

“Opportunity of a Lifetime”: Paraprofessionals and the UFT in New York City, 1966-78

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Abstract: This paper analyzes the creation of the paraprofessional program in New York City public schools, focusing on the unionization of paraprofessionals (“paras”) within the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), their fight to win a contract, and their efforts to improve the program in the years that followed. Launched in 1967 through a collaboration between the UFT, the Board of Education, elite reformers, and community activists, the paraprofessional program sought to enhance classroom education, create jobs, and improve school-community relationships through the employment of local women in New York City's "poverty areas." Hired as low-wage workers, paraprofessionals organized with the UFT at a time when the union was deeply distrusted in their communities on account of the racially-inflected fight over "community control" of schools in 1968. Asserting their status as pedagogical employees and their right to a living wage, these African-American and Latina women used their contract to win sizable raises and develop a career ladder program that helped many of them to become teachers. While paras were not a panacea for education or poverty, their work improved the quality of education, particularly early childhood, English-language, and special education, and they used their position to build new relationships between schools and communities. Running counter to narratives about the failures of community control and the War on Poverty, this paper explores the efforts of a seemingly marginal group of citizens to reshape and democratize the relationships between communities and the municipal education bureaucracy in New York City.

To Participants and Readers:

I must apologize in advance for the length of this paper, which has been pared down (but not quite enough) from a master's essay submitted this past spring and presented this past summer as part of a panel on “Democratizing Education” at the International Sociological Association's 2nd Forum of Sociology. While I would of course welcome any and all comments on the entire draft, it seems prudent to offer some excerpts and questions to focus discussion. Readers interested in the full story but with limited time can pick up the paper at Section III on page 9 (the preceding two sections contain an extended look at the creation of the program).

I am hoping to develop this project for a dissertation proposal over the next year, and would appreciate comments and suggestions for how this might be accomplished. To offer some specifics, I need to develop my analysis of how gendered expectations shaped to the challenges and paras faced (see Section V, pages 22-28, in particular), look more closely at how paraprofessional unionism impacted migrant and Spanish-speaking communities, (see Sections V and VI, 22-34), and find better ways to assess of the impact that paraprofessionals made on their communities outside of schools (see Section VI, 28-34).

Many thanks,

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I.

Writing in the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1970, civil rights leader Bayard Rustin called the newly signed contract between the paraprofessionals of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT) and the New York City Board of Education “one of the finest examples of self-determination by the poor.”¹ Four parties – the UFT, the Board, elite reformers, and community groups in African-American and Hispanic neighborhoods – had taken part in the conversations and contests that led to the creation of New York City's paraprofessional program three years earlier. Launched with federal funding and the support of all four groups in the spring of 1967, the program employed thousands of low-income New Yorkers, primarily women of color, in public schools with four distinct aims: to improve the quality of public education, to provide jobs for welfare recipients in the city's “poverty areas,” to improve communication and relationships between schools and communities in these areas, and to integrate the teaching corps by training paraprofessionals to become teachers.

The program was an immediate success, and received high marks from teachers, administrators, reformers, and community organizations. Paras (as they were, and still are, known) took pride in their work, but were frustrated by poverty-level wages and the inadequacy of the teacher education they were promised. They voiced their grievances in their schools and communities, catching the attention of the UFT, which launched a sustained and successful drive to unionize paras and win a contract. By “putting millions of dollars in the pockets of the poor,” Rustin argued, this contract did “more to combat poverty” than any other War on Poverty program. Lauding the significant educational impact the paras had made as well as the terms of their contract, which included a 140-percent wage increase, improved benefits (including health coverage), and the allocation of stipends and time for teacher training, Rustin wrote that the

¹ Bayard Rustin, “The Triumph of the Paraprofessionals” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 22, 1970.

contract was “a benefit not only to the paraprofessionals but to the entire society.” The contract was all the more remarkable for coming a scant eighteen months after explosive clashes between community leaders and the UFT in Brooklyn’s Ocean Hill-Brownsville, which had pitted advocates of “community control” of local schools against a union seeking to preserve the jobs of existing teachers, and which would have seemed to render an alliance between community-based paraprofessionals and the UFT unthinkable. According to one historian, the strike “sparked a cultural war between blacks and whites that would last for the rest of the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first.”² Rustin himself was vilified in the pages of the *Amsterdam News* as “a handpicked 'black representative' without black identity” for his defense of the UFT.³

This paper tells the story of the creation of the paraprofessional program, the unionization of paras, their fight to win a contract, and their efforts to improve the program in the years that followed. It argues that the program, and specifically the efforts of the paraprofessionals themselves to realize the program's ambitions, helped to democratize education in New York City. Paraprofessionals helped democratize public education in three distinct, if overlapping, areas: pedagogy, access, and relationships between communities and bureaucracies. In the classroom, they led small group work, translated (both literally and figuratively) lesson plans, disciplinary actions, and school communications for students and parents, modeled professional behavior as relatable role models, and designed programming that drew on local cultural resources. Their classroom work improved access to primary and secondary education for some of the most disadvantaged children in the system, particularly in bilingual, early childhood, and special education. Beyond the classroom, they used their expertise to guide parents through the school system, and they organized and won access to higher education and job training, both

² Jerald E. Podair, *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean-Hill Brownsville Crisis* (New Haven: Yale, 2002), 182.

³ Marietta J. Tanner “Community Conscious” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 20, 1969.

through the City University of New York and their union. Finally, they used their position at the nexus of the community, the union, and the educational bureaucracy to facilitate communication between all three of these parties, and gave voice to the needs of marginalized communities within the structures of power that dominated the public school system in an era of scarcity.

The paraprofessional program was not a panacea, and New York City's schools are not democratic now (nor were they in 1974).⁴ Nonetheless, programs that make significant – if not sufficient – efforts to democratize education by bringing community members into schools and training them to become teachers are rare, and the preservation and extension of these programs is rarer still. Paraprofessionals were able to challenge, if not overturn, hierarchies of race, class, and gender in education because the Board, the union, and local communities considered their program a successful and necessary intervention. By examining the actors and the contingencies that informed the creation and development of this program, and the ways in which the paraprofessionals within it came to articulate their own visions for a more democratic educational system, this paper hopes to illuminate some of the lesser-known strategies and structures that expanded educational opportunities in New York City in the 1970s. The highest ambitions of the program were never or only briefly realized before fiscal crises and retrenchment, but the struggle that created them might yet inform and inspire future efforts.

II.

In 1955, the New York Teacher's Guild, the forerunner of the UFT, lobbied for an

⁴ For critiques of the limits of the paraprofessional program and the racial and gender hierarchies embedded in the UFT, see Christina Collins, *Ethnically Qualified: Race, Merit, and the Selection of Urban Teachers 1920-1980* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2011), 65, and Diana D'Amico, "Claiming Profession: The Dynamic Struggle for Teacher Professionalism in the Twentieth Century" (PhD diss, New York University, 2010), 35, 375. Collins and D'Amico's concerns echo general critiques that the War on Poverty was in fact a "War on Politics" that managed and splintered dissent by depoliticizing and bureaucratizing responses to poverty and drawing radicals into limited and ultimately fruitless city responses (see Gregory, 1998, Mollenkopf, 1983, etc.). While such admonitions are important reminders of the limits of collaboration with authorities, it is still worth examining these collaborations to see where they did reorder state priorities and make space for new ideas through resistance and cooperation.

“experimental training program for people to assist in the handling of clerical and monitoring duties in the schools” and relieve teachers of these “burdensome chores which interfere with teaching and lesson preparation.”⁵ The Board of Education first hired aides during the 1957-58 school year, and by 1962, when the UFT won its first contract, school aides to relieve teachers from non-teaching duties were included among the provisions.⁶ Though they pushed the Board to hire these aides, the union drew stark lines between their professional, pedagogical duties and the aides’ work. The 1963 contract stipulated defined aides as “civil service, administrative, non-pedagogical” employees.⁷ When aides at Bronx Science High School wrote to UFT President Albert Shanker in 1964 requesting membership, he suggested they organize AFSCME District Council 37 (they did so in 1966).⁸ The UFT, said its leader, was strictly for professional teachers.

