

CHAPTER 1

Radical Roots: The Rise of the United Federation of Teachers

On most mornings in the fall of 1960, Fred Nauman, a thirty-year-old New York City science teacher, would rise before dawn to commute from his home in Brooklyn's Kensington neighborhood to Junior High School 73, in Bedford-Stuyvesant. He usually arrived well before the 8:40 a.m. bell to ready science experiments for his students, and he had hoped that the morning of November 7, 1960, a Monday, would unfold like all these others.

But as the day approached, it became clear that it wouldn't.

Over the weekend, he and his fellow teachers had phoned one another, and in each call, Nauman expressed his disbelief: How had this happened? Why hadn't the conflict between teachers and the New York City Board of Education, over salaries and the recognition of their new teachers' union, been resolved? Would he and other teachers really have to *strike*?

On that Monday morning, Nauman gobbled down his bagel and gulped his coffee, and was out before his wife, Judie, had awakened. She had not been pleased the year before, when Fred had left his \$6,000-a-year job repairing office machines at IBM to become a \$4,800-a-year public school teacher. Family finances had become even tighter three months before, when the couple moved to a larger, more expensive apartment and Judie had stopped working as an executive secretary at the Associated Press to stay home with Steven, the couple's first child. On November 7, Steven was just over a month old.

Judie worried that if Fred walked the picket line that day, he'd be fired. It wasn't an idle worry. In the weeks prior, New York City Superintendent Dr. John J. Theobald had repeatedly stated that he would enforce the Condon-Wadlin Act, the New York State antilabor legislation, which made it illegal for public employees, including public

school teachers, to strike. If Theobald enforced the law, any striking teachers would be fired. If rehired, Nauman would have to wait three years before receiving a pay raise. Still, Nauman was set on walking a picket line. Teachers needed to raise their pitiable salaries, and a strike just might deliver that.

His gray Dodge sedan pulled up to JHS 73 by 6 a.m. He and the other strikers around the city established their picket lines hours before schools opened. That way, teachers who refused to strike couldn't slip into the school without having to cross the line. Nauman counted only ten other teachers, all men and most of them younger than thirty, walking the picket line with him, a small percentage of the sixty teachers in JHS 73. As he walked that cold morning, he was anxious to know what was happening across the city and how it would all turn out. How many of the other fifty thousand teachers at the city's public schools were walking picket lines? Would teachers, divided for so long in New York City, act in unity on this one day? Or would today be the day he lost his job?¹

Nauman and the city's other public school teachers would not have had to choose whether to strike that November day in 1960 if it weren't for the meeting of a few young men seven years earlier. Two were teachers who had met on the first day of school in 1953. They weren't introduced by other teachers, or by teacher unionists—unless you place their mothers, both working-class seamstresses, into those two categories.

Mamie Shanker and Pauline Altomare worked together at a sewing factory called J. & J. Clothing at the corner of Prince Street and University Place in lower Manhattan. The factory employed two hundred people, mostly women, who cut and sewed men's coats and jackets. Pauline Altomare was full of spunk, a natural leader who was chosen by her peers at J. & J. Clothing as shop chairlady, the equivalent of a shop steward, for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union.² Pauline was a neighbor of Mamie Shanker's in Astoria, Queens, a working-class neighborhood then largely inhabited by Italian-Americans, along with a mixture of second-generation Americans of Irish, German, Greek, Polish, and Jewish ancestry. Mamie was a Jewish immigrant from czarist Russia, who had come to America before World War I. At first, she worked in sweatshops, putting in upwards of seventy hours a week at her sewing machine for meager wages and no benefits.³ At one point, Mamie worked briefly at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, which later became infamous for the March 25, 1911,

fire that killed 146 workers, most of them Jewish and Italian teenage girls trapped in the inferno by locked exits or killed when they fell from a fire escape that failed.⁴

During her years in the trade, Mamie discovered that unions were willing to defend workers from unsafe conditions, as well as fight to whittle down exhausting weekly hours and increase paltry wages. She joined both the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union and the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, and in Mamie's home, unions were revered just below God, a hierarchy that would guide her only son, Al, all his life.⁵

One day in the spring of 1953, Mrs. Altomare and her son George picked up Mrs. Shanker from work in their twenty-year-old Chevy. George, then a graduate student at City College in Harlem, mentioned to Mrs. Shanker that he was planning to teach in the fall. You know, my boy is going to be teaching, too, my boy Albert, Mrs. Shanker replied in her thick Russian accent—Vere are you going to be teaching? Astoria Junior High School, George said. That's vere mine boy Albert's going to be teaching, Mrs. Shanker replied. Vy don't you get together?⁶

