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Teachers United: The Rise of New York State United Teachers

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kind favored by the editors and contributors to *Toward a European Labour Identity* is a matter much-discussed among philosophers and political scientists concerned with theories of democracy: the relation between “hard” and “soft” law. In view of the politico-cultural and socio-economic diversity among EU member states, detailed, uniform regulatory provisions are often too inflexible, and therefore inferior to intelligent soft law regulations that provide leeway for negotiations and minimum standards. The editors perceive the EWCD as a “soft legislative approach” (p. 8) to non-state actors. In their view, negotiations between EWCs and managers of multinationals, which fill a regulatory void of the EWCD, amount to a variant form of democracy. Other authors regard institutions like EWCs as an “aspect of new complex interactions between supranational regulation and evolving international labor structures” (Martinez Lucio and Syd Weston, p. 182).

The field observations presented in this book illustrate the arduousness of the path to transnational labor solidarity. The editors and authors agree that postwar Europe, not yet “complete,” remains in a developmental stage, and that the EWCs are playing a prominent role in this stage as a vehicle for the renegotiation of capital-labor relations at the supranational level. Although they are well aware that the EWCs are not yet fully mature (p. 226), they nevertheless see these institutions as pioneers clearing the way for a transnational labor movement.

This intellectually demanding, politically charged anthology contains a plethora of theoretical insights and strategic guidelines. It is a cornucopia for scholars and policy-makers interested in labor developments in the EU.

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History

Teachers United: The Rise of New York State United Teachers. By Dennis Gaffney. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007. x, 273 pp. ISBN 978-0-7914-7191-3, \$25.00 (hardcover).

In the 1973 movie *Sleeper*, the character played by Woody Allen relates, upon being awakened in the future, that his world came to an end when

a madman named Albert Shanker got hold of a nuclear device. Dennis Gaffney’s *Teachers United* tells the story of the New York State United Teachers (NYSUT) during the 1970s and the role of Albert Shanker and others in the union’s birth and growth. Shanker worked tirelessly to merge the many New York State K–12 teacher groups and wanted the resulting union to become a major political player; he saw his role in such a game as a power broker. Woody Allen may have been prescient in 1973: Shanker and NYSUT gained and wielded a great deal of power, even if it fell short of apocalyptic.

The author, a professional writer and an adjunct faculty at SUNY Albany’s Journalism Program, apparently used the NYSUT documents in the Kheel Center of Cornell’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations Catherwood Library, principally NYSUT’s presidential and vice-presidential papers, and the oral histories of NYSUT collected at SUNY Albany, as the book’s main sources. Distilling such rich troves of material into a 273-page book is a task fraught not only with difficulty, but also with risk. Indeed, although Gaffney calls this book a history, it is better described as a peripatetic collection of quotes and stories, concentrating especially on the biographical aspects of many union leaders. The book’s themes are often hard to discern. Although the dustcover promises lessons for other unions, the only two messages I am able to identify are that (a) unions must grow, or else they will shrink, and (b) unions need bold leaders with vision. These are platitudes, not insights that could be expected to help the labor movement.

The reader should be aware that *Teachers United* tells its story without placing it in either economic or social context; yet we know that the period covered by the book, 1960–2005, was one of immense change in both arenas. The author does not even allude to the changes going on in New York City (except for its 1970 budget problems), New York State, the financing of local school districts, other unions, or family life; nor does he mention the Catholic Church (a major player in K12 education) or the health or decline of its various parishes. Shanker’s accomplishments, strengths, and weaknesses, the problems he saw and those he chose to address, must all have been influenced by these changes.

Also useful would have been a discussion of NYSUT’s rigid position toward school vouchers, the changing demands of higher education, and the curriculum changes over the 45-year period. The reaction to the combination of small teachers’ unions that took place in the 1950s and 1960s was the professionalization of school districts’ administrators with respect to negotiations and

personnel policies as well as curricula, and this development too is ignored. Finally, Gaffney skips over teacher training, taxes, society, and the children themselves—subjects about which Shanker and his contemporaries evinced real, if intermittent, concern.

Shanker's core belief, according to the author, was that union strength was needed and that it would come from unity. Thus, much of the book is concerned with the mergers of various teacher unions that existed in New York State in the immediate post-World War Two period. Bringing the unions together was no easy task, but was given impetus when the New York State legislature, in a move spearheaded by Assemblyman Charles Jerabek, attacked teachers' tenure in 1972. While teacher tenure had existed under state law since 1917 in New York City, and for all of the state since 1945, the early 1970s attacks on the strength of the tenure laws gave Shanker, Walter Tice (Yonkers Federation of Teachers), and Manny Kafka (New York State Teachers Association) a fresh battle-cry with which to spur the merger of their own unions and, along the way, the absorption of others. This they did with great vigor, as Gaffney recounts.

Shanker took an adversarial stance toward any politician who questioned him or NYSUT. Particularly striking was the animosity between Shanker and Senator Alfonse D'Amato in the 1990s (pp. 166–69). According to the *New York Times*, "It began during the mayoral campaign when Ruth W. Messinger's attacks on the school system seemed to raise public concern about the state of the schools" (December 2, 1997; not cited by Gaffney). In an attempt to strongly position himself on educational policy, a common concern among voters at that time, Senator D'Amato ran an ad stating that the teachers' union put its own interests ahead of those of the schools. The senator said the union had blocked efforts to end automatic tenure for teachers and principals, opposed merit pay raises for teachers, and opposed permitting parents to choose their child's public school. NYSUT responded by promising to campaign for Mr. D'Amato's defeat. Gaffney tells the story from NYSUT's side but gives little background information and does not state D'Amato's concerns.

Another of the several stories that are, in my view, incompletely told in this book is how NYSUT overcame a challenge by the New York Educators' Association (NYEA) in its bid for control of UUP (the United University Professionals) in 1978. Gaffney describes Shanker's role in this successful action (p. 148). Not remarked in the book is that although NYSUT added UUP to its rolls, its attention and efforts remained—and still remain—fo-

cused on K–12 education, with the SUNY faculty and professional staff too often ignored. Control of UUP was a prize in the fight between NYSUT and NYEA, but once won, it seems too often to have been left on a shelf to gather dust—perhaps because Shanker was primarily motivated, in this instance, not by the goal of unifying teachers, but by the need to build member numbers in order to consolidate his own power. Such considerations are missing from Gaffney's account.

Gaffney is not at all a critical interpreter, merely a distiller of reports. For example, he repeats the union position on class size (p. 144) without comment on or recognition of all that has been found out since Shanker darkly warned that class sizes could top 60 students if the union did not engage in "the largest number of strikes in the history of this state" against school boards. Since this was a key element in the union's campaigns, it would have been useful if the author had discussed the STAR program of Tennessee (see Alan Krueger, "Economic Considerations and Class Size," *Economic Journal*, 2003) and at least footnoted the various relevant articles by, in particular, Caroline Hoxby and Eric Hanushek.

Gaffney also tells of efforts to share the concept of a teachers' union, and possibly teaching methods and experiences, with Chile in 1985, with Poland in 1988–89, and with Mexico in 2003. But were these efforts successful? What gains have teachers enjoyed in the affected countries? The book does not say.

I also would have appreciated more quantitative material, such as union membership figures for each of the years covered, finances, contract wage settlements, and salaries of union officers. Myron Lieberman's *The Teacher Unions* (1997) provides a wealth of such data; an update of figures found in that work, or at least a reference to it, would have made Gaffney's own book more valuable.

Teachers United, then, is a fun read, but not a scholarly work. I believe it could best serve as supplemental background material in introductory collective bargaining or labor history classes. It may also be useful in education courses when discussion turns to lessons to be learned from the history of school district administration. (I plan to give my copy to a retired school district superintendent.)

Albert Shanker was a complex and driven man who achieved a great deal and merits a more thorough-going biography than is provided in this book. More useful are *Teachers United's* brief biographies of the 2006 NYSUT officers and of notable earlier officers. Also included is a list of the members of NYSUT's Board of Directors from 1973 to 2005, a bibliography, a less than successful

index, and a useful list of the alphabet soup of teachers' unions.

Readers can choose from a number of more academically rigorous books on teacher unions. Among them are several (noted in Gaffney's bibliography) by David Tyack; Lieberman's *The Teacher Unions*; Richard D. Kahlenberg's *All Together Now: Creating Middle-Class Schools through Public School Choice* (Brookings, 2003); and, most importantly, Kahlenberg's new biography of Shanker, *Tough*

Liberal: Albert Shanker and the Battles over Schools, Unions, Race, and Democracy (Columbia University Press, 2007).

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