

Triumph of the Paraprofessionals, August 22, 1970

Op-Ed written by civil rights organizer Bayard Rustin on the signing of the first union contract for paraprofessional educators (classroom and school support staff) in New York City. It was published in the *New York Amsterdam News*, the city's largest black-owned newspaper.

Triumph Of The Paraprofessionals

By BAYARD RUSTIN

(Executive Director, A. Philip Randolph Institute)

When I spoke before the convention of the American Federation of Teachers in 1964, I said that the best way to upgrade and protect the poor would be to write upward mobility into their union contract. This is precisely what has been done by the new three-year contract negotiated by the United Federation of Teachers which covers paraprofessionals in New York City's public schools.



RUSTIN

The settlement, which came after months of intensive negotiations with the Board of Education as well as a threat to shut down the city school system, will bring important benefits to 4000 paraprofessionals, most of whom are black and Puerto-Rican. They will receive (retroactive to January 1, 1970) a 140 per cent increase in wages and fringe benefits, thereby bringing to an end the unseemly practice of paying paraprofessionals well under the government-set poverty level. In addition, they will receive paid vacations, sick leave, health and dental coverage, and better welfare benefits.

As important as the immediate economic gains is the career ladder program that was written into the contract. Through this program, the paraprofessionals will have the opportunity for advanced professional positions.

They will be given 2½ hours a week of released time with pay in order to attend high school or college, and beginning with the summer of 1971, a 4-week college career training program will be es-

tablished which will be open to all paraprofessionals with a high school diploma or its equivalency. Such a program is clearly of benefit not only to the paraprofessionals but also the entire society.

To Dignified Jobs

The paraprofessionals will receive the educational tools which will enable them to secure dignified and remunerative professional jobs. At the same time, thousand of people, many of them former welfare recipients, will be making a constructive and vital contribution to the society's well-being.

The importance of this contract was summed up by Velma Hill, the chairman of the paraprofessional steering committee and a long-time activist in the struggle for civil rights: "With this agreement, paraprofessionals who have already demonstrated that they can contribute greatly to the education of children now are guaranteed the opportunity to make an even greater contribution. This was made possible by the unity of all UFT paraprofessionals and the success of the collective bargaining process."

Of the many lessons that can be drawn from the struggle of the paraprofessionals, two stand out as most worthy of mention. The first is that the union which the paraprofessionals elected to represent them, the UFT, is frequently portrayed in the press as the "enemy" of black community, and the president of that union, Albert Shanker, has been called a racist by numerous people in the black and liberal communities.

That the press and the name-callers are grievously mistaken is demonstrated by the UFT paraprofessional contract which Shanker helped negotiate, and they can also be sure that the UFT will now protect the paraprofessionals as vigorously as it has protected the teachers. What should be remembered is that the fundamental issue which precipitated the 1968 strikes was not racial animosity but union rights, and a side benefit of the new contract is that it will help bring together the UFT and minority groups around the common struggle for better schools.

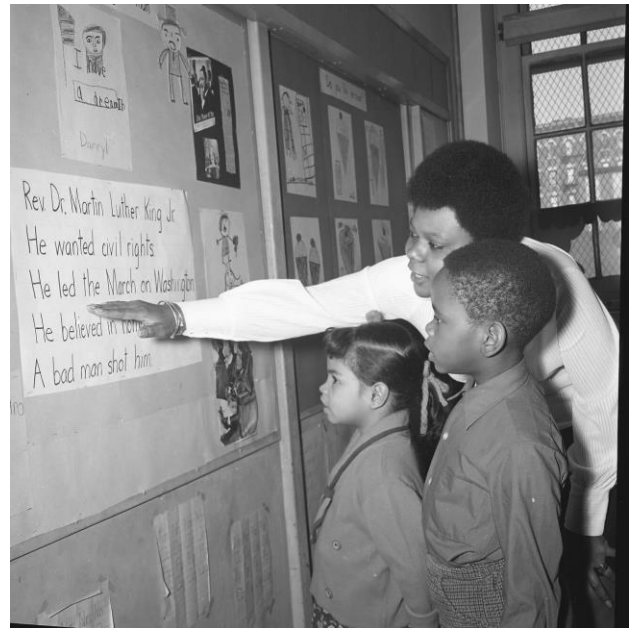
The second lesson has to do with the way poverty can be eliminated. During the past six years, countless small programs have been started which have tried to deal with various aspects of poverty. The difficulty with these programs has been that they were too limited and treated only the effects of poverty, not its cause. The new contract, which puts millions of dollars into the pockets of the poor, does more to combat poverty than all of these other programs.

Moreover, it does not fight poverty in a patronizing way by administering to the poor. On the contrary, the contract is the result of the poor's own struggle to create a decent and dignified life for themselves.

In this sense, the new UFT paraprofessional contract is one of the finest examples of self-determination by the poor, and it is likely to be repeated in other cities as part of a nationwide struggle by low-income workers to achieve equality.



Albert Shanker and Bayard Rustin march in support of collective bargaining rights for paraprofessionals. October 6, 1970. Credit: [Walter P. Reuther Library](#).



[Paraprofessional Doris Hunter teaches about the life of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.](#) at PS 25 in Brooklyn in 1970. Many paraprofessionals took the lead in bringing African-American, Latino, and Asian-American history and culture into public schools in New York City. United Federation of Teachers. Credit: Hans Weissenstein Negatives Collection, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU.



Teacher Sheri McCormick (left) and [paraprofessional Shashala Saulsbury](#) work on a reading assignment with students. Credit: [UFT](#)



[Paraprofessionals taking a high-school equivalency exam](#), Manhattan, 1970. The UFT's landmark paraprofessional contract created opportunities for education and advancement for thousands of working-class women. Credit: United Federation of Teachers Hans Weissenstein Negatives Collection, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, NYU.