On Monday, the day classes started that fall, George, just twenty-two years old, sought out Al, as he was known, at the faculty meeting in the auditorium at Astoria Junior High School, a cookie-cutter public school built of red brick that stood five stories high. Shanker, then twenty-five, was tall, lanky, and academically inclined. He fell into teaching because he was having trouble completing his doctorate in philosophy at Columbia University, and he had begun to feel guilty that he hadn't earned a dime since he married three years earlier.⁷ Altomare and Shanker began eating their brown bag lunches together in an empty classroom on the second floor with a few other teachers who would later become union activists, including Delores Tedesco, Dick Thaler, and John Stam. Another was Dan Sanders, a social studies teacher, who would become a close confidante of Shanker's and a statewide teacher leader.⁸

The lunchtime colleagues shared their experiences in the classroom. None of them were paid well—that was no surprise. Shanker and Altomare started at about \$50 a week, about a quarter of what their mothers were making at the clothing factory.⁹ Many junior high school teachers in the system were full-time substitutes, and were paid even less than regular teachers and received no benefits.¹⁰ Sanders, who

was a full-time substitute, was once out for a month with the mumps—and he received no salary during his illness.¹¹ Two years after these teachers came together, the *New York Times* would print an editorial titled “Teach or Wash Cars.” It asked why anyone would bother to teach in the New York City schools for an average salary of \$66 a week when they could make more—\$72.35 a week—washing cars.¹²

Work conditions matched the pay. A junior high school teacher might teach two hundred or more students in five periods, an average of forty students in each class. Teachers had no prep periods and were often assigned to oversee students during lunch. The newcomers at Astoria Junior High complained about these conditions during their lunchtime gatherings, but perhaps their most colorful complaints were about Abe Greenberg, the school’s assistant principal. Greenberg used to look out through his office window with binoculars to spy on teachers during the day. Were you sitting down? Greenberg believed teachers should be standing up. Were the students standing up? Greenberg believed they should be sitting down. One day early in the semester, Shanker told his peers that the assistant principal had appeared in his classroom doorway. The new teacher thought the administrator had come to help him. He motioned the assistant principal to come in, but Greenberg stayed just where he was. “Mr. Shanker,” Greenberg finally said, “I see a lot of paper on the floor in the third aisle. It’s very unsightly and very *unprofessional*.”¹³

The school bureaucrat’s behavior might have been merely an unpleasant footnote in all their lives, had he not been the catalyst that roused Sanders, Shanker, and Altomare to leave their school in Astoria one day and travel to a small two-room union office in lower Manhattan. It was a trip that would bring the men to teacher unionism in New York City, and over time, launch a teachers’ revolution.

The office that the men visited was rented by the Teachers Guild, the New York City union that was affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT). The office was located at Broadway and Fifth Avenue, across the street from the historic Flatiron Building. The guild office, though, had little distinction. It was a fourth-floor walk-up located above a cut-rate barbershop, and had but two rooms with loft ceilings. In the first room, guild staff and volunteers made phone calls, wrote, and did other office work. In the second, which was more open, wooden chairs were pulled out for guild delegate assembly meetings or other gatherings. The office was grimy and untidy, and in the early

morning or late at night, little visitors could be heard scurrying along the wood floors. They were rats.

When the teachers from Astoria Junior High School entered the guild's office they were stepping into a thirty-seven-year-old stream of teacher labor unionism in New York City. The guild was descended from the Teachers Union (TU), the small band of New York City teachers who formed the city's first teachers' union in 1916. That same year, teachers in the TU joined with those from other urban areas, including Chicago, Gary, Oklahoma City, Scranton, and Washington, D.C., to form the AFT, a small national teachers union that was founded with fewer than three thousand members. The AFT was affiliated with the American Federation of Labor (AFL), a federation of skilled workers that had been organized and was led at the time by the craggy-faced cigar maker Samuel Gompers.

By forming a union, teachers made a dramatic break from their usual habit of joining associations, such as the National Education Association (NEA), which had dominated the New York State and national education landscape for many decades. Teachers in the NEA considered themselves professionals, like doctors and lawyers, and they yearned to share the same social status. By joining a union, New York City teachers were abandoning this pretension and admitting they were like other workers who had to negotiate and sometimes tussle with their bosses to win better wages, rights, and respect. An appeal found in *The American Teacher*, a TU publication, in February 1916, argued for this revised self-image.

Teachers with few exceptions are not organized. Teachers with few exceptions are regarded as being nerveless and without backbone. Their pay is miserable. Their hours are seemingly short, but their work is exhausting. In spite of all this teachers have failed to learn the lesson learned by labor everywhere—namely the necessity of Organization. Teachers have refused to recognize that they are workers—highly skilled workers it is true—but workers nevertheless. They have failed to see the identity of their interests with the interests of all labor; and so the idea of union has been repugnant to them. . . .

You owe it to yourselves, Fellow Teachers, to assert your manhood and womanhood, to Organize for your protection, to be able to fight with dignity and force for proper conditions, for proper salaries, for a share in the control of the schools, for a voice in the formulation of school courses of study.

Or would you rather, hat in hand, wait in some politician's ante-room preparatory to licking his boots, and there beseech him to help you.

Which method do you prefer, Fellow Teacher? It is for you to choose!¹⁴

Teachers devoted themselves to the TU, but those who did so were a small minority of New York City teachers. At the onset of the Depression, just 1,200 of the 30,000 teachers in the city belonged to the union. In the Depression of the 1930s, teachers, along with other workers, became more radical, and the TU became dominated by Communist Party members. Seeing this, many of the TU founders broke off to form a new union in 1935, and that new union became the Teachers Guild. In 1940, the AFT revoked the TU's charter and granted a new charter to the guild. By 1953, many of the guild's original members were in their fifties and sixties and had been fighting for teachers' rights for decades. Many, including Charlie Cogen, guild president at the time, and Rebecca Simonson, Cogen's predecessor, had been among those who had broken off from the TU.

Cogen, born in 1903 on Manhattan's Lower East Side, was typical of the group's members. Like almost everyone who belonged to the guild, and like many teachers in the city, he was Jewish. Cogen also came from a union background. His father, a Russian immigrant and a union garment worker, would often bring his young son to listen to speakers at labor rallies. The guild president was also typical in that he was well educated. He came up through the city's public schools, earned his bachelor's degree at Cornell University, and taught in New York City public schools before getting his law degree at Fordham University. Unable to find sufficient work as a lawyer during the Depression, he was forced to take a \$4.50-a-day teacher-in-training job at Grover Cleveland High School in Queens. He later became one of the original faculty of the prestigious Bronx High School of Science, and, eventually, chairman of the social studies department at Bay Ridge High School in Brooklyn. Along the way, Cogen earned a master's degree in economics from Columbia University.

Cogen and the other guild leaders—who all volunteered their time—were the cream of the teaching profession. Sanders was shocked by the quality of the people he met; almost everyone in the guild had a doctorate in something.¹⁵ Shanker compared the guild to a debating society and described a typical guild executive board meeting as “an exhilarating intellectual experience.”¹⁶

“You’d go to a Guild meeting and listen to some very brilliant people expound on the state of the world,” Shanker said. “After three hours you’d leave edified with nothing done.”¹⁷

But during their first visit to the guild’s office, Shanker, Sanders, and Altomare didn’t meet these well-educated guild leaders. Instead, they met another man, who was neither Jewish nor from New York City. He was a blonde midwesterner who liked to wear bow ties, and he would serve as mentor to the spirited young men from Astoria. He had arrived in New York City only a few months earlier to work as an organizer for the union—its only employee other than the secretary. His name was David Selden.

David Selden had grown up in Michigan and talked far more slowly than the typical New Yorker. What impressed Altomare upon first meeting the man was not how well he spoke, but how well he listened. He had the look of a square-jawed cowboy, and seemed to have a streak of wisdom and wit that reminded Altomare of another midwesterner, the sage comedian from the pre-World War II era, Will Rogers.

Selden was a Socialist. He had come to New York City to do a job that most labor organizers of the day considered a Sisyphean task: organizing teachers. But unionizing teachers was Selden’s mission. Previously, he had been based in Poughkeepsie, New York, as the AFT’s “Eastern organizer,” directing all organizing drives east of Lincoln, Nebraska.¹⁸ His turf was later narrowed to New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey, and his job put him on the road almost constantly, organizing new AFT chapters and bolstering established ones. Often it seemed that as soon as he had set up one chapter, another would dissolve.

After Selden took a job as the guild’s sole paid organizer in the spring of 1953, he learned fast that organizing New York City teachers wouldn’t be any easier. Each morning, some eight hundred thousand New York City students—a group whose size alone would have rivaled the populations of Cincinnati or Kansas City—made their way to school. More than forty thousand teachers taught those students in six hundred elementary schools, one hundred junior high schools, and ninety high schools. When Selden arrived in New York City, the vast majority of those teachers didn’t belong to any teachers’ group, much less to the guild.

The midwesterner must have been relieved when Shanker, Sanders, and Altomare walked into his office. When he was done listening to them, Selden “grabbed hold of us,” Altomare remembered

later, and got them to work.¹⁹ Sanders, who had written for the campus newspaper at City College and had been a stringer for the *New York Times* covering college sports, was recruited to write for the *Guild Bulletin*, the union's newspaper. All three were put to work organizing their school, Astoria JHS. The teachers relished the task. Shanker, the most intellectual in the crew, used logic to persuade teachers to join the guild. Altomare convinced teachers to join by citing the small and large indignities that teachers had to suffer. Sanders won new members with an infectious congeniality; people were buoyed by his presence and seemed eager to join the club that would have him as a member.

The men also used another tactic. On weekends, Sanders and his wife, Elaine, used to invite "the Guildies" from PS 126 to their apartment for weekend get-togethers.²⁰ Each Friday, Shanker would mix whiskey sours for after-school parties at his apartment on 29th Street in Astoria, located about a mile from the junior high. The rules were unwritten, but understood: if you hadn't joined the union, you wouldn't get an invitation to the parties. Teachers would ask, Can I come? Sure, they'd be told, but you have to give nine dollars—half a year's membership—to join the guild.²¹ The method might not have been ideologically pure, but it was effective. "After the whiskey sours," Altomare said years later, "we didn't need Shanker's logic."²²

In less than two school years, the majority of teachers at Astoria Junior High had joined the guild, a success rate that dwarfed that in any other school in the city. Shanker, with a smile, would later compare the concentration of guild activity in the Queens junior high school to the concentration of "dissidents who met under the czar in Siberia" before the Russian Revolution.²³

After two years at the guild, though, Selden had made little headway. New York City was a hotbed of American radicalism, yet its teachers, like those elsewhere, were averse to joining a union. The staunchest antiunionists were the school system's older generation of teachers, who were largely Irish-American women. These were the teachers who declined invitations to join the guild with the phrase, "We are professionals." Shanker would sometimes discuss this attitude with his mother. "Teachers are so smart, they're stupid," Mamie Shanker would tell her son. "They don't realize that they have to have a union."²⁴

But Selden was also surprised to bump into opposition among many younger Jewish teachers, the most recent wave of educators to roll into the city's public school system. These were the sons and

daughters of Eastern European and Russian Jews who had immigrated to New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of these families had settled in the Lower East Side and worked in the clothing industry. They were unabashedly liberal, even radical, and almost always pro-union. The rub, though, was this: they expected their sons and daughters to climb the social ladder and become professionals, who didn't need unions. Selden found Jewish teachers almost always sympathetic to unions; they just wouldn't join one. My parents, one said, would drop dead if I ever joined a union.

Other times, teachers rebuffed Selden by explaining that they already belonged to a teachers' group. And they did. In the 1950s and earlier, teachers paid from 50 cents to a few dollars to join one of the city's roughly one hundred teacher groups. Teachers in Manhattan met on one side of the East River; teachers from Brooklyn met on the other. Queens teachers didn't take subways to the Bronx, and Manhattan teachers weren't inclined to make a ferry crossing, which left the Staten Island educators with their own teachers' group. High school teachers, who believed they should be better paid than elementary and junior high teachers, had formed their own organization. English teachers met separately from math teachers, who met separately from science teachers.

How else could teachers divide themselves? Religiously, of course. Catholic teachers had their group; Jewish teachers had theirs. As if to prove their point, Orthodox Jewish teachers broke from non-Orthodox Jewish ones. It wasn't long before Shanker, making fun of all the splinter teacher groups in the city, was referring to the Female Health Education Teachers of Bensonhurst.²⁵ It was a joke, but barely.

It was as if teachers had used that old political tactic—divide and conquer—against themselves. New York City's Board of Education took full advantage of the divisions. Fred M. Hechinger, education editor of the *New York Times*, summed up the status of New York City teachers this way: "The huge education bureaucracy has made [teachers] voiceless pawns in a machine."²⁶ Each year, the board would invite dozens of the teachers' groups to appear before them to make their case. All were aware that they were competitors. If science teachers convinced the board to purchase more beakers, English teachers might be allotted fewer Shakespeare texts. If high school teachers convinced the board they deserved a raise, elementary teachers might have to forego one. Each year, the board listened politely—and then did what it pleased. What the board meted out was more often crumbs from the tin than pieces from the pie.

Selden dreamed of building the guild membership until it was the dominant teachers' group in the city. A few times a week he would visit schools and discuss pressing educational issues with teachers over brown-bag lunches, and at the end of the hour, a few teachers might sign membership cards for the guild. But the pace of guild growth was glacial. In two years on the job, the guild's membership had risen from about 1,800 members to about 2,000.²⁷

Riding on a subway to one such school meeting, Selden calculated that at this rate it would take about twenty-five years to herd the majority of New York City teachers into the Guild. His worst-case estimate was a century—or never. For a missionary, even a patient one, this was a dismal prognosis. Selden applied for a teaching job in Westchester County, the suburban district just north of New York City, and considered quitting his New York City job. Instead, he decided to stay and make recruitment more light-hearted. He began scheduling Guild meetings at night rather than just after school, which allowed for more leisurely get-togethers, including a monthly beer-and-peanuts party. At gatherings, Selden entertained new members by playing labor songs on his cheap banjo while Altomare played his guitar, strumming songs such as “Teacher’s Blues.” “Oh unions are for workers but a teacher has prestige,” went that song. “He can feed his kids on that old noblesse oblige.” Guild get-togethers were becoming fun.²⁸

The organizer also believed that the guild needed to do a better job at setting itself apart from other teacher groups. In the in-house paper “Big Guild, Little Guild,” Selden and his union friend Ely Trachtenberg suggested that the union should sell itself like a candidate for public office in order to become the dominant teachers' group in the city. The first thing it needed to do was to stop taking positions that repelled members, such as opposing prayer in the public schools. Instead, the paper called for the guild to focus on bread-and-butter issues such as salaries, benefits, and working conditions.

Selden also saw another key issue that the guild could promote to separate itself from competitors: collective bargaining. Establishing the right to bargain collectively would mean that a single united union would represent them at the bargaining table, where administrators would be required to bargain with them “in good faith.” Private employees had gained the legal right to bargain collectively in 1935 under the National Labor Relations Act, known as the Wagner Act because Senator Robert F. Wagner of New York had introduced it. The

law was often referred to as the “Magna Carta of Labor.” It gave workers more power in their relationship with their employers and it also brought order to the relations between management and employees during a time of strikes and violence and near-revolt by the masses. Under the Wagner Act, unionism in the private sector flourished. But the act specifically excluded public employees from the rights of collective bargaining—and in the 1950s nearly all public employees, including teachers, still didn’t have these rights.

In the spring of 1956, Selden and the more militant guild members were able to convince the organization’s delegate assembly to make collective bargaining the group’s first priority. From then on, almost every piece of guild literature stated that collective bargaining was the cure for teacher ailments. Was your salary too low? A collective bargaining agreement with the board would increase it. Your principal was a despot? The guild would find ways to restrain him when it won collective bargaining rights. Selden and the others dreamed that if the guild became the most dominant teachers’ group in the city, it would eventually win the right to represent all city teachers when collective bargaining was won.²⁹

Selden’s plan also included another crucial idea: that bold actions by the guild would bring in members. The older Guild leaders maintained that membership had to grow more before the group could take more decisive action, a traditional organizing approach. But Selden and his young recruits believed, on the contrary, that bold teacher action would bring in members. Evolution was proving too slow. They wanted a revolution.

Buoyed by his successes organizing at Astoria Junior High School, and eager to add members to the guild, Altomare took an appointment in 1956 to teach history at Franklin K. Lane High School in Woodhaven in Queens. In doing so, he was becoming what was called a “union colonizer,” intending to recruit a new group of workers: high school teachers. But in his first year at Lane he recruited only eight new guild members.³⁰ The problem was that most high school teachers who joined a teachers’ group joined the High School Teachers Association (HSTA), which along with the guild and the TU was one of three major teachers’ groups in the city. HSTA had one issue: it demanded that high school teachers receive more pay since their job required more education than elementary and junior high school teachers. The demand went back to 1947, when the city’s Board of Education, in an

effort to attract more elementary school teachers, raised their salaries to those of high school teachers. The leveling of salaries embittered high school teachers, who left the guild and joined the HSTA in the late 1940s and early 1950s.³¹ High school teachers avoided the guild because the union had long supported the single salary schedule for all teachers on the grounds that elementary teachers were worth as much as their high school equivalents. “Equal salary for equal work,” was the guild’s slogan.

Altomare soon realized that he wasn’t going to convince many high school teachers to join the guild. But he and the other young guild recruits had another idea: Why not merge the Guild, which consisted of maybe two thousand teachers, with the HSTA, which had maybe three or four thousand members? In 1957, Altomare broached the idea with HSTA leaders. They told him they would only merge if the guild supported the policy of paying high school teachers more, something that Altomare knew wouldn’t work because guild leaders opposed it.³²

While Altomare was thinking merger, HSTA upstarts took a bold action that would change teacher politics in the city forever. In January 1959, eight hundred teachers who taught at evening high schools resigned en masse to protest their pitiful wages. In labor parlance, it was a wildcat strike because it was initiated not by union leaders, but by the rank-and-file. The young guild activists were amazed. Teachers rarely talked strike, much less launched one. The Teachers Union had never struck; neither had the guild. The AFT had opposed strikes since its inception in 1916, as had the NEA. High school teachers were taking the kind of bold action that insurgents at the guild had only dreamed of.

Hoping to find a bridge to these militant high school teachers, Shanker, Altomare, and Selden would drive to the nightly picket lines at Jamaica High School in Queens, offering donuts and coffee to the shivering strikers.³³ Selden called his station wagon and Shanker’s Volkswagen minibus “Guild Coffeemobiles.”³⁴ On these trips, they met some of the young members of the HSTA: Roger Parente, the HSTA secretary who taught at Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Bronx; John Bailey, one of the strike’s leaders; and Samuel Hochberg, HSTA vice president.

Selden, Shanker, and Altomare returned from those picket lines and suggested a radical move to the guild leadership: support the evening high school teachers and their strike. The older guild leaders

hesitated. To support it would increase the likelihood of its success, and thereby give the HSTA the upper hand in the ongoing organizing battles. But Selden and his friend Trachtenberg pushed another argument they had developed in “Big Guild, Little Guild.” It was that teachers needed to support all their fellow teachers, because as one teachers’ group gained muscle, all teachers would gain strength. Selden put it succinctly: What if they won the strike without your support?³⁵ Guild leadership reluctantly endorsed the action. Guild phones and mimeograph machines were used to publicize a strike rally at city hall, and Guild members even walked picket lines with the high school teachers. A solidarity, fragile but genuine, slowly grew between the young men of the competing teacher groups.³⁶

The HSTA strike, the first one by teachers in New York City history, was an unequivocal success. After a few weeks, the Board of Education raised the daily wages for evening high school workers, who taught the equivalent of four courses each night, from \$12 to \$21, beyond what even the strike organizers had hoped.³⁷ The strike was a lesson of what a daring act could win teachers—and the potential of teacher unity. On the picket line, Altomare and Bailey made a pact: We will meet with each other until a merger is forged.

Shortly thereafter, the young guild leaders—Selden, Shanker, and Alice Marsh, a teacher at Joan of Arc Junior High School in Manhattan who would later become a legislative representative for New York City teachers³⁸—met with the three HSTA activists, Parente, Hochberg, and Bailey, at Altomare’s apartment in Astoria. The young teachers swore to keep the meetings secret from their leaders. Secret meetings might have been undemocratic, but both sides knew that the leaders of either group might kill the delicate negotiations if they knew of them, something they didn’t want to risk.

Inspired by the high school strike, Selden wanted the guild to organize its own one-day strike to win a salary increase for all teachers. It was the kind of bold action he believed would attract new members. But the guild’s senior membership feared that if it failed, the move could destroy their group. Rebecca Simonson, the guild’s well-respected former president, challenged the young activists to bring out five thousand teachers for a mass meeting to show that there was support for the action. Selden and the other young activists knew that five thousand teachers had not come together anywhere, any time, for any purpose. So they counter-bargained: two thousand teachers. They

compromised: bring out three thousand teachers and the guild's leaders would endorse the strike.³⁹

Attracting three thousand teachers to one meeting was a Herculean task. To make matters worse, HSTA's senior leaders refused to support the guild's action. Guild organizers scheduled a rally at the St. Nicholas Arena on West 66th Street, which was often used for sporting events. The guild activists pulled every organizing tactic they knew, but fearing that the crowd would still fall short of three thousand, Altomare gave the custodian of St. Nicholas a few bucks to remove about five hundred chairs from the arena.⁴¹

On the night of the rally, St. Nicholas Arena, minus the five hundred chairs, was nearly filled with teachers. In a voice vote, the crowd approved the Guild's one-day action for April 15, 1959. It marked the first time that a teachers' organization in New York City had openly called for a strike. The evening before the stoppage, guild president Cogen went on TV to exhort teachers to "stick to their guns." While the guild president was being interviewed, an aide passed him a note saying that New York City's superintendent of schools, Dr. John J. Theobald, wanted to meet with union leaders for last-minute negotiations.⁴² Cogen came on the eleven o'clock news later that night and called off the strike; teachers had been promised considerable raises. The next day, the guild printed bulletins hailing the victory. What seemed like a flood of new members—upwards of eight hundred teachers—joined the Guild.⁴³

The young guild members continued to push for a merger with HSTA, convinced that unity would bring teachers even better results. They suggested a compromise on the salary issue. Allow a salary differential, they proposed, but apply it to anyone, even elementary school teachers, who completed a master's degree. Parente, Hochberg, and Bailey were intrigued by the offer, but when they took the idea to the more conservative HSTA leadership, they rejected it.

The guild negotiators' next move was to suggest that Parente, Hochberg, and Bailey abandon the HSTA and form a new group of high school teachers that supported teacher unity. In the fall of 1959, Bailey and Altomare scraped some of their own money together to put an ad in the *New York World Telegram & Sun's* education page, which was read by thousands of teachers daily. It announced the formation of The Committee for Action Through Unity, or CATU (pronounced *kay'-too*), a group of high school teachers who supported teacher unity and better pay for all teachers with supplemental education. The

response to the ad was phenomenal. Within days, CATU had 1,200 new members, almost half the size of the guild.⁴⁴ The effort to create a willing partner to merge with would have been an unambiguous success if not for a few powerful teachers who were outraged by the plan: the guild's Old Guard.

President Cogen called the guild's executive board to order. Guild leaders immediately attacked the young rebels for secretly negotiating a potential merger with the high school teachers without the approval of the guild's leadership or members. They also criticized them for establishing CATU, which they saw as a potential rival to the guild. Jules Kolodny, an elder statesman in the guild, motioned to censure Selden and Altomare. Shanker, by then an organizer and a board member, and a good friend to both Selden and Altomare, stood up to confront the board. He told them that thousands of teachers had signed up with CATU, signaling the desire for teacher unity. Well, what are you going to do about it? the combative Shanker asked. The old-timers pulled back on the censure of Selden or Altomare.⁴⁵ Cogen, a voice of reason, knew that to destroy the bridge that had been built to the high school teachers would leave the guild the marginal group that it had been for over two decades. The guild's board initiated formal merger talks with CATU.

Through the fall of 1959 and into early 1960, CATU and the guild leadership hammered out an agreement. But what to call the new group? "Teachers Union" was taken. They avoided the word *association*; it smacked of the NEA. The name United Federation of Teachers (UFT) was suggested. President Cogen complained that the words *united* and *federation* were redundant, but the name stuck.⁴⁶

On March 16, 1960, at the old Astor Hotel, 500 guild delegates overwhelmingly voted for the merger, and with the 1,500 sign-ups from CATU, the UFT boasted a membership of roughly 5,000. New York City teachers had finally come together. Now it was time to act.

Almost cocky, UFT leaders presented the Board of Education with a list of demands. These included: an across-the-board raise, including a \$1,000 bonus for all teachers who had received additional education; duty-free lunch periods; ten days a year paid sick leave for full-time substitutes; and an automatic deduction of union dues from pay checks. The Board of Education and Superintendent Theobald balked at these requests, especially the UFT's key demand: that the union represent all

of New York City's teachers in collective bargaining. The board's hesitance was understandable. At the time, few public employees anywhere in the country bargained collectively. Besides, how could the board agree to bargain with one group of teachers if teachers couldn't choose one group to represent themselves?

"I do not bargain with members of my own family," was Dr. Theobald's response to the demands. The UFT called a strike for May 17, 1960, Teachers' Recognition Day, when parents would traditionally walk through the city's schools pinning flowers onto the blouses and jackets of teachers. At the last minute, Superintendent Theobald agreed to the bulk of the demands, and the action was put off.

But in June, representatives from all city teachers groups except the UFT were invited to the board offices at 110 Livingston Street. These teacher groups, which had opposed collective bargaining, came from the meeting advocating "divisional bargaining," which was separate bargaining for elementary, junior high, and high school teachers. UFT leaders assumed the board was up to an old trick: dividing teachers in order to conquer them. All summer, Theobald ignored pleas from UFT leaders that the superintendent follow through on his promises.

The UFT's collective bargaining committee voted to launch a strike on November 7, the day before the Kennedy-Nixon election. They figured that the authorities, Democrats in New York City, wouldn't dare invoke the Condon-Wadlin Act lest it alienate Democratic voters.

The UFT's executive board and delegate assembly approved the strike on October 4 and 5, but no other teachers' group in the city endorsed the measure, seeing it for what it was: a power play by the UFT to become the dominant teachers' group in the city. Superintendent Theobald, as well as the Board of Education and James E. Allen Jr., the state education commissioner, also warned that any teacher who went on strike would jeopardize "that teacher's state certificate and his rights to teach in any school district in New York State."⁴⁷ Many old-timers were told they would lose their teachers' pension if they walked that day. Nervous school officials forbade teachers to meet on school grounds to discuss a strike. Instead, guild teacher leaders met at churches, synagogues—even at a funeral parlor.

In the days prior to the strike date, Shanker remembers a guild meeting where some of the old-time leaders, aware of Theobald's threats and the skepticism about the strike from the city's labor unionists, spoke of calling off the strike. Look, Shanker told them, we have

no choice but to go out. With Condon-Wadlin, a strike is going to be illegal next year and every year. If we're going to allow that to stop us, then forget about the union. We're finished. There's no argument that anybody can come up with to call this strike off that allows us to continue to have a union or any chance of building one. I admit this is risky. But the other way is a certain death warrant.

After Shanker's speech, old-time guild firebrands such as Si Beagle and David Wittes defended the strike, and all rumblings about calling it off ceased. The last editorial before the November 7 strike day in the UFT's paper, *The United Teacher*, said: "This is a strike for our dignity, our self-respect. We will smash once and for all the concept that teachers are educated fools."⁴⁸

As the Monday strike day approached, the tiny UFT headquarters on East 23rd Street was jammed with volunteers who manned phones, turned out mimeographed flyers, and painted signs. "It was all thunder and lightning, do or die," Jeannette DiLorenzo, a teacher at JHS 142 in Red Hook in Brooklyn, recalled. "Even the old were young again."⁴⁹

Since the UFT office was closed from Saturday night to Monday morning, UFT organizers moved their headquarters to Selden's and Shanker's apartments during the weekend. Each apartment had two phone lines. In one call after another, the men told the teacher troops not to believe what would be reported on the radio the next morning since the Board of Education would likely underestimate the number of teachers out. Altomare also suggested a technique to keep administrators from knowing who stayed out: drop paper clips into the school's time clocks.

At about 3 a.m. on Sunday night, Selden and Altomare, their preparations over, walked over to Shanker's to get some more wine, which they had been sipping while they worked. The three men knew that not all—or even most—of New York's teachers would walk out. What they hoped was that enough teachers would strike to cause havoc in the schools. Striking with such meager forces was like putting your head in a lion's mouth and hoping it didn't bite. The men hoped the lion—Mayor Robert F. Wagner Jr., son of Senator Wagner, architect of the Wagner Act—was sympathetic to their dreams. On the walk over to Shanker's house, Altomare asked Selden a question he hadn't dared consider: What happens if teachers cave in?

Win or lose this strike, said Selden, we'll have created a teachers' union movement that won't fail. As the sun came up on that freezing

New York morning, Altomare headed to the guild office to wait for news of the strike. Despite the wine, the hour, and his lack of sleep, Altomare never in his life felt more awake.⁵⁰

On the morning of November 7, all over the city, teachers strung placards over their shoulders and joined picket lines. “Better Salaries, Better Schools” said one sign; “United We Stand” said another. One parent on the line wore a sign: “Parents Want Justice for Teachers.” A news clip about the strike was titled “Reading, Writing—and Pickets.” The newscaster said, “When problems hit the nation’s biggest city, they’re usually big—such as the first strike of school teachers in New York City’s history.”⁵¹

At JHS 73 in Brooklyn, Fred Nauman and his fellow teachers got out early to walk their picket line; it was cold enough to see their breath. The picketers passed a transistor radio around, spinning back and forth between local news channels. Would the strike be a success? It was a question on the mind of nearly every public school teacher in the city.

At Public School 165 on the Upper West Side, a teacher named Ray Frankel walked the picket line with just four of her colleagues. Some of the other teachers appeared in the school’s windows to watch the picketers, and a few started crying. “Stop crying and come out,” she yelled at them.⁵² As each hour passed, the radio reported higher and higher estimates of strikers. One thousand teachers . . . two thousand teachers . . . with each announcement, the dread that Nauman had felt slowly began to lift. Three thousand teachers . . . four thousand teachers . . .

At Public School 100 in Queens, Nat Levine, bowing to the vote not to strike by his UFT colleagues at the school, showed up for work. But by lunchtime he could no longer stomach the choice he had made. He grabbed a piece of chalk and wrote a message on the board for himself, but also for his students who would enter the classroom in the afternoon: “To thine own self be true.”

Outside JHS 142 in Red Hook in Brooklyn, Jeanette and John DiLorenzo and about eighty other teachers picketed, joined by longshoremen and merchant seamen from the nearby piers. Later that morning, Jeanette drove around to check out other public schools in south Brooklyn, and at many of the elementary schools, not a single teacher was walking. By the time they circled back to JHS 142, half of the striking teachers had deserted their picket line, and by day’s end

Jeanette was hoping “to find a way to get back in that building with some kind of dignity.”⁵³

DiLorenzo’s observations were accurate: the turnout from elementary school teachers had been dismal. Most of the strikers came from the more militant staff at the junior highs. By the end of the day, the board had conceded that 4,600 teachers had gone out. Later newspaper accounts would report that 5,600 teachers had walked picket lines and that another 2,000 teachers called in sick. Whatever the exact numbers were, Nauman was exhilarated come the end of the day: thousands of other teachers had risked their jobs as well.

That night, the teachers once again returned to the St. Nicholas Arena, and from the cheers that rose up from within, a passerby might have thought that a raucous crowd had gathered for a professional wrestling match. As the meeting was breaking up, Selden was told that he had a phone call. “Okay, listen,” the caller said. “Vill you take mediation?”

“Who is this?” Selden asked.

“Dubinsky. I want to meet with you.”⁵⁴ It was David Dubinsky, the legendary president of the International Ladies Garment Workers Union (ILGWU), the union that Mamie Shanker and Pauline Altomare belonged to. Dubinsky was well connected to the Democratic Party, and he didn’t want the strike to embarrass the mayor or disrupt the election. That night, Cogen, Hochberg, Kolodny, and Selden met in Dubinsky’s Manhattan apartment, and by the end of the evening, a compromise had been worked out. The mayor would appoint a special labor committee consisting of three labor unionists, all of whom were sympathetic to the cause and to collective bargaining, to investigate the teachers’ demands. Dubinsky was one of the panelists. The second was Harry Van Arsdale, the tough leader of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and the president of the New York City Central Trades and Labor Council. The third was Jacob Potofsky, president of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union, the other union that Mamie belonged to. Mayor Wagner—and the city’s top labor leaders—had supported the feeble strike by teachers; the UFT leaders called off the strike.

Superintendent Theobald announced that the Board of Education would not enforce the Condon-Wadlin Act and reversed his command to fire strikers. The labor committee that was established recommended that the board make concessions on pay and working conditions to teachers and that a collective bargaining election be held

before the end of the school year. In June 1960, the Board of Education polled New York City teachers whether they wanted collective bargaining. Despite the opposition to collective bargaining by the NEA, which had set itself up as an alternative to the UFT, 27,367 teachers voted “yes” to 9,003 who voted “no.” In October 1961 the Board of Education directed the City Labor Department to hold a collective bargaining election to decide which group would represent teachers.

The UFT had two rivals. One was the TU, but a more serious threat came from the NEA, which came into New York City with organizers and established the Teachers Bