists fighting for desegregation and greater community control over their schools. What was not inevitable was the shape of this encounter.

Often, across the country, teacher unions and civil rights leaders could find common cause, or at least avoid conflict. In several large urban settings, however, the rise of Black Power, particularly its separatist tendency, led to a series of complicated confrontations between African American activists and militant teachers, with tragic results. In New York City's Ocean Hill-Brownsville section and in Newark, New Jersey, these confrontations weakened the teachers' unions and undermined the potential for meaningful community control of the schools. They bitterly divided the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), and what had been a very progressive union grew more conservative, a shift that made it easier for its rival, the National Education Association (NEA), to recruit the growing number of teachers interested in unionism. The reasons for the AFT's shift have much to do

with the rise to national leadership of Albert Shanker as AFT president; it was his neo-conservative approach to education that most alienated teachers and weakened the union.<sup>1</sup>

### The Rise of Teacher Militancy

The number of work stoppages by public workers in the years after World War II added up to no more than a handful until the 1960s. In most states, legislation prohibited public workers, including teachers, policemen, and firemen, from striking. The prohibition was so strong that many unions, as a matter of course, adopted anti-strike pledges; others, however, clung to the right without ever using it. In 1962, President John F. Kennedy, advised by New York City Mayor Robert Wagner, issued Executive Order 10988, establishing collective bargaining rights for federal government workers. Four years earlier, Wagner had issued a similar Executive Order of his own, number 49, known as the "Little Wagner Act," which allowed collective bargaining for the city's workers. Other cities and states enacted similar legislation.

While most jurisdictions still prohibited strikes by public employees, the more accommodating legal environment encouraged public sector worker militancy, including work stoppages. Many of these strikes were recognition and first-contract strikes, because, despite the new laws, public sector workers still had to mobilize to convince local and state authorities to bargain. By the mid-sixties, there had been 142 work stoppages by public workers nationwide. The number grew to 169 in 1967 and 254 in 1968, compared to 15 in 1958. This rise in militancy accelerated in the late 1960s, with 411 public worker strikes in 1968 and 412 in 1969. The number dropped slightly in the early seventies and averaged about 375 for the rest of the decade. After 1981, the number of strikes fell dramatically.<sup>2</sup>

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1 The author wishes to thank Cal Winslow and Marty Goldensohn, Aaron Brenner, and Carole Mackenoff for their comments and encouragement. On teacher militancy, see D. Selden, *The Teacher Rebellion* (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1985), pp. 75-80; M. Murphy, *Blackboard Unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900-1980* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 226; S. Aronowitz, *From the Ashes of the Old: American Labor and America's Future* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1998); T. W. Kheel, "Strikes and Public Employment," *Michigan Law Review* vol. 67:5 (March 1969), pp. 931-42; and P. Buhle, *Taking Care of Business: Samuel Gompers, George Meany, Lane Kirkland, and the Tragedy of American Labor* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), pp. 146-203.

2 US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Handbook of Labor Statistics 1966-82*.



Teachers were some of the most militant public sector unions. They engaged in more than 300 teachers' strikes during the sixties, and in 1967 alone teachers nationwide walked out at least 105 times. David Selden, former AFT leader, calculated that at least 1,000 school districts experienced a strike or threatened strike during the hard-fought representation struggles of the 1960s, and another 2,000–3,000 districts saw job actions of one kind or another, short of a strike.<sup>3</sup>

The teachers union in New York City, the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), was one of the oldest teachers unions in the country. In the fall of 1960, it engaged in a one-day walkout aimed at winning union recognition. With more than half the teachers walking picket lines at hundreds of schools throughout the city, the demonstration had its effect; the city agreed to a union election for the following spring, which the UFT won. Teachers demanded a pay raise, sick pay for substitutes, a fifty-minute break for lunch, and binding arbitration, but when negotiations dragged on into the spring of 1962, the union called another strike. It lasted only one day, but convinced the state to provide the funds to meet the teachers' demands. They won the first comprehensive collective bargaining contract for teachers in the country.<sup>4</sup>

New York City teachers were not alone in growing more determined and militant. The success of union organizing and mobilization in the Big Apple led the AFT (of which the UFT was the largest local) to send organizers around the country, and the results were immediate. Detroit teachers won collective bargaining rights in 1964, and the next year, in neighboring Hamtramck, teachers, like the auto workers of the 1930s, held a two-week sit-down strike. Teachers in Pittsburgh walked out a few years later, and when they were arrested, the public outcry led a judge to release them. Teacher militancy helped establish the political clout of their unions. During several strikes by teachers in Gary, Indiana, the city's first African American mayor, elected with support of the black teachers, mediated favorable settlements. Nationwide, the AFT's efforts led to skyrocketing growth as the union expanded from 60,000 to 200,000 members between 1960 and 1970.

3 Selden, *Teacher Rebellion*, pp. 109–10. See also [www.aft.org/about/history](http://www.aft.org/about/history).

4 J. B. Freeman, *Working Class New York: Life and Labor Since World War II* (New York: New Press, 2000), pp. 49, 203; C. Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981); W. C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Part Two; and T. Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 1988), pp. 129, 161–4.

### Teacher Militancy Confronts Urban Unrest

The arc of teacher militancy coincided with rising urban unrest and escalating protests against the Vietnam War, but it was no coincidence. Teachers in the nation's big cities had watched as their chronically underfunded schools deteriorated. They held their employers, the boards of education, responsible for the terrible conditions and saw their militancy as a means to force the cities and states to improve the schools. They took a further step by connecting the conditions in the schools to larger issues of war, crime, unemployment, and racism. Such links were obvious to teachers, many of whom, for example, found themselves teaching young African American men of draft age who used high school to avoid the draft much as middle-class young white men used college. The inequalities of the draft and the American education system were manifest in the classroom. As teachers increasingly made these connections, they made the struggles of their communities part of their own struggles for better schools.

The AFT had considerable credibility in these efforts, because it was one of the most progressive unions in the country. Despite a substantial loss of membership in the South equaling some 18 percent of total membership, the union began desegregating in 1956 by combining its African American and lily-white locals a full fifteen years before the NEA did likewise. Teachers and AFT leaders funded and joined civil rights demonstrations, desegregation marches, and struggles for greater school funding in African American districts. Richard Parrish, an African American teacher and vice president of the UFT and AFT, led an integrated group of teachers to Prince Edward County, Virginia, in 1963 to start what later became known as Freedom Schools in the African American community. As a result of this type of activity, the AFT had strong relationships with local and national civil rights organizations, particularly around efforts to integrate the schools, and it won to its ranks thousands of African American teachers who saw the union as a means to fight racism.<sup>5</sup>

Relationships between the AFT and African American leaders were not without their tensions, and those tensions grew, especially in New York City, as both teacher militancy and the African American struggle accelerated in the late 1960s. Signs of growing conflict emerged in 1967 during the UFT's bargaining for a new contract in New York City. In

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5 L. Buder, "City Stands Fast in School Dispute," *New York Times*, September 5, 1967, p. 1; "Another Opinion, Why the Teachers Are Not Teaching," *New York Times*, September 17, 1967, p. E15.

addition to a wage increase, the union had a series of demands related to the classroom. The teachers asked for more control over the curriculum, professional preparation time, paraprofessionals in the classroom, and the power to remove disruptive children. The union also demanded the expansion of its More Effective Schools (MES) program. This program, which the Board of Education adopted first in 1965 for about a dozen schools, called for smaller schools, a radical reduction in class size, the introduction of pre-K classes, and the use of teams of psychologists, social workers, and other specialists to work with students and their parents to address the impact of poverty and prejudice. In 1967, the UFT demanded that more schools be included in MES and that the city commit to lobbying the New York State Legislature to match its funding for MES. As part of the campaign, the union pointed to the false promises made by the Board of Education in Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Ocean Hill-Brownsville. UFT leaders invited reporters to photograph the dilapidated schoolrooms in those areas and highlighted the rise in the crime statistics in the city's schools. After a two-week strike in the fall of 1967, the UFT won most of its demands, including, remarkably, the city's commitment to petition Albany for greater funding.<sup>6</sup>

With this victory, UFT leaders thought they had successfully combined the social progressivism of unionism with the push to reform education and save the city's poorest schools. "We thought [the union] was a vehicle for social change," one teacher leader recalled.<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, during the strikes the teachers found themselves excoriated in the community and the press. One *New York Times* columnist remarked, "Working teacher turned against non-working teacher, Negro parents (who three years ago had boycotted the schools with UFT support in protest against de facto segregation) charged the union with callousness toward slum children." Behind the criticism was a shift in the political context in New York

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6 R. Teilhet, Oral History, American Federation of Teachers Oral History Project, Walter Reuther Archives, Wayne State University; Buder, "City Stands Fast in School Dispute," *New York Times*; Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, pp. 232–51; B. Carter, *Pickets, Parents, and Power: The Story Behind the New York City Teachers' Strike* (New York: Citation Press, 1971); D. Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: New York, 1805–1973: A History of the Public Schools as Battleground for Social Change* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); J. A. Gordon, *Why They Couldn't Wait: A Critique of the Black-Jewish Conflict over Ocean Hill-Brownsville, 1967–1971* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2001); C. Taylor, *Knocking at Our Own Door: Milton Galamison and the Struggle to Integrate New York City Schools* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), pp. 176–207; J. E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites and the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

7 R. Teilhet, Oral History, American Federation of Teachers Oral History Project, Walter Reuther Archives, Wayne State University; Buder, "City Stands Fast in School Dispute." *New York Times*.

City and nationwide. The negotiations and strike had taken place against the background of major urban riots in the summer of 1967 in Tampa, Cincinnati, Atlanta, Newark, northern New Jersey (East Orange, Jersey City, Englewood, Plainfield, New Brunswick), and Detroit. Cities were in flames, dozens killed, and the turmoil lasted through the fall and winter.

The urban unrest accompanied and encouraged the emerging Black Power movement, which shifted the emphasis of the African American struggle from integration to empowerment. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee became an exclusively African American organization, as Stokely Carmichael declared that "integration is irrelevant." Community-based organizations, such as the Black Panthers and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), rose to prominence. When it came to schools, these organizations were more interested in community control than desegregation. They wanted a thoroughgoing transformation of education that would address the specific needs and culture of African American children, including an Afro-centric curriculum. As they saw it, such an education was part and parcel of the larger social transformation they advocated for their communities and American society generally. In carrying out their activity, these community-based African American organizations differentiated between "the establishment" and "the community," and they usually identified teachers and their unions with the establishment.

The new breed of African American activists, which in New York City included most prominently Robert Sonny Carson of CORE, opposed many of the teachers' demands during the 1967 round of bargaining. As they saw it, demands to remove disruptive children and spend more time on class preparation illustrated teachers' racist disinterest in African American children. Contrary to the UFT slogan "Teachers want what children need," Carson and his followers viewed the strike as further evidence of the teachers' greed. Already skeptical of the union's commitment to the African American community, they dismissed MES as an effort to reinforce a racist curriculum and prevent more community control over what African American children would be taught. Many African American teachers, who had joined the union as a vehicle for civil rights, agreed with Carson, at least when it came to the strike, and for the first time large numbers of them refused to support the UFT and crossed the picket lines.<sup>8</sup>

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8 "Athens Steps Up Its Loyalty Purge," *New York Times*, September 24, 1967, p. 20; J. Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: The Troubles I've Seen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997). The Gotbaum-Shanker feud begins with this strike; see Freeman, *Working Class New York*, p. 225; J. Bellush, *Union Power and New York: Victor Gotbaum and District Council 37* (New York: Praeger, 1984).

The divisions between the UFT and the African American community, and within the UFT itself, remained muted during the 1967 strike, but the conflicts sparked by the strike set the terms of the much larger conflagration that took place the next year in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville section of Brooklyn.

### **Ocean Hill-Brownsville**

As in 1967, the conflict between the UFT and African American activists in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in 1968 took place against a backdrop of urban unrest, this time following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The assassination proved particularly tragic for Ocean Hill-Brownsville, because it ended an incipient movement for economic justice led by King that might have provided an alternative to the conflict that developed between labor and community. The alliance King envisioned at the time of his death would have rested on the two legs of an integrated civil rights organization and a more progressive labor movement. King's last speech, which took place in Memphis during the strike of predominantly African American sanitation workers, spoke to the possibility of such a coalition, the outlines of which he developed as he worked on the strike with William Lucy, secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). While King had originally seen his work in Memphis as a distraction from his work on the anti-poverty campaign, with its march scheduled for that summer, the discussions in Memphis led him to believe that the movement could go forward with help from the trade unions where new black leadership was emerging.<sup>9</sup>

King's assassination on April 4, 1968, and the resulting urban unrest ended all such possibilities. Cities all over the country exploded in violence. Virtual insurrections took place in Chicago, Washington, D.C., Baltimore, Cambridge, Delaware, Cincinnati, Youngstown, Buffalo, Trenton, Newark, Jersey City, Kansas City, and Boston. Just six blocks from the White House, SNCC leader Stokely Carmichael urged his followers to "go home and get your guns." It took 21,000 troops to calm the streets of the nation's capitol, more in Chicago. The Pentagon set up a riot control unit and estimated that over 75,000 soldiers had been out on the streets enforcing citywide curfews, with orders to "shoot to kill" in some cities. In New York City, the poor community of Brownsville was burning. Firemen and police were met by young African Americans throwing stones

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9 M. K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), pp. 169, 200; D. Appleby, A. Graham, and S. J. Ross, *At the River I Stand* (San Francisco: California Newsreel, 1993).



and shouting "Kill whitey, out of our community!" One fireman thought his unit should comply. "If they want to burn up their neighborhood, it's their business," he said.<sup>10</sup>

Against this background, the UFT faced off against African American activists in Ocean Hill-Brownsville in the spring of 1968. That these two groups could become direct adversaries was the result of a complicated process that mixed school reform, philanthropy, racial politics, and class struggle. A year earlier, in the spring and summer of 1967, while the UFT negotiated its contract with the Board of Education, McGeorge Bundy, president of the Ford Foundation (and former Kennedy adviser who encouraged United States involvement in Vietnam), committed to fund and promote independent community school boards in new "experimental" school districts in New York City. This move toward "decentralization" grew out of Bundy's belief that plans to desegregate were inadequate. He declared an admiration for "legitimately militant black leaders . . . and their properly angry black words." Embracing the Black Power declarations of SNCC and CORE, Bundy asked, "Who can deny the right of young black students to have a part of their lives kept black? And who can be surprised that many of them exercise that right?" In a press conference, he said he did not expect to agree with community activists on all of the public questions concerned, but he believed they could use the money to help channel the black rage in the urban north. Continuing with this line of reasoning, Bundy thought "a little Black Power in the classroom would make the schools more responsive and more relevant to students and perhaps their reading and math scores would improve."<sup>11</sup>

The New York City Board of Education accepted the Ford Foundation's money and Bundy's proposal for community control of schools by agreeing to establish experimental school districts. With this move, the board sidestepped the pending decentralization proposals in the state legislature, thereby hampering the UFT's ability to shape the implementation of decentralization and community control. Because UFT officials disagreed

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10 T. Johnson, "12 Arrested Here; Sporadic Violence Erupts in Harlem," *New York Times*, April 5, 1968, p. 1, 26; N. Sheehan "Army Has 15,000 For Riot Control," *New York Times*, April 6, 1968, p. 25; D. Janson, "7 Die as Fires and Looting Spread in Chicago Rioting," *New York Times*, April 6, 1968, p. 1; R. Semple, "Capital's Police Using Restraint," *New York Times*, April 7, 1968, p. 62; J. Flint, "4,000 Guardsmen Stay in Detroit As City Keeps Curfew in Effect," *New York Times*, April 7, 1968, p. 63; F. P. Graham, "Police Restraint in Riots," *New York Times*, April 13, 1968, p. 16; "Long Wants Police to Shoot Looters," *New York Times*, April 14, 1968, p. 56; B. Colliers, "Jersey Guard Tightens Its Rules on Riot Control," *New York Times*, April 14, 1968, p. 56.

11 N. M. Rooks, *White Money, Black Power: The Surprising History of African American Studies and the Crisis of Race in Higher Education* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), pp. 81, 83-4, 90.

with both their exclusion from the decentralization process and the details of the Bundy proposal, they were hostile to the experiment. By accepting the Ford Foundation plan, the board succeeded in weakening the UFT politically and pitting it against the community.<sup>12</sup>

The first experimental school district started in Ocean Hill-Brownsville. An old industrial community nestled in Brooklyn just south of Bedford-Stuyvesant, Brownsville had been a blue-collar Jewish neighborhood until after World War II. As manufacturing declined in New York City in the 1960s, the new, largely African American and Latino migrants into the area suffered high unemployment and struggled with the decaying housing stock. The situation was similar in Ocean Hill, Brownsville's much smaller neighbor to the northeast.<sup>13</sup> To get the new school district off the ground, the Ford Foundation turned to CORE, which it had funded for years. Sonny Carson led the effort. Born and bred in Brooklyn, he was, by his own description, something of a gangland thug in his teenage years. He served in the Korean War with the 82nd Airborne division, an experience that radicalized him and motivated him eventually to join CORE. With a fluid set of politics that some labeled opportunist, he was a Black Nationalist in the late 1960s, and one of the most vocal critics of the UFT. He promised after the union's 1967 strike to prevent the teachers who struck from returning to "his" school district.<sup>14</sup>

From the spring of 1967 through the spring of 1968, Carson, CORE members, and other community activists organized elections for the new Ocean Hill-Brownsville district school board. The election results and the composition of the new local school board reflected their educational politics. Led by District Superintendent Rhoady McCoy but influenced heavily by CORE and Carson, the new board denounced the historic racism of the educational system both in the classroom and in the administration of schools. As they saw it, the existing system discriminated against African American teachers in examinations and licensing. Racist white teachers undermined African American children with their low expectations, colonialist mind-set, and Euro-centric curriculum. In contrast to the existing system, the board believed the schools could serve the community, give African American children a positive self-image, teach them the lost history of African American struggles, and lead them to believe in themselves as the arbiters of their own destiny.

12 M. Mayer, "The Full and Sometimes Very Simple Story of Ocean Hill, The Teachers' Union and the Teachers Strikes of 1968," *New York Times Magazine*, February 2, 1969, p. 18.

13 W. Pritchett, *Brownsville, Brooklyn: Blacks, Jews and the Changing Face of the Ghetto* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 132-3.

14 Sonny Carson, *The Education of Sonny Carson* (New York, n.p., 1972), pp. 141-3; P. Kihss, "School Leaders See Bias to Oust Principals," *New York Times*, May 22, 1967, pp. 1, 24; Murphy, *Blackboard Unions*, pp. 237-43.

To accomplish its goals of transforming the schools, the board insisted on the right to hire teachers committed to its vision and fire those who did not share its predilections. However, the zeal with which it sought independence had its contradictions: the teachers who first went into the Harlem schools and turned teaching around for young African American children, who were educational pioneers in celebrating Black History Week, were turned away from the Ocean Hill-Brownsville school district because now parents and community leaders suspected their sincerity in developing the minds of African American children. This suspicion arose from the black nationalism fast becoming the dominant perspective in Brooklyn's African American community and found some justification in the UFT's opposition to school decentralization as it was being implemented by the city's Board of Education. There was also the simple issue of power.<sup>15</sup>

On May 7, 1968, the experimental Ocean Hill-Brownsville school board tested the limits of its power by dismissing thirteen union teachers, five assistant principals, and one principal on the grounds that they opposed the board's plan of community control. The teachers received no hearing and no alternative assignment, violations of the union contract and past practice of the central Board of Education. The dismissals sparked a series of strikes that spilled over from one school year to the next.<sup>16</sup> The entire debacle might have been avoided had the board waited just a few weeks until the summer, when the teachers could have been eased out of the district. In fact, all during the summer break, Albert Shanker, president of the UFT, Reverend Milton Galamison, a city civil rights leader, and Superintendent McCoy met for lunch once a week. All agreed that objectionable teachers would be quietly transferred. Galamison and Shanker thought that the issue had been settled when school started again in the fall.<sup>17</sup> McCoy, however, insisted upon the mass dismissals, and the strike began again on September 9.

The next two and a half months witnessed several long citywide teacher strikes, numerous community protests, bitter negotiations, accusations

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15 M. L. King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967); Kihss, "School Leaders See Bias," *New York Times*, May 22, 1967; H. Bigart, "Negro School Ousts 19, Defies City," *New York Times*, May 10, 1968, p. 1; P. Hoffman, "Ousted Teachers Get Mixed Advice; Donovan and Union Favor Work—Supervisors Say No," *New York Times*, May 13, 1968, p. 39; I. Buder, "Parents Occupy Brooklyn School as Dispute Grows," *New York Times*, May 15, 1968, pp. 1, 44.

16 L. Buder, "8 Brooklyn Schools Boycotted by 6,000," *New York Times*, April 11, 1968, pp. 1, 36; H. Bigart, "Negro School Ousts 19," pp. 1, 38; L. Buder, "11 Teachers Defy Local Dismissals," *New York Times*, May 11, 1968, pp. 1, 29; Buder, "Parents Occupy Brooklyn School."

17 Parrish, "Teachers Strikes."



of racism and anti-Semitism, and near-violent confrontations. Increasing racial polarization characterized the conflict. McCoy fired an additional 350 teachers who walked out in support of their dismissed colleagues. He then hired replacements, including many young militant teachers who supported community control of the schools. On several occasions when UFT teachers tried to return to work, Carson led protests of students, parents, and replacement teachers against the returning strikers, personally blocking their entrance to the schools. These confrontations were characterized by shouting, jostling, and other forms of intimidation, despite the presence of police. At one community meeting in Ocean Hill-Brownsville, militants surrounded Shanker and refused to let him leave the room. From then on, he used a bodyguard.

The UFT's unstinting defense of union rights regardless of the community's needs was interpreted as racist not only by black nationalists. Many militant teachers were growing disillusioned with the UFT. Shanker insisted on strict union discipline during the strike, leaving teachers who supported community control and the idea of self-determination little room to maneuver. One of those teachers was Dick Parrish, a lifelong educator, who, as vice president of the national union, had made sure the AFT was one of the few AFL-CIO unions that had honestly desegregated by the late 1950s. He had played key role in making the UFT an important part of the school desegregation projects in New York City that began in 1964. Like other teachers who supported community control, Parrish had grown increasingly uncomfortable with the UFT's unwillingness to support the new militancy of the African American community. Through the strikes in 1967, the spring of 1968, and finally the fall of 1968, Parrish and other African American teachers grew increasingly angry with the union's exclusive focus on bread-and-butter union issues and its disregard for the community's educational interests. By the final strike, Parrish was urging teachers to cross the picket lines and teach African American children.<sup>18</sup>

Shanker contended that the strikes were about teachers' procedural

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18 William Simon, Oral History Collection, AFT papers, Walter Reuther Archives, pp. 80, 101. See also Richard Parrish Papers, Box 1 additions; Parrish called the affair "a blow to education and a boon to racism"; R. Parrish, "The New York City Teachers Strikes," *Labor Today* (May 1969); D. Golodner, "The Integrating of the AFT Locals," delivered at the Midwest History of Education Society Conference, October 21-22, 2005. The ATA, the City Teachers' Association, and the United Parents Association all called for volunteers to keep schools open during the strike; T. A. Johnson, "Negro Teachers Give School Plan," *New York Times*, September 20, 1967, p. 37; L. Buder, "Lindsay Proposes a 26-Month Plan for School Peace," *New York Times*, September 20, 1967, pp. 1, 26.

rights, about preventing a precedent that would undermine the union's ability to protect teachers from the arbitrary power of the administration. He insisted that the UFT was not opposed to community control or decentralization. But his demand for complete union discipline polarized the situation by brooking no compromise between the union's rights to protect teachers and the community's right to decide its curriculum. He further stoked the conflict by exaggerating the anti-Semitism of the African American community-control movement. Despite the fact that they had no connection to the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Board, CORE, or any known organization, Shanker distributed 50,000 copies of anonymous anti-Semitic leaflets found in the mailboxes of several Ocean Hill-Brownsville teachers. These actions were designed to pit teachers against the community-control movement, especially Jewish teachers, and isolate the large minority of young, militant teachers, both black and white, who supported the African American struggle and wanted to push the UFT to take a more militant stance in favor of community control. Shanker's tactics worked to some degree, but not entirely. Of the teachers who crossed the picket lines in the fall of 1968 to teach African American children, 70–80 percent were white, and half of them Jews.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Shanker's willingness to polarize the conflict arose in part from his need to consolidate control over the union and suppress internal dissent.<sup>20</sup>

It took an outsider, the state commissioner of education, to convince all sides to settle the dispute. The union won the transfer issue, though most of the teachers fired by the local board were no longer in the district by the end of the strikes. The community experiment continued, but without the funding of the Ford Foundation, which also stopped supporting CORE. Dick Parrish remained a vice president of the AFT, but as William Simon, another African American vice president of the AFT at the time, recalled, "Dick differed with the leadership in New York in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville strike, [and as a result of his experience he] was crushed as a union person, as a human being . . . it's a sin and a shame."<sup>21</sup> Parrish was not the only one affected. The strike cast a long shadow over subsequent teachers rebellions.

19 Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York*.

20 King, *Where Do We Go from Here?*

21 William Simon, Oral History Collection, AFT papers, Walter Reuther Archives, pp. 80, 101. See also Richard Parrish Papers, Box 1 additions; R. Parrish, "The New York City Teachers Strikes." D. Golodner, "The Integrating of the AFT Locals."

### Newark: Ocean Hill-Brownsville Redux

Big teachers strikes in Philadelphia, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Newark in 1969 and 1970 followed the Ocean Hill-Brownsville conflagration. The strikes in the Midwest and West involved many issues, including union recognition, contract negotiations, decentralization, and community control. Many of these were large strikes, involving tens of thousands of teachers. Only in Newark did the conflict take similar form as in Brooklyn, only this time it was a revolution.

Teachers in Newark had long struggled for union recognition, as they followed the successes in nearby New York City. Newark had always been a blue-collar industrial city, but in the late sixties it was divided between the large Italian community in the North Ward and the largely African American and Puerto Rican community in the South and Central Wards. Recognizing the potential for working-class community organizing in the slums of Newark, Tom Hayden and SDS's Economic Research and Action Project (ERAP) moved into the city in 1964 to organize, much in the way that SNCC had in the South. By providing a left alternative to liberalism, the Newark ERAP project, dubbed the Newark Community Union Project (NCUP), hoped to challenge the Democratic machine politics of Mayor Hugh J. Addonizio and North Ward leader Anthony Imperiale, and to make Newark an example of how this kind of class-based organizing could encourage new leadership.

A city of 400,000 working people at the time, Newark had extraordinarily high rates of crime, maternal and infant mortality, tuberculosis, and venereal disease. A third of the housing was substandard. The unemployment rate was 15 percent and rising. Most importantly, the schools were in shambles. With one of the highest dropout rates in the nation, less than 10 percent of students achieved normal reading levels, and crime in the schools was rising. Worse still, the political establishment was so bankrupt that it preferred to appoint a white high school graduate as secretary of the Board of Education rather than an African American accountant with a master's degree. Leaders of the local CORE chapter were so incensed by the appointment that they took over the Board of Education meeting, but it only justified the anger of the reactionaries, while NCUP stood helplessly by. Hayden's project was running out of time in July of 1967 when the riot broke out.<sup>22</sup>

In five days of rioting, twenty-six people were killed, a thousand were

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22 Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir* pp. 114-32, 151-64; F. R. Harris, T. Wicker, comp., *The Kerner Commission Report: The 1968 Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders* (Washington, DC: GPO, 1968), p. 60.

injured, fourteen hundred were arrested, and \$16 million worth of property went up in flames. It took six thousand police, state troopers, and national guardsmen from two city armories to quell the storm. In Hayden's own words: "It was an urban Vietnam." Out of this cauldron came an uncanny alliance between Anthony Imperiale, the vigilante North Ward leader and racist nemesis of NCUP, and Amiri Baraka (formerly LeRoi Jones), the urban poet and playwright who was arrested during the riot for carrying guns. Both appeared on a radio show blaming the "so-called radical groups" for the city's problems. Imperiale and Jones established a "hotline" with each other so that they could patrol their own neighborhoods in case of racial trouble. The government offered them funding for "local police patrols" in the city, a way to arm the racial divide that Hayden and his group had hoped to avoid. The rhetoric of violence combined with the politics of separatism to transform Newark into an armed camp. Hayden left the city in despair, but Jones claimed his hometown as something that would now become a black city, representing the black majority, with a black mayor and a black Board of Education. Although it took him another three years to do it, Jones would now lead the Black Power movement, and the conflict in Newark would make Ocean Hill-Brownsville look like a picnic.<sup>23</sup>

The teachers union in Newark had been lead largely by an Irish Italian group that had benefited from the rising power of their New York City compatriots. They had won a new contract after their successful 1966 strike, but the New Jersey anti-strike laws meant one year of probation for thirty-one teachers and bankruptcy for the local. But in 1968, a new union alliance was formed under the leadership of Carole Graves, the first African American to head the union and one of the most important African Americans in the AFT. Meanwhile, Amiri Baraka formed a coalition of politicians that very explicitly meant to take over the city; in fact, during the King riots, Baraka assured reporters that there would be no riots in his town, as vigilante groups roamed the streets. "We've come to the conclusion that the city is ours anyway, that we can take it with ballots," he said. The teachers union was one of the last integrated groups left in the city.<sup>24</sup>

Even as 200,000 students missed the first day of classes in the fall of 1969 due to teachers' strikes in other cities, the Newark teachers were hoping for a settlement. They finally struck on February 3, 1970, and although their strike was 90 percent effective, the opposition was strong. Baraka

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23 "Mayor Convenes New Peace Talks in School Strike," *New York Times*, September 29, 1968, p. 1, 78; Hayden, *Reunion: A Memoir*, p. 160. Harris, Wicker, comp., *The Kerner Commission Report*, pp. 60-9.

24 L. Buder, "Pressure by Boycott for Local Control," *New York Times*, April 14, 1968, p. E13; S. Golin, *The Newark Teacher Strikes: Hopes on the Line* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002).

conducted meetings throughout the South and Central Wards urging the black community to take over the schools. He argued that the teachers' fear of school violence was racist, that the teachers' demands for salary raises and release time for school preparation were attempts to evade the children who needed them. Three union leaders were arrested a few days later: Carole Graves, head of Local 481; Frank Fiorito, the executive vice president; and Donald Nicholas, a member of the union executive board. By the end of the week, thirty-nine teachers had gone to jail, and by the next week the number had risen to ninety-one. When the three-week strike ended, many teachers faced exorbitant fines and jail. The union victory had been bitter.<sup>25</sup>

That spring, the mayor, Hugh J. Addonizio, was under indictment for corruption, and a new face, Kenneth A. Gibson, emerged in urban politics to challenge the incumbent in a run-off where "race is going to be the issue." Gibson was the first black mayor of an eastern seaboard city, and immediately upon becoming mayor he appointed three new members of the school board, two African Americans and one Puerto Rican community leader. Imamu Amiri Baraka immediately set up an experimental classroom at the Robert Treat School, a rundown building in the Central Ward, as part of the African Free School, a plan to change the nature of classroom teaching. The certified teacher and four aides were dressed in the colors and costumes of Africa (green turbans, long black skirts, and red beads). They were called "mamas" and taught "collectively," with Baraka frequently visiting the classroom and joining in the pledge of allegiance to the red, black, and green flag of black nationalism.

Critics accused Baraka of having too much power, claiming that he was running a regency under the Gibson administration where he and his coalition, Committee for a Unified Newark, dictated educational policy. Baraka denied it, saying, "I'm being painted as some kind of shadowy figure controlling the action behind the scenes, but this is not true." But his Africa Free School closely mirrored some of the same characteristics of the training given to black teachers in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville area, where he and H. Rap Brown, head of SNCC, had toured in the summer of 1967 and 1968 to promote self-determination in education. Unlike the situation in New York City, where the union was more powerful and the city less polarized, the Newark case was about to become far more violent and extreme in the next teachers' strike.<sup>26</sup>

25 Golin, *The Newark Teacher Strikes*, pp. 72-80; "23 Arrested at Newark March Held to Back Teachers' Strike," *New York Times*, February 14, 1970, p. 25; M. A. Farber, "Teachers Ratify Pact in Newark," *New York Times*, February 26, 1970, p. 1.

26 "Dr. King's Mural Sets Off Melee," *New York Times*, January 17, 1970, p. 32; R. McFadden, "George Washington High Results in Arrests of 13 Students," *NYT*, April 11, 1970, p. 33.



The 1970 Newark teachers contract ran only one year. As it expired in February 1971, the new Board of Education decided that if it did not negotiate at all, it would not have a teachers union and, hence, there could be no strike. Exposing the inanity of that logic, the teachers walked out. Then, when ordered to negotiate, the Board of Education announced that all union demands, including recognition, were on the table, and that they would roll back teacher gains to before the 1966 contract. That just prolonged the strike.

As the union executive board dispersed in front of its headquarters on the first evening of the strike, twenty-five men dressed in paramilitary uniforms, armed with baseball bats and knives, attacked the teachers. First they beat the men, then the women union leaders. Of the fifteen victims, five were treated at the hospital; one was kept overnight. As the strike went on, the violence continued. Teachers were attacked and beaten on picket lines; their cars were smashed and bombed. Carole Graves, the president of the union, had a bomb hurled into her home.<sup>27</sup> Though the paramilitary groups were never identified or brought to trial, they were most likely extreme black nationalists. Some observers attributed the violence to the newly organized Organization of Negro Educators (ONE), which went about the city trying to break the strike and whose members were seen in paramilitary outfits. Nevertheless, their president denied involvement. ONE, like other nationalist groups, condemned the strikers for abandoning the African American children of Newark.

The strike continued for ten weeks, and, while the labor movement embraced the teachers, the black community was split between two factions. Even the teachers were divided. ONE had members in the union. As Carole Graves insisted, "This is just a labor-management fight. Jesse Jacob [president of the school board] and Amiri Baraka interject this racial business because it's a good way to break the union and get control of the schools." Graves went to jail that spring for six months, and her temporary replacement was attacked while the struggle continued. After ten weeks of striking, mediation, and arbitration, the school board rejected a settlement in a raucous meeting and finally settled in the eleventh week.<sup>28</sup>

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27 R. Johnson, "Teachers Beaten in Newark Strike; Group Attacks 15 Leaving Meeting," *New York Times*, February 3, 1971, p. 1, 41; R. Johnson, "Ocean Hill Fund Nearing Its End; Unrest Feared if Education Center Cannot Continue," *New York Times*, February 3, 1971, p. 41.

28 F. Butterfield, "Newark School Strike Splits Blacks," *New York Times*, February 14, 1971, p. 45; F. Butterfield, "Newark Teachers Reject Pack," *New York Times*, April 16, 1971.

## The End of Integration and Militancy

The tragedy of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville and Newark teachers' strikes was that one of the few institutions that had fought racial segregation in the union movement, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), became the very symbol of that racism. The project of integration had belonged to the AFT. Its leaders included African American teachers trying to transform the labor movement as a whole. But these strikes destroyed that possibility by forcing the African American leaders out of the AFT, demoralizing African American teachers, and reinforcing the conservative Shanker leadership. Nationally, the integrationist movement was over, and the teachers union, especially in Newark, would suffer the consequences. "Perhaps the real tragedy of the strike is that it makes it look like reason and racial integration won't work in Newark. The teachers union, for all of its own militancy, is one of the very few really integrated organizations around here," a local Democratic Party leader concluded.<sup>29</sup>

Despite the bitterness it instilled, the racial divide did not end teacher militancy. Instead, economic crisis finally drew the era of teachers' strikes to a close. Again, developments in New York City were emblematic. In the fall of 1974, Mayor Abraham Beame announced a fiscal crisis in the city, when his budget for 1974-5 was running \$420 million short, in part because the city had to spend 11 percent of its budget servicing its \$11 billion debt, including \$3.4 billion in short-term notes. Beame blamed his predecessor John Lindsay, whom he accused of negotiating overly generous contracts with more and more public workers unions. Albert Shanker, who had become president of the AFT and remained leader of the now statewide UFT, had a hard time coming to terms with the crisis. Two months after Beame's lament, he asked the city for \$2.78 billion for school improvements. By January 1975, however, the Board of Education was cutting seven hundred jobs and forcing new economies on the teachers. The banks were asking for 9.5 percent interest on a \$500 million loan, and city bonds were selling at two-thirds of face value. The causes were readily identified: the decay of the city center, white flight, unionization of public employees, expansion of social services, inflation, and the doldrums of the financial industry. But the unions took the brunt of the blame.<sup>30</sup>

At first the unions refused to budge, but as the commercial banks refused to lend money to the city, the fiscal crisis deepened and the unions were

29 F. Butterfield, "At Root of Newark Teacher Strike: Race and Power," *New York Times*, April 8, 1971, p. 50.

30 M. H. Maier, *City Unions: Managing Discontent in New York City* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), pp. 170-86; Freeman, *Working Class New York*, pp. 256-87.

drawn into negotiations to save the city. All of the municipal unions agreed to defer contractual demands, giving up billions of dollars in benefits and offering their pension funds to capitalize the city. "In terms of going deep into the pocketbook," AFSCME head Jerry Wurf explained, "we did a hell of a lot more than any of the banks. Yet we still ended up the villains." Shanker claimed that education took the brunt of the cutbacks, "22 per cent cuts while other city services averaged about 11 per cent."<sup>31</sup> The teachers' disproportionate burden grew in part from Shanker's alienation from other New York municipal union leaders, especially AFSCME District Council 37 leader Victor Gotbaum, who did the bulk of the negotiating with the city and the banks. Shanker claimed that teachers relied on the state legislature, not the city, for school funding, but it was his hostility to Gotbaum and sanitation union leader John DeLury that kept him from participating in the negotiations until October 1975. The teachers also paid for the failure of their strike in September 1975.

Ostensibly, the strike protested the large class sizes and poor school conditions teachers faced on opening day. Schools had opened with a "lack of textbooks and desks, programs were in confusion, teacher assignments and reassignments went well into October." The real reason for the strike was the fiscal crisis and the Board of Education's demands for a new contract that would eliminate most of the gains teachers had made, especially those won in the late 1960s. Included in those gains was a limit on class size of thirty-two, now routinely violated as the Board of Education cut back the number of teachers while the number of students remained the same. The Board demanded an additional thirty minutes of teaching per day and cuts to preparation time. In a disingenuous move, the board offered to keep to the limits on class size if the teachers would give up their prep time, arguing that they were only asking to increase teacher productivity, as if preparation had nothing to do with quality in education. Some 55,000 teachers struck that September, but they found little support from other municipal unions, who viewed the teachers as selfish for not agreeing to the same cuts they had taken. Not surprisingly, many in the African American community also thought the teachers selfish, seeing the strike and its demands to protect preparation time as further evidence that the teachers did not care about their children.<sup>32</sup>

In the end, the teachers took the same cuts as the other municipal unions.

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31 J. C. Gouldin, *Jerry Wurf: Labor's Last Angry Man* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), pp. 235-40; "AFT Crisis Report," December 29, 1975, Box 11, Albert Shanker Collection, Walter Reuther Archives, Detroit.

32 "AFT Crisis Report," December 29, 1975, Box 11, Albert Shanker Collection, Walter Reuther Archives, Detroit.



The Board of Education saved between \$4.5 and \$5.5 million each of the eight days the teachers were out, but the city won much more. Teachers worked longer days, but the students' days were shortened by forty-five minutes. African American parents were furious. Teachers gave up two of their preparation hours weekly. Class sizes stayed the same. Still the teachers remained the villains. They hated the contract, but they swallowed it. Even worse, prompted by the fiscal crisis, the Board of Education made drastic cuts that reduced or eliminated guidance counselors, crossing guards, sports programs, adult education, and summer school. From 1974 to 1976, the teaching workforce shrunk by nearly 25 percent, with most of the layoffs hitting young teachers. African American and Spanish-surnamed teachers were also hurt, and their percentage in the teaching workforce shrank to 3 percent from 11 percent. The impact was dramatic. Morale plummeted and union strength ebbed. The teachers' days of militancy were over.<sup>33</sup>

### Dream Deferred

In remembering the heady days of teacher militancy during the late sixties and early seventies, it is easy to forget what was attempted while remembering who succeeded and who failed. In Memphis, the sanitation workers and the African American community built something significant with lasting implications. In other cities, African American municipal workers organized unions and brought civil rights struggles and labor struggles together. Community control was not always met with union hostility. Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized the significance of going on with the struggle. "Nothing would be more tragic than to stop at this point in Memphis," he said the day before he was shot. And it would only add to the tragic side of the story if we stopped analyzing school struggles yesterday or today.

Consider, for example, the fact that urban schools still suffer from terrible inequality, with suburban white children receiving well-funded public education while urban African American children attend badly funded charter (private) schools. The origins of school choice and its complement, privatization, go back to 1968. As African Americans demanded control over their schools, many conservative pundits and politicians quickly realized that such demands could be accommodated without much cost or

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33 Freeman, *Working Class New York*, p. 271; "AFT Crisis Report," December 29, 1975, Box 11, Albert Shanker Collection, Walter Reuther Archives, Detroit; L. Buder, "Tally 10,651-6,695, Relatively Close Count Reflects Bitterness—2,400 to be Rehired," *New York Times*, September 17, 1975, p. 1; L. Dembart, "A Familiar Accord: Teacher's Settlement Parallels Those Other Unions Accepted Without Strikes," *New York Times*, September 17, 1975, p. 28.

inconvenience to their core constituents in the lily-white suburbs. Instead of busing to achieve integration, African Americans could control their neighborhood schools, which were doomed to underfunded status given the urban tax base. Suburban schools, meanwhile, would prosper free of the burden of educating the city's children. It is no coincidence that school choice and privatization are most often touted for urban schools, not the suburbs.

Consider, too, that African American leaders in the teachers unions were ready to lead their unions in a new direction. Many observers remember the names of LeRoi Jones and Sonny Carson; few remember that there were also leaders like Dick Parrish, Carole Graves, and William Simon in the AFT, who were real classroom teachers fighting to reform the schools and the union they helped build. The narrative of teacher militancy is a complex one, but it helps to explain how public employee unionism in this period cannot be separated from the urban rebellion, and how the inability of the two to come together played a key role in breaking apart the labor-civil rights coalition King dreamed about.