In the same year that Shanker told the aides of Bronx Science that the UFT was uninterested in their petition, President Lyndon Johnson announced the War on Poverty, allocating millions of federal dollars for community-based anti-poverty programs. In New York City, where programs including Mobilization for Youth and Harlem Youth Opportunities Unlimited had served as models for federal legislation, community groups and city agencies (including the Board of Education) mobilized to capture these funds. One year later, New York University sociologists Arthur Pearl and Frank Riessman authored *New Careers for the Poor: the Non-Professional in Human Services*, in which they argued for the employment of local community members in the servicing of “poverty area” communities. Not only would such

⁵ Letter from Charles Cogen to William B. Nichols, December 7, 1955. UFT; 7; 38.

⁶ “To Chapter Chairmen of the Schools Which Are Receiving Teacher Aides in February 1963” from Neil Lefkowitz, November 30, 1962 UFT; 20; 60. Gladys Roth “UFT Opens Career Doors for Educational Assistant” *The United Teacher* January 24, 1968, UFT; 155; 1.

⁷ Board of Education Special Circular No. 66, 1962-63, June 25, 1963, UFT; 93; 5.

⁸ Letter from School Aides of Bronx Science to Shanker, March 26, 1964. “The School Aide program is a fast growing and potentially powerful force. Because we work closely with the teachers, it would be far more appropriate that we affiliate with the UFT. Once such an affiliation should become firmly established, it should prove to be mutually advantageous.” Shanker himself would employ similar logic in developing aggressive strategies to unionize both paraprofessionals and school aides later in his career,.

programs provide much-needed employment in these areas, argued Pearl and Riessman, but “indigenous personnel” would better connect communities and bureaucracies by bringing local knowledge to bear in developing “a more wholistic [sic] client relationship” that would improve the quality of service provided.⁹ At a time when many communities across the city had begun to chafe at the unresponsiveness of the municipal bureaucracy, Pearl and Riessman’s thesis offered a model for job creation and community involvement that appealed to both radicals and bureaucrats who were developing programs with federal monies.

One group that implemented the “new careers” model was the Women’s Talent Corps (WTC), founded in March of 1965 as “a training and employment institute designed to combat poverty and to utilize the skills and experience of employable women in urban areas for careers in community service.”¹⁰ Funded directly by the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the WTC brought together elite reformers and community activists. Executive director Audrey Cohen got her start as an education advocate seeking flexible employment for college-educated women raising children, while the WTC Board was chaired by Preston R. Wilcox, the director of the East Harlem Project and professor of Sociology and Social Work at Columbia University.

A longtime organizer who worked tirelessly in Harlem “to involve the poor in community action and to transmit organization skills,” Wilcox was one of many activists and intellectuals who came to reject integration as a solution to the deterioration of public schooling in Black and Latino communities after the failure of the Board to respond to massive student strikes in 1964 and 1965.¹¹ Writing in March of 1966, Wilcox argued, “If one can believe that a predominately ‘de facto segregated’ white school can be a ‘good school,’ then, one must believe that a ‘de facto segregated’ and predominantly Negro and Puerto Rican school can also be a

⁹ Pearl and Riessman, *New Careers for the Poor: the Non-professional in Human Services*. (New York, 1965). 197.

¹⁰ Women’s Talent Corps Teacher Aide Proposal, November 21, 1966, UFT; 108; 5.

¹¹ Diane Ravitch, *The Great School Wars: A History of the New York City Public Schools* (New York, 1988), 294.

‘good school.’” Schools, Wilcox continued, needed to “bring the community into the school” so that pedagogy could become “a reflection of local values and not a subtle rejection of them.”¹²

The WTC’s organizing strategy reflected Wilcox’s commitment to community involvement in school operations. From the outset, they built alliances with community organizations to identify local needs and seek out ways that local residents could mobilize to meet them. They worked with these organizations to “encourage qualified persons to apply for training,” and then to put pressure on city agencies to hire trainees. This pressure included a “flood of letters” to city offices and a sit-in at the New York City Poverty Office.¹³

The WTC also approached local unions, including the UFT. In October, the Corps’ “Progress Report” noted, “Meetings with top representatives of the UFT have produced offers of cooperation and assistance. Interest has been expressed by the union in representing the new position of teacher assistant as the role would be ‘pedagogical.’”¹⁴ By the spring of 1967, the WTC, with the backing of the UFT and community groups, had placed 75 of their trainees in New York City schools and won a guarantee from the city’s Board of Education that even more “permanent positions” would be established for the 1967-68 school year.¹⁵

The Board of Education announced the hiring of the first auxiliary educational assistants on October 30, 1967 in a circular that read: “this is part of a program for development of careers for auxiliary educational personnel designed to improve communications with communities, improve instruction in the kindergartens, and provide opportunities for residents in disadvantaged communities, who possess the ability, to develop into teachers.”¹⁶ The Board grouped auxiliaries – also known as paraprofessionals - in seven new positions differentiated by

¹² Wilcox “To Be Black and Successful,” qtd. in Ravitch, *Great School Wars* 296-298.

¹³ Women’s Talent Corps Teacher Aide Proposal, November 21, 1966; WTC Progress Report (No. 6), March – April 1967, UFT; 108; 5.

¹⁴ WTC Progress Report (No. 2) October 1966, UFT; 108; 5.

¹⁵ WTC Progress Report (No. 6), March – April 1967, UFT; 108; 5.

¹⁶ NYC BOE Special Circular No. 30, UFT; 155; 1.

duties, qualifications, and rates of pay. Funded by Title I of the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a piece of War on Poverty legislation that targeted aid to low-income school districts through state and local education agencies (and which contained provisions encouraging the “maximum feasible participation” of community groups), the program expanded the WTC’s proposal, employing 1,500 low-income New Yorkers by the spring of 1968.

In an effort to clarify the duties of paraprofessionals, the Board composed several memos to principals listing potential duties, which ranged from the menial (“get milk,”) to the anthropological (“explain Puerto Rican community and culture to teachers and administrators”). Principals were directed to hire 50% of their allocated paraprofessionals at their discretion, including from their existing staff of “non-academic school aides” and 50% on the recommendation of city-recognized community associations. In January of 1968, the Board amended this agreement at the request of AFSCME DC 37 to allow that union to recommend school aides to principals as they hired within schools. The Board also allocated funding for paraprofessionals with high school degrees to enroll in college courses in conjunction with Frank Riessman’s New Careers Development Center at NYU. However, this opportunity was limited to 10% of the paraprofessional workforce (paras were recommended for courses by their principals) and was not coupled with any release time or funding. Surveying this dramatically changing landscape, Shanker composed a letter to UFT Chapter Chairs in schools employing paras in that read “We consider these positions ... to be pedagogical in nature and, therefore, will include them in the UFT ... a special effort must be made to organize these paraprofessionals.”¹⁷

The paraprofessional program had many progenitors. Community associations had recommended many of the first paras and had rallied their members to write letters and sit in to get them jobs. The UFT had exercised its clout within the Board of Education and risked the ire

¹⁷ Letter from Shanker to Chapter Chairs, February 19, 1968, UFT; 133; 27.

of its membership by approving a non-teacher pedagogical position, while another union, DC 37 Local 372, had positioned itself as an official recommender of candidates for paraprofessional positions. The WTC had forged the model for the program from diverse components and ideologies ranging from the job-creation goals of Frank Riessman to the community-control efforts of Preston Wilcox. All of these groups would invoke their role in the program's creation as they lobbied for the paras' support and loyalty in the months and years to come.

III.

Who worked as a paraprofessional? An in-depth study conducted by the Institute for Educational Development in 1969-70 school year offers a wide-ranging portrait. Approximately 55% of paras surveyed were African-American or Afro-Caribbean, 18% were of Puerto Rican descent, 7% were "other nonwhites" (presumably Asian and other Latinas) and roughly 20% were white (many Latinas identified as white on such forms throughout the 1970s). The vast majority (93%) were women in their thirties and forties, and the majority (65%) were married, though a significant minority were single heads of households (80% of all paraprofessionals had at least one child, and 72% had one at home). The fact that most paras were women prompted claims and conflict over gendered responsibilities to their homes, communities, and workplaces, with paras challenging male partners, community association directors, and union leaders.

Over 77% of paras had a high school diploma, and 25% had at least one year of college training, but for 40% of them, being a paraprofessional was their first foray into the workplace, while another 30% had previously only held low-wage, part-time service employment, many as school aides. While hired from welfare rolls by law, the survey revealed that once they were hired, 87% of paraprofessionals received no household income from public assistance, and only 20% continued to live below the federal poverty line (\$3,000 per year).¹⁸ Paraprofessionals

¹⁸ Brickell, *Paraprofessionals*, 40-49, A-43 – A-58.

averaged 22-25 hours a week, and took home \$50-75 weekly before they won their first contract.

Nearly all paraprofessionals lived within ten blocks of the school they worked at (almost always the same school their own children attended), which meant that paras serviced a population that they both resembled and knew intimately. In neighborhoods experiencing high rates of residential turnover, 80% of paraprofessionals had lived in their communities for more than five years, and 56% had lived there for more than ten years. As a result, 85% of paras reported regularly encountering children they worked with and their parents outside of school, 66% reported belonging to the same organizations (churches, clubs, etc.) as their students, and 35% had even cared for these children outside of a school setting “as a favor to the family.” Within these communities, paraprofessionals were active participants: over 60% were involved in formal community-based organizations (including, most commonly, school-based groups), and the study showed that as paras aged and earned more, they tended to join more formal organizations of all sorts. As 91% of New York teachers and an even higher percentage of administrators were white in 1969 (the student body was 64% nonwhite), local encounters with nonwhite educators inside or outside of school were extremely rare before the advent of paraprofessionalism, a fact that put the paras’ role as school-community brokers in high relief, and made them desirable as allies in struggles over the future of urban education.¹⁹

The UFT expressed interest in unionizing WTC trainees before they had even entered the school system, and once the program was underway, the union pushed forward with this plan. Several factors occasioned the UFT’s new position on unionizing “non-teachers.” Facing demands for local control of schools and mounting critiques of white teachers failing black students, the UFT had good reason to seek the support of paraprofessionals. Meanwhile,

¹⁹ Brickell, *Paraprofessionals*, 40-49, A-43 – A-58. Also “The Para-professional Program at Queensborough Community College” November 30, 1970, UFT; 255; 5. “Between Teacher and Pupil” *NY Post Magazine Section*, Saturday December 30, 1972; Internal Report, UFT; 80; 13.

AFSCME DC 37 had established itself as the largest and most powerful public union in the city by mobilizing hospital workers in 1965. The victory gave DC 37 the sole power to negotiate pensions, wage scales, and other citywide policies for civil service employees.²⁰ While the UFT had let DC 37 unionize school aides in 1966 without a challenge, the idea of a different union's members in the classroom concerned UFT leaders. Though they worried about the reaction of their rank and file to the employment of community-based non-teachers as “pedagogical” staff, the union's leadership decided it would be easier to convince teachers to accept paraprofessionals as potential allies if they were recruited to the union.²¹ At the national level, the National Education Association (NEA), the UFT's longtime rival and an opponent of teacher collective bargaining in the 1960s, was reporting the hiring of over 100,000 paraprofessionals nationwide and suggesting it might launch its own paraprofessional chapter.²²

It was a group of women within the UFT who led the drive to organize the paras. UFT Field Organizer Gladys Roth led the initial meeting of 152 paraprofessionals on January 19, 1968 at UFT headquarters. The event, which Roth described as “standing-room only” in the pages of the *United Teacher*, the UFT's newsletter, generated the appointment of a “paraprofessional steering committee” which was to meet regularly to formulate strategies and demands for unionization.²³ Among those who joined the committee was Velma Murphy Hill, a former NAACP and CORE organizer with a master's degree in education from Harvard who had secured a paraprofessional position with the express goal of organizing paras for the UFT.²⁴ Hill,

²⁰ See Maier, *City Unions*. The city government under Mayor Robert F. Wagner had insisted that a majority of workers across city agencies had to be represented by a single union before the city would bargain on citywide policies. Teachers, as professional staff in a specific role, were not classified as such.

²¹ WTC Progress Report (No. 2) October 1966, UFT; 108; 5.

²² Report, August 1967, UFT; 155; 1.

²³ Gladys Roth, “Educational Assistants 'On Move with UFT' to Professional Status, Career Opportunities” *United Teacher* February 7, 1968. UFT; 93; 5.

²⁴ Shanker insisted that Hill work at least a year as a paraprofessional before becoming a full-time UFT organizer, and though she was clearly not a welfare recipient, he quietly placed her in a school with the help of a cooperative principal. Hill remembers that she “didn't advertise my background much” while on the job.

who would later chair the UFT's paraprofessional chapter, was also courted by DC 37 for the same purpose, but felt at the time that membership in the UFT offered paras better leverage with the Board of Education and a better chance of building a workable career ladder that would contribute to the integration of the teaching corps. Hill remembers the importance of these early meetings in formulating a sense of solidarity among paraprofessionals as workers beyond their particular schools and communities.²⁵ Invitations to meetings read, "Since your assignment involves working beside the teacher and directly with children, it is professional in nature. The UFT is eager to represent you and to protect your rights."²⁶ Shanker personally wrote to paras, asking them to "take an active role in establishing policy and making decisions."²⁷

At the same time, community associations were growing hostile to the UFT on account of their public rejection of the Ford Foundation's recommendations for decentralization. The Morrisania Education Council, a community-based organization in the Bronx, circulated a memo "to all paraprofessionals of Morrisania schools" in schools and community meetings in March of 1968 that read "[The Council], which screened and recommended you to your present positions, is vehemently opposed to you joining the United Federation of Teachers ... the UFT has alienated the community in its stand on the McBundy report [sic]." The memo, which claimed this position had been developed at a "Paraprofessional Conference" held by the group, argued that teachers had opposed the employment of paras and now sought to control them, despite the fact that "a teacher's union cannot possibly speak for you, inasmuch as your problems are different than those of teachers." Asking, "Should teachers be aware of your plans?" the memo concluded, "when there is such a thing as a permanent paraprofessional group, we will decide

²⁵ Interview with Velma Murphy Hill, November 7, 2011 (transcript available from author).

²⁶ Memo: To All: Educational Assistants, Teacher Assistants, Family Workers, Family Assistants, Educational Aides, from Joan Fisher and Gladys Roth, February 13, 1968; Memo: A special meeting of district 19 paraprofessionals will be held at IS 292, March 20, 1968, UFT; 133; 7

²⁷ Letter from Shanker to Members (aimed at paraprofessionals), February 28, 1968, UFT; 133; 7.

which union we embrace [all emphasis original].”²⁸ Attempts to build (and enforce) paraprofessional loyalty were not solely the province of the UFT.

As they courted the paraprofessionals, Roth and Sandra Feldman, who supervised the campaign (Hill was still working as a para and would not take over the campaign until 1969), had to simultaneously address the concerns of teachers about the admission of paras to their “professional” union. The union’s public dispute with African-American and Latino leaders over decentralization and the “disruptive student” provision in the 1967 UFT contract had made many teachers increasingly wary of “community people” in public schools. Writing in the fall of 1967, one teacher worried that “the primary purpose of the program has been to provide employment for poor people rather than primarily to help the children.”²⁹ Roth’s articles in the *United Teacher* emphasized the UFT’s role in the creation of the paraprofessionals’ positions, and suggested that teacher concerns about “poverty area” schools, including teacher shortages and strained relationships with parents, would be addressed by a robust paraprofessional program and career ladder.³⁰ A flyer circulated by UFT Field Representative Kinard Lang titled “Why should the UFT encourage the hiring and union membership of the Paraprofessionals?” suggested a number of benefits for teachers, including “increased political influence,” “teacher-parent empathy,” “assistance for teachers,” and “local community allies on future picket lines.” “Teachers legitimately resent being blamed for all educational failures” wrote Lang, and “with local parents involved in the educational process they will learn to appreciate the administrative and bureaucratic problems that hamper competent and dedicated teachers in the performance of their duties.” More to the point, Lang added, “Paraprofessionals who belong to the UFT will be

²⁸ Memo: To All Paraprofessionals in Morrisania Schools, March 20, 1968, UFT; 133; 7. McGeorge Bundy of the Ford Foundation had authored the report, known throughout the city as the “Bundy” report.

²⁹ Letter from Nancy D. Garcia to Albert Shanker, UFT; 93; 5.

³⁰ Roth, “UFT Opens Career Doors for Educational Assistant” *United Teacher*, January 24, 1968. UFT; 155; 1.

potential allies and arouse more parent support of work stoppages” and “are far less likely to serve as scabs after their union improves their working conditions.”³¹

Some teachers began to embrace the potential benefits of paraprofessional unionism as well. A UFT chapter from the Italian-American neighborhood of Bensonhurst in Brooklyn submitted “Proposed Guidelines for the Use of Paraprofessionals” to UFT headquarters with many recommendations that mirrored those of Field Organizers (and, for that matter, Black and Latino community groups), including “paraprofessionals should be interviewed by the Community Progress Corporation and the principal,” “the paraprofessional is best viewed as an intern whose ultimate goal would be to attain full professional status,” and “full articulation between the school and the Community Progress Corporation.” The program, these teachers concluded, “is a bridge between the teachers and the community and the professional staff would be more than remiss if it did not utilize to the fullest the tremendous energies and talents of the community in achieving the common goal of educating the children.”³²

In an effort to demonstrate the UFT’s responsiveness to the needs of paraprofessionals and teachers, and to gauge the impact of their appeals, Gladys Roth conducted an extensive survey of paraprofessionals and teachers working with them in the spring of 1968, from which she produced a report that offered a vision of bright future relations between both parties.³³ What comes through most clearly in this report is the mutual respect that the vast majority of teachers and paras working together seemed to have had for one another, and the extremely positive reviews that both gave to the program in its first full year of operation. In her introduction, Roth claimed that the organizing drive was born of “requests from classroom teachers to provide

³¹ Kinard Lang, “Why should the UFT encourage the hiring and union membership of the Paraprofessionals?” UFT; 133; 27.

³² “Proposed Guidelines for the Use of Paraprofessionals” Letter from the Arturo Toscanini Chapter to UFT Headquarters. UFT; 133; 27.

³³ Gladys Roth “Auxiliary Educational Assistants In New York City Schools” May 20, 1968 UFT; 80; 11.

service for their assistants who were not paid promptly or who were closed out of community college courses.” Roth noted that the vast majority of teachers surveyed rated their auxiliaries as “excellent” (one teacher replied “I cannot do without her! She’s essential!”), while of 168 replies from paraprofessionals, only four were negative (and three of these came from a single school).

Roth devoted five pages of her fourteen-page report to quotes from paraprofessionals, from which three main themes emerge. Most prominent was the assertion that the program was “very good for community relations” and that, by giving “the people in the community a chance to take part in the education of their children” the program was “particularly good in bettering relations between black and white in ghetto areas.”³⁴ A close second was excitement about the career ladder program. Many paras had “always wanted to back to school” and one noted that “income while learning” was “marvelous for low-income families.” The final theme paras emphasized was the need for prompt pay, which was connected to desire to join the UFT. One para wrote, “We are all going to join the union because we need someone strong behind us.”³⁵

Roth’s report suggested that a key factor in the development of paraprofessional consciousness was the classroom experience, which confirmed the importance of paras’ role as intermediaries between school and community while bringing them into contact with committed teachers (and intransigent administrators), which prompted some to re-evaluate the problems with the educational system in “poverty areas.” A strong current of aspiration runs through Roth’s report; paraprofessionals were united not just through classroom experiences but by their desires to build careers there. After a year, the provisions of the program had begun to empower the women it employed, even as it made them increasingly aware of the complex set of forces they contended with as low-wage working mothers within a city bureaucracy.

³⁴ Ibid. The three quotes in this sentence are drawn from the responses of three different paraprofessionals at three different schools.

³⁵ Ibid.

IV.

Eleven days before Roth's final report was released on May 20th, Ocean Hill-Brownsville Administrator Rhody McCoy announced the removal of 19 teachers from his demonstration district. The resulting firestorm engulfed the rest of the school year, with teachers in the district striking for the final three weeks of school. While paraprofessional organizing was not the first item on anyone's agenda in the months that followed, it remained a key issue for a few dedicated UFT organizers, who understood that their task would in many ways be all the more crucial when the smoke cleared. Paraprofessionals, too, faced new challenges in the context of the fight. Would the paras respect the picket lines of the teachers they worked with, or enter the schools to teach local children, including their own?

When the strikes continued in the fall, paraprofessionals took part in a range of actions that demonstrated their varying commitments across the divide created by the conflict. Many did cross picket lines, inspired by the opportunity to teach or driven by loyalty to the community-control experiment (of which their own positions were often considered a part). However, many paras did not cross picket lines. Aside from risking pariah status in their communities, many of these paras were "penalized more harshly than teachers for honoring the strike" by administrators who had near-total control over their pay and hours.³⁶ Roth wrote during the third strike, "While the majority did cross our picket lines, the minority, mostly Puerto Rican, did not do so. Some have lost their jobs, others have lost their pay. On make up time, they are not asked to serve the additional hours or days and will therefore lose the additional remuneration provided for the teachers on an overtime basis as well as their salary for the entire period of the strike." Roth, who had become the point person for paras interested in joining the UFT, added that she was "receiving very angry calls and would like to be able to provide justice for this very valuable

³⁶ Memo From: Gladys Roth To: Albert Shanker and Vito DeLeonardis, October 17, 1968. UFT; 80; 14.

and brave group of UFT members.”³⁷ Roth’s memos reveal an ongoing UFT concern with paraprofessionals even as they became enemies in the eyes of many striking teachers. They also reveal a partial fracture between African-American and Latina paras.³⁸ Despite contemporary portrayals, neither communities nor paraprofessionals were homogenous.

The news that some paraprofessionals had supported their picket lines encouraged UFT leaders to press forward with their unionization drive when the spring semester began in 1969. Still, the three strikes had done serious damage to the UFT’s community standing, and they resumed their drive in a highly charged atmosphere. Facing criticism from both progressive and reactionary wings within their union, the UFT also contended with claims on paraprofessional loyalties from community organizations and DC 37 Local 372, which, having represented some paras as school aides, now also sought to unionize them in their new positions. With a union election set for June, the UFT’s leaders had to make a case that they, and not community leaders or Local 372, could best provide the job security, increased wages, and path to advancement that paraprofessionals desired. At the same time, they had to ensure the support of their membership, a task which proved to be a precarious balancing act.

In making their case, the UFT utilized several strategies to differentiate the benefits it offered from those paras had enjoyed while aligned with community organizations or Local 372. Mass meetings and the development of a steering committee continued under the supervision of Velma Murphy Hill, who left her paraprofessional position to become a full-time organizer and the face of the campaign.³⁹ Hill sought to build paraprofessional unity through meetings and the

³⁷ Memo From: Gladys Roth To: Vito and Al, November 19, 1968. UFT; 80; 14.

³⁸ Jesse Hoffnung-Garskof, *A Tale of Two Cities: Santo Domingo and New York After 1950*, (Princeton; Princeton, 2007), 194. Hoffnung-Garskof suggests that these fissures emerged on account of leadership concerns, and whether “there was room in the community control movement for Latinos to participate on their own terms, rather than simply as supporters of a ‘community’ politics that had already been defined by black activists.” Chapters 5 and 6 of Hoffnung-Garskof’s book examine cooperation and contention among Dominican migrants and African-Americans in the context of education, including student interactions, the decentralization crisis, and school board elections.

³⁹ Sandra Feldman continued to supervise paraprofessional organizing efforts for Shanker, while Gladys Roth’s

committee, and to remind paras that “a boss is a boss is a boss,” even when the “boss” in question was a community leader living next door.⁴⁰ The steering committee advertised their demands, including annual salaries, better benefits, and an improved career ladder in flyers, highlighting para participation in the process. Photos of steering committee members with their schools and titles listed ran in a special election edition of the *United Teacher*, re-titled the *United Para-professional* for the occasion, captioned with quotes from these paras explaining their support for the UFT. Putting para faces and ideas up front, the UFT hope to refute notions of Shanker’s dictatorial style and emphasize the democratic potential of membership in the UFT.

The UFT also pushed its status as “a union of professionals” in an effort to appeal to the paras’ sense of themselves as part of an educational team, creating flyers and memos with messages like “Join the Only School Union,” “Join the Union that Knows the Schools,” and “If You Work With Children, You Belong in the UFT.” One flyer touted the UFT’s fight for smaller class sizes, a better curriculum “with African-American history,” and “introduction of school aides and paraprofessionals.” The material side of professional status was celebrated as well, with one flyer touting UFT discounts on everything from vacations to cars to stereos.⁴¹ In addition to suggesting a path to stability and status through UFT membership, these flyers deliberately contrasted the professional unionism of the UFT with the civil service unionism of DC 37. Their language mirrored that of the Women’s Talent Corps, and even that of community groups, who had insisted on professional, and not “entry-level,” status for paras.

Community organizations, locked in contests with the UFT and the Board to preserve and expand the decentralization experiment in 1969, were largely absent from the fray before the

involvement with the campaign seems to have ended. She moved to a position with the union’s grievance office.

⁴⁰ Interview with Velma Murphy Hill, November 7, 2011 (transcript available from author). While community leaders were not supervisors of paraprofessionals in schools, many sought to position themselves as the ultimate decision-makers with respect to the hiring, firing, evaluation, and retention of paraprofessionals, as discussed below.

⁴¹ UFT Flyers, UFT; 155; Folders 2-4.

June union election (they also, perhaps, believed the UFT would never win). DC 37, however, spied an opening to expand their union, which had built a sterling reputation in Black and Latino communities through its organization of low-income workers in the city's hospitals. Seeking to capitalize on the alienating effect of the 1968 strikes, DC 37 couched their campaign messages in the language of community control. One brochure argued:

“Many more paraprofessionals have come to the realization that Al Shanker fears and opposes a real Career Ladder Program for Para-professionals. It is Shanker who demands continuation of the Board of Examiners and their old, outmoded system of employing teachers. Local 372 wants to change this system, so that people from the community can rise through the ranks to become teachers. Shanker opposes such changes; he fears a real Career Ladder program because he fears the community.”⁴²

While simultaneously making a case for itself as a forward-thinking, racially-conscious union, the UFT drew on the legacy of 1968 in a very different way once DC 37 began dredging it up. As June approached, flyers urged paras to “Vote for the Union that has the Strength to Win.” One from May, featuring a photograph of an unsmiling Albert Shanker staring out of the frame (as if at an unlucky adversary at the bargaining table) bore the message “When you vote for the UFT and Al Shanker you're not guessing! You KNOW we can do the job because we are DOING it. Vote UFT! UFT can do the job for YOU – It's STRONG. [emphasis original].” The flyer stood in stark contrast to DC 37's brochure, which bore the image of a smiling Lillian Roberts (the well-respected mastermind of DC 37's campaign for city hospital staff, and an African-American woman) smiling at the camera with the caption “Mrs. Roberts, Associate Director of DC 37, is nationally known as originator of Career Ladder Programs which have already raised 500 Nurse's Aides to Licensed Nurses.”⁴³

In the campaign's final days, both unions sought to leverage person-to-person contact to

⁴² DC 37 Flyers, UFT; 155; Folders 2-4. The Board of Examiners had been a particular target of community leaders' ire, and was seen as representative of the over-rigid bureaucracy with which the UFT was associated.

⁴³ UFT Flyers, UFT; 155; Folders 2-4.

influence paras. A June 18, 1969, letter from Shanker to teachers who worked with paras read:

“We are counting on you to convince her that UFT is the best choice and to see that she votes UFT in the coming election . . . When the paraprofessional in your class votes next week, she should know that you want her in the UFT – that you need her support in teachers’ struggles and that you will support her in winning benefits” (this followed a flurry of urgent correspondence with Chapter Chairs with much the same message).⁴⁴

Members of Local 372 went even further, threatening paras with termination if they voted UFT, and, on Election Day, filling out ballots for paras and in some cases stuffing the ballot boxes outright. UFT observers cried foul, and after several months of arbitration (during which time both unions circulated flyers and press releases accusing the other of stalling), the contested ballots were removed and the votes were counted. At the insistence of the Board of Education, the election had only been held among paraprofessionals who worked in grades K-2 (the Board claimed that they could not guarantee the continuation of the program beyond those grades on account of divisions in federal funding). This group, between 3,500 and 4,000 paraprofessionals (out of about 10,000 total employed in New York City), had been further divided into two bargaining units: paras who worked in classrooms and paras who did not. In the final count of unchallenged ballots, the UFT won the classroom workers with 1,248 votes to DC 37’s 1,195 (29 paras voted for no union, and 9 ballots were blank) while DC 37 won the family and parent workers with 252 votes to the UFT’s 202 (5 voted no, 10 were blank). In total, somewhere between 75-85% of eligible paras voted, the vast majority for some form of union membership.

While the UFT did not win a resounding victory, it was clear that paraprofessionals sought union representation and the material and status benefits that came with it. The teacher’s union was deeply unpopular in most of communities where the election was contested, and was challenging a broadly popular union that had already represented a significant minority of paraprofessionals (those who had previously served as school aides). Given these challenges, it

⁴⁴ Letters from Shanker to Teachers and Chapter Chairs, June 18, 1969, UFT; 155; 6.

seems fair to ask how the UFT was able to win any votes at all.

The paras that chose the UFT did so for two primary reasons: their affirmation of paras as professional educators and their demonstrated ability to outduel the Board of Education (which promised a more effective career ladder). As Brooklyn Para Julia Rodgers said,

“I like the idea of the UFT because the teachers are in it and we work with them in the classroom. We're a team, and in order to work well we ought to be together. The UFT is also offering us good things – a raise and the chance to go to college one day since we want to become teachers. I go for it because I like what they're trying to do.”⁴⁵

Talking to the *Baltimore African-American*, para Carolyn Frazier of Harlem was blunter, noting that she supported the UFT because she was “going to the highest bidder.” In the same article, Robert Jackson of the WTC argued “the paraprofessionals ideologically prefer DC 37, but from a practical standpoint, they feel that the UFT has more muscle.”⁴⁶

By confirming the professional status of paraprofessionals, offering a vision of career advancement, and (somewhat ironically) by showing so clearly that they could fight the City and win, the UFT eked out a 53-vote victory. It was one that the union would begin trumpeting almost immediately, and which it continues to celebrate today.⁴⁷ However, a two-percent margin victory hardly signals a resounding show of support, and though the election marked a drastic shift in their relationship, negotiations between the UFT and paraprofessionals were far from complete. In some locales, the UFT had won a major victory, not least in Ocean Hill-Brownsville where 175 out of 200 paraprofessionals signed UFT union cards, but in others, ties to DC 37 or mistrust of the UFT had carried the day.⁴⁸ Perhaps more importantly, before any substantive gains could come of paraprofessional unionism, the paras and the UFT had to bargain a novel

⁴⁵ *The United Para-Professional* June 1969, UFT; 155; 3.

⁴⁶ “Unions fight to enlist NY’s teacher aides,” *Baltimore Afro-American*, December 27, 1969, found in UFT Clippings File, UFT; 255; 2.

⁴⁷ E.g. “Not for Teachers Only” *The United Teacher*, February 2010.

⁴⁸ “UFT Scoring Gains in Ghetto” *New York Post* January 12, 1970.

contract with the Board of Education while being challenged by hostile community corporations and internal dissent, both of which the city sought to leverage against the UFT's demands.

V.

Contract negotiations between the UFT and the Board of Education began in December 1969, but the final paraprofessional contract was not signed until August of the following year. Many factors precipitated so lengthy a bargaining period; first, the Board had to assess its capacity to fund substantial wage increases and additional outlays for benefits and the career ladder (which itself had to be completely overhauled, as it was with the help of the City University of New York), essentially taking responsibility for a program which had previously been federally-funded and jointly administered. Financial concerns notwithstanding, the Board, whose members had almost all been appointed by Mayor Lindsay, had favored the decentralization districts over the UFT during the 1968 strikes and retained a deep-seated antipathy to Shanker and the UFT. Many on the Board were happy to stall, hoping to undermine what they felt was an over-powerful but over-extended union. By provoking the threat of yet another teacher's strike, the Board hoped to break the UFT, either by unleashing a massive backlash against an unpopular tactic or by revealing the UFT leadership's inability to make its mostly white rank-and-file walk out to support paraprofessionals. While opposition to paraprofessional unionism began to build in communities and among teachers immediately after the election results were ratified, it was the question of a strike for paras that posed the most serious challenge to the UFT's efforts, both from within and from without.

Officially recognized by the city, Community Action Programs and Community Development Corporations were community organizations that had advocated for and helped implement the paraprofessional experiment in its first two years, screening and recommending

candidates for positions in local schools. These positions created both low-income jobs and one potential route to “community control” and, like other jobs created with War on Poverty funding, these positions offered some community leaders the opportunity to build patronage networks and the chance to influence city bureaucracies. These efforts at control sometimes antagonized paras: one complaint in Gladys Roth’s 1968 survey referenced a meeting held in school by a community group demanding the fealty of paras, and the UFT received complaints from the Two Bridges demonstration district when paraprofessionals were ordered to join a sit-in at the office of the Manhattan borough president.⁴⁹ Organizations sometimes faced internal challenges from those they employed, as evidenced by an attempt at unionization on the part of some 300 employees of the Bedford-Stuyvesant Restoration Corporation (the city’s largest CDC) in 1968.⁵⁰

When the UFT announced the beginning of paraprofessional contract negotiations in 1969, community-based organizations were still furious with the UFT for blocking decentralization and for keeping their children out of school for nearly two months, and they saw the UFT’s unionization drive as yet another attempt to stifle community control of education. These groups worried that a UFT contract would spell the end of their influence over paraprofessional appointments, even as the newly-signed New York State decentralization law created community school boards with nominal hiring privileges for non-teachers, including administrators. These organizations sought to remind paras that they were “placed in the school” by community associations and thus owed their jobs, and their loyalty, to these groups. As one organization put it, “It is required that para-professionals remain in constant cooperation with the Crown Heights Education Committee.” This meant avoiding the UFT, which “does not reflect our local community culture in any positive manner,” and was out of bounds in any case, as “a

⁴⁹ Roth, *The United Para-Professional* June 1969, UFT; 155; 3.

⁵⁰Mike Woodsworth. “The War on Poverty in Brooklyn” (PhD diss, Columbia, 2012).

union contract concerning Title I personnel is invalid because it is in conflict with and in fact contrary to public law.” Urging paras to “toss aside the concept that we need people outside of our community culture to bargain anything for us,” they sought to reassert both their authority over paraprofessionals and their legitimacy as voices of the communal will.⁵¹

Many flyers circulated by community groups, including the one cited above, quoted from an article from the *New York Amsterdam News* that described the firing of former paraprofessional and UFT Field Organizer James Howard, on account of his independence from Albert Shanker and his use of the language of “Black pride.” Reporting that paraprofessionals organized by Howard had turned in their union cards in protest the article asked, “If the UFT can do away with Howard, a so-called top representative, imagine what they are going to do for you?”⁵² The report implied paraprofessional independence from their new union and the hope, for community leaders, that they might yet abandon it.

Community groups grew increasingly outspoken in their appeals to paras when the threat of a paraprofessional strike was broached in the spring of 1970. A “Letter to Paraprofessionals of Ocean Hill-Brownsville” from Rev. Herbert C. Oliver and Rhody McCoy used the word “para” interchangeably with “parent” to elide the two in a gendered appeal. It plead, “Don't let Shanker use our children and us to help him win back friends in our communities. He doesn't care about our children. He proved that with his illegal strikes of 1967 and 1968...”⁵³ In Bedford-Stuyvesant, whose local school district employed the largest number of paraprofessionals, Bed-Stuy Youth In Action informed paras that, “if a strike is called, [we] will urge the para-professionals not to go

⁵¹ Memorandum No. 1, Crown Heights Education Committee, December 29, 1969, UFT; 80; 11

⁵² Marietta J. Tanner, “Community Conscious” *New York Amsterdam News*, December 20, 1969. Copies of this article appear throughout the UFT Collection, as reproduced in all five boroughs. The UFT archive contains a one-line letter firing Howard, but no other information as to why he was terminated (Hill does not remember the cause of his termination). He later worked for the Board of Education before being hired by Lillian Roberts at DC 37.

⁵³ A Letter To Para-Professionals of OceanHill-Brownsville School District April 22, 1970, UFT; 80; 15.

out. They will be hurting the children from the community they are trying to serve.”⁵⁴

These attempts to guilt paras, however, were tempered by the need to address the extremely low pay paras were receiving for work that community associations agreed was vitally important. UFT newspaper ads promoting the paraprofessionals’ negotiations read, “Everybody knows the way out of poverty is a job. Well, we’re working and we’re still poor. We are paraprofessionals. We live in the neighborhoods of the schools we work in.”⁵⁵ Seeking to preempt the need for a union-brokered contract, several community groups insisted that they had approved a 25% increase in paraprofessional wages, to be paid out of the federal funds allocated to the Board of Education, which the Board had failed to honor.⁵⁶ Bed-Stuy Youth in Action’s leaders noted in their monthly newsletter that they had formed their own paraprofessional organization, which had affirmed its commitment to the community and promised not to strike.⁵⁷ One group even went as far as to develop a preliminary Career Opportunities Program of its own with the University of Massachusetts.⁵⁸ If they were to retain paras’ allegiance, many organizations realized that they had to address their needs and desires directly.

Velma Hill joined paras around the city at local community meetings, many of which became heated. In one instance, after being threatened by a local organization, Hill’s delegation was defended by a para from the district, who leapt between them and shouted “Come on then! You’ve gotta bring some to get some!” after which the group heard them out.⁵⁹ Paraprofessionals believed they could fight for their their rights as workers and still remain involved in their local communities. Though local organizations could not force paras to repudiate the UFT, the

⁵⁴ Memorandum: Para-Professional Crisis, Bedford-Stuyvesant Youth In Action, May 1, 1970 UFT; 80;15.

⁵⁵ “Work or Welfare” March 23, 1970, UFT; 155; 3.

⁵⁶ Materials from Ocean Hill-Brownsville, Crown Heights, and Bedford-Stuyvesant all contain this identical claim, but there is no evidence that the Board of Education ever seriously considered honoring it, or whether the structure of the program gave the CDCs a voice in the wages paid to paraprofessionals.

⁵⁷ “Community News Service” May 1970, UFT; 155; 5.

⁵⁸ Letter from Mary Phifer to CDE Education Committee, July 28, 1970, UFT; 80; 15.

⁵⁹ Interview with Velma Murphy Hill, November 7, 2011 (transcript available from author)

meetings they hosted gave paras an important opportunity to explain their reasons for unionizing while asserting their commitment to their communities by listening to the concerns of residents.

Many in the press supported the paras as well. The *New York Post* ran a long, glowing profile of paraprofessional Lettie Concepcion and the “fantastic” relationships she had built with her students and teachers in Brooklyn, while the *New York Times*, a staunch opponent of the 1968 strikes, called organizing the paraprofessionals “a stroke of genius.”⁶⁰ The *Amsterdam News*, which had opposed to the strikes, gave Bayard Rustin column space to track the progress of contract negotiations, and in the Puerto Rican community, *El Tiempo* ran interviews with paraprofessionals, whom it lauded for their work in bilingual education and noted, “If anyone in any Latin American country were to say that a public servant in the US earns between \$2,500 and \$3,000 annually, very few would believe it.”⁶¹ This coverage emphasized the value of the paraprofessional contribution, and made their demands sympathetic to wide audience.

As the paras contended with demanding and occasionally hostile community organizations, the UFT was scrambling to sell paraprofessional unionization to skeptical teachers. Early on, a handwritten letter from Beatrice E. Jacob, the Chapter Chair of PS 106 in the Bronx, informed Shanker that her chapter was “unilaterally opposed to the continuation of the para-professionals,” because, as she put it, “they will become a noose around our neck and at present offer no assistance but rather are a disturbing factor and a hindrance.”⁶² Similar missives, often signed by whole chapters, raised concerns about paraprofessionals acting as scabs, diluting the legitimacy of teacher professionalism, or receiving unfair assistance in becoming teachers.

When the threat of a paraprofessional strike was raised, many asserted, as did teacher Paul

⁶⁰ “It’s more than watering plants” *New York Post Magazine* May 16, 1970.

⁶¹ “Las Demandas de Los Paraprofesionales” *El Tiempo*, May 1970. UFT; 155; 6. The importance of paras to early efforts at bilingual education, while beyond the scope of this paper, was celebrated in New York’s Spanish-speaking community, and efforts were made to expand their role, including a successful suit by ASPIRA that forced the Board of Education to give preference to bilingual paraprofessionals in building bilingual education programs.

⁶² Letter from Beatrice E. Jacob to Albert Shanker, January 12, 1969. UFT; 80; 14.

Engelson of Queens, “I have no intention of going on strike for this group.”⁶³

This last threat posed a grave problem for the UFT – not only would a paraprofessional strike without teacher support have little practical impact and hinder any attempts to negotiate a contract, but images of white teachers crossing picket lines would confirm everything community organizations had said about the UFT and irrevocably damage the union’s legitimacy with paraprofessionals. In response, Feldman and Shanker conducted what an internal report later called “one of the most intensive internal education campaigns in its history.”⁶⁴ Feldman answered hundreds of letters from teachers, driving home the message that “paraprofessionals are members of our own union. [emphasis original] If we do not support them in their struggle for a contract ... if our efforts to win a living wage and working conditions are defeated, that defeat will be a severe blow to the UFT and its future negotiating strength.”⁶⁵ After a decision to hold a membership-wide vote on the question of whether to back a paraprofessional strike (a move that outraged progressive elements within the teachers union and the para caucus, who felt that it revealed paras’ second-class citizenship) Shanker once again leaned on his chapter chairs to educate the rank and file, urging them to emphasize the support of “civil rights, liberal and labor groups” for “our paraprofessional campaign” and the need for a “strong vote of support by all UFT members.”⁶⁶ Many rose to the occasion with impressive materials of their own, including a one-act script composed by a Brooklyn chapter chair addressing major questions about the campaign.⁶⁷ On June 3, 1970, teachers voted 3 to 1 at Madison Square Garden to support a paraprofessional strike, forcing the Board of Education to the bargaining table.

⁶³ Letter from Paul Engelson to Albert Shanker, April 4, 1970. UFT; 155; 3.

⁶⁴ Internal Report, 1974, UFT Box 80 Folder 13. A more comprehensive account of this effort is contained in Richard D. Kahlenberg, *Tough Liberal* (New York: Columbia, 2007).

⁶⁵ Letter from Feldman to Paul Engelson, April 24, 1970. UFT; 155; 3.

⁶⁶ Shanker to Chapter Chairs, May 26, 1970 UFT Box 133 Folder 27.

⁶⁷ Newsletter from UFT Chapter Chairman Lucy Shifrin @ 189K, April 1970, UFT; 155; 6.

VI.

The paraprofessional story, if it is told at all, often ends with this justly-celebrated contract. By leveraging their position as the providers of a popular and effective program in a closely-fought union election, paras had demanded that the UFT support a massive investment in their own wages and major improvements to the career ladder system, an investment that the city was forced to realize with the signing of their contract. However, the complex negotiations between the paras, the UFT, the Board, and communities were far from complete, and would continue on the new terrain created by the contract. Indeed, immediately following the celebrations of the contract in August of 1970, the Board of Education announced paraprofessional layoffs. In response, Rustin formed the Emergency Citywide Committee for Public Schools, composed of labor and civil rights leaders, to put pressure on the Board of Education, while Shanker called out his membership for a mass demonstration at City Hall.⁶⁸ Some community groups, while keeping their distance from the UFT, even joined in the protest, as did DC 37, whose contract negotiations for their non-classroom paras were underway at the time (negotiating after the UFT, they typically won identical contracts, in part because all paraprofessionals were included in the career ladder program). This successful mobilization returned all paraprofessionals to their jobs, and demonstrated the value of the paraprofessional contract to both groups: the paras saw their livelihoods and futures defended by powerful new allies, while the UFT was able to shed some of its pariah status.

This victory was soon supplemented by the release of an independent study of the impact of paraprofessionals commissioned by the Board of Education from the Institute for Educational Development (IED). The IED prefaced its 100-page report with the words “Whatever may be wrong with the paraprofessional program in the schools of New York City, none of it could

⁶⁸ Shanker to Members, September 25, 1970. UFT; 80; 15.

outweigh the overwhelming evidence we have found of its success.” In a comprehensive survey of hundreds of paraprofessionals and the teachers, principals, students, and parents they worked with, the IED found that the program was delivering on all four of its goals. 95% of elementary school students reported enjoying school more and learning more, with a para in the classroom, as did 80% of junior high school students (75% of whom also found their homework more important). 75% of teachers observed improved student performance since the beginning of the paraprofessional program, as did 75% of parents. Fully 95% of teachers felt that community relations had improved, as did nearly 100% of principals, while 70% of paras felt their work was improving the neighborhoods in which they lived (95% described their job as “very important”). Asked to name the major impact of the paraprofessional program, the survey returned, in order, increased pupil achievement, increased pupil enjoyment, improved teacher morale, and better relations between teachers and communities. This survey, which was soon followed by similar ones from around the country, confirmed what many had known – the program was working.⁶⁹

Armed with this confirmation of their value in schools, the paras undertook to educate and organize themselves in order to better make their voices heard within the union and to enhance their capacity as leaders within their communities. Under Hill’s leadership, paraprofessional activities were expanded to include weekend conferences in Westchester and Long Island, where paras heard from leaders including Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph on such topics as “civil rights,” “collective bargaining,” and “the history of the labor movement.”⁷⁰ They took their success story on the road, sending representatives to conferences like the one hosted by Frank Riessman in December of 1970, which brought unions and low-income workers

⁶⁹Henry M. Brickell et al., *An In-Depth Study of Paraprofessionals in District Decentralized ESEA Title I and New York State Urban Education Projects in the New York City Schools* (New York: IED, 1970), 77-100.

⁷⁰Program, Paraprofessional Retreat in Tarrytown, January 1971 UFT; 175; 6. Paraprofessional Week-End, Harrison House, Glen Cove, Long Island, February 10, 1973, UFT; 149; 30.

from across the country together to discuss organizing strategies for paraprofessionals in many professions.⁷¹ Perhaps most important to the building of a collective identity was the formation of the Paraprofessional Chapter within the UFT in 1973. Their constitution bears the unmistakable stamp of its parent organization, but reveals as well particular goals unique to the group. Among the chapter's stated objectives were "To cooperate to the fullest extent with the labor movement and to work for a progressive labor philosophy to awaken in all paraprofessionals a labor consciousness and a sense of solidarity with labor," "To promote education as a social agency for developing the capacities of the young; for enlightening adults, and for working toward a society motivated by the ideal of service and democratic participation" and "To make paraprofessionals aware of their political responsibilities."⁷² The chapter published a regular newsletter, *Para Scope*, and hosted an annual "Salute to the Paraprofessionals," at which graduates in the career ladder program were honored. They also organized voter registration drives and disseminated information about union and local school board elections in their communities.

At the local level, paraprofessionals developed their role as liaisons between schools and communities with financial assistance from the Paraprofessional Chapter. Chinese-American para Marion Thom and her colleagues began leading teachers on tours and dinners in Chinatown in the early 1970s, and also became the organizers for celebrations of Chinese cultural heritage in their school. Paras in many other communities, she remembers, took on similar roles as cultural ambassadors.⁷³ In local elections for the UFT's delegate assembly (a body composed of several hundred UFT members) paras touted their commitment to their communities. One para noted her work as an "active, participating parent" in the local PTA, while another cited "100 years of service," among which she counted twenty years as a Brooklyn resident, eighteen as a member

⁷¹ Correspondence between Riessman and UFT, September-November 1970, UFT; 155; 6.

⁷² "Constitution of the Para-Professional Chapter of the UFT, Article II: Objectives" UFT; 149; 30.

⁷³ Conversations with Marion Thom, December 13, 2011.

of her church, ten as a PTA member, and seven as a paraprofessional.⁷⁴

Paraprofessionals took part *en masse* in the free education provided through the career ladder program, which expanded rapidly under the new contract. In partnership with the City University of New York, which launched its Paraprofessional Teacher Education Program in 1970, over 6,000 paraprofessionals (of the 10,000 eligible after the Board of Education agreed to expand the bargaining unit to cover paraprofessionals in grades 3-12 in 1972) were enrolled in university programs by 1974, with over 3,000 having earned some degree and 400 working as teachers in New York City schools (approximately 400 each summer earned their high school diplomas as well).⁷⁵ By 1978, over 1,500 former paraprofessionals were employed as teachers, and one had become a New York State Assemblyman.⁷⁶ Those who earned an associate's or bachelor's degree earned greater rates of pay and increased responsibility in the classroom as part of the Board of Education's hierarchy of paraprofessional positions (as well as opportunities in other sectors if they left education).

Aided by stipends, summer classes, and free periods during their workweek, paraprofessionals (who were still required by law to be drawn from local "poverty area" communities, with the lowest-level position of Educational Assistant drawn from the welfare rolls, through the 1970s) underwent a massive group immersion in education in the 1970s. For many paras, education was the heart of the experience; paraprofessional Chapter Chairs Velma Murphy Hill and Sandra Feldman were swamped with letters requesting assistance whenever new opportunities for education were made available or procedures changed, and Hill remembers talking many women through the challenges of managing school, work, and relationships on the

⁷⁴ "Para Scope" Vol. 1 No. 2, October 1974, UFT; 149; 30.

⁷⁵ Draft of full-page advertisement for *New York Times*, March 1974, UFT; 149; 30.

⁷⁶ "Career Ladder Demonstrates Mobility: Union Moving for EFCB Approval of Para Contract" *The United Teacher*, UFT; 159; 31.

phone, so much so that she was inspired after her career as an organizer ended to take up psychology (a common request was “talk to my husband 'cause he doesn't want me to go to school”).⁷⁷ *Para Scope* listed the latest information about CUNY deadlines and protocols as well as recent graduates in every issue, and any degree recipient could have the honor of walking across the stage in front of thousands of cheering union members at the annual “Salute to Paraprofessionals.” Paras from immigrant communities, in particular, embraced these opportunities at an even greater rate than the professional average, in part because involvement in bilingual education made their positions even more crucial for their children and communities (the first four paras to receive teaching certificates, in 1970, were all immigrants to New York, two from Puerto Rico, one from Barbados, and one from Haiti).⁷⁸ While it is difficult to gauge the impact this influx of educational capital had on the communities paras lived in (though it seems fair to think that it must have been significant), it undoubtedly bonded paraprofessionals to one another. When their chapter did break with and challenge their larger union during the 1970s, it was not over wages, but the continued opportunity to advance their educations.

Complaints about inflexible bureaucrats withholding funds for simple errors on forms and administrators taking advantage of paraprofessionals persisted even once paras were unionized, as did criticism that the official path to teacherdom was too long and convoluted for a working para to navigate in a timely fashion. At a public hearing on the selection of teachers and supervisors held in 1971, one para argued that the release time and financial assistance she received “woefully underestimated,” what she needed to become a teacher, adding “I don’t want to go to my teaching position in a wheelchair.”⁷⁹ The 1975 fiscal crisis in New York City posed a

⁷⁷ Velma Murphy Hill, interviewed by UFT Oral History Project, quoted in Collins *Ethnically Qualified*, 63.

⁷⁸ See Goldenback, “Paraprofessionals,” also “Meet three paraprofessionals who climbed career ladder” *United Teacher* June 25, 1972, UFT; 255, 2.

⁷⁹ Testimony of Joan Burton in Paul Trachtenberg ed. *Selection of Teachers and Supervisors in Urban School Systems. A Transcript of the Public Hearings Held Before the New York City Commission on Human Rights, January 25-29, 1971* (New York: Agathon, 1972), qtd in Collins, *Ethnically Qualified*, 63.

greater set of challenges, particularly as its resolution included the imposition of tuition payments at CUNY and drastic cutbacks in public services, including the elimination of 7,000 paraprofessional positions and 8,000 teachers. Matters came to a head the following summer, in 1976, when the Board of Education unilaterally announced the end of summer stipends for paraprofessionals. The UFT and the Paraprofessional Chapter cried foul, picketing the Board and rallying at City Hall in June. However, as the summer wore on and stipends were not forthcoming para impatience extended to the UFT itself, which was greeted with a rally of angry paraprofessionals and progressive teachers under the banner “Support Concerned Paras for Quality Education” at its headquarters in August.⁸⁰ The UFT urged paras to direct their ire at the Board, but it increased its attention to the negotiations, and the paras’ contract was upheld and stipends ordered paid (retroactively) by an arbitrator in October of 1976.

Despite these conflicts, however, the UFT continued to deliver increasingly beneficial contracts to the paraprofessionals, winning raises, improved access to pensions and, by 1973, fifty weeks of pay (many paras had, until then, been forced to re-apply for welfare or unemployment during the summer). Their chapter grew with the union, which became the largest AFL-CIO local in the country toward the end of the decade. They aided the UFT’s campaigns, touting their story when courting new members, including school aides (who remained in Local 372 and enjoyed none of the benefits that paraprofessionals in either union did) in 1973. In the same year, the New York story was broadcast nationwide when the AFT prepared a pamphlet on “Organizing Paraprofessionals” for chapters across the country. These stories featured prominently at the AFT’s first annual Paraprofessionals Conference in 1978, at which Velma Murphy Hill told a story that had become a stock favorite in UFT publications, about a young African-American para who had replied to accusations that her union was racist by saying

⁸⁰ Flyer, UFT; 80; 13. *New York Amsterdam News*, July 31, 1976.

“I used to be a domestic. I earned \$50 a week and worked like a slave. It was a degrading job. Then I became a paraprofessional, joined the UFT and began to fight for a better life. Albert Shanker not only helped that fight, he led it. Now I earn a decent salary. I have paid vacations, sick leave, health insurance, and other benefits. I also study so that someday I can get a college degree. My whole life has changed.”⁸¹

The story may be apocryphal, but it captures the sense of opportunity that paras and the UFT drew from their unlikely partnership in the decade that followed their unionization.

VII.

Despite this national recognition, paras would find themselves fighting for their jobs less than a year later. Upon his election as mayor, Ed Koch ordered the Board of Education to renew its contracts with teachers but not with paraprofessionals, arguing that the position was never meant to be unionized and should remain “flexible” (a coded description of low-wage, easily-fired auxiliary labor). The UFT fought back, but Ronald Reagan's election in 1980 further damaged their cause, as federal funding for auxiliary programming was repeatedly slashed during his presidency. While the program was not eliminated, its most democratic features were cut back; today, paras are not specifically hired from the communities in which schools are located, and while a paraprofessional training program persists at CUNY, it no longer offers teaching certification, only bachelor's degree. Despite this, the employment and the unionization of paraprofessionals has become a national phenomenon, and today, there are nearly one million paraprofessionals employed in education nationwide. Additionally, UFT figures suggest that the paraprofessional career ladder has been the largest source of African-American and Latino schoolteachers to the New York City system.

Through their alliance with the UFT, paraprofessionals preserved a small and effective part of “community control,” a movement so often depicted as a failure. Their efforts and impact support arguments made by Frank Stricker and others that War on Poverty policies were most

⁸¹ Velma Hill, “A Profession with Promise” *The American Teacher* 1971. UFT; 255; 2.

successful when they focused on “direct job creation,” and that these programs are still a boon to impoverished communities today.⁸² None of this is to say that the paraprofessional program was a panacea, or to argue that it was a sufficient response to massive structural inequality perpetuated along race and class lines in New York City, both within the UFT and the school system and in the city as a whole. Nonetheless, in the preservation of an unlikely alliance, paraprofessionals and the UFT generated opportunities in an era of scarcity. By organizing across the divides that too often separate the workplace from the community, by fighting for the preservation of local employees at the citywide level, paras and their union improved access to and the quality of education in New York City during the 1970s. The paras who organized trainings on civil rights and race relations, who led voter registration drives, who volunteered for PTA positions and church groups, who studied at night and over the summer to become teachers, and who worked all the while to educate some of New York's most marginalized students, built a vision of a democratized educational system that would treat communities not as negative influences to flee from, but partners in a collective effort. This vision was only briefly and incompletely realized before falling victim to neoliberal policy shifts (justified by false assertions that community-based anti-poverty efforts had failed), but it still has the capacity to inspire.

⁸² Frank Stricker, *Why America Lost the War on Poverty And How to Win It* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2007), 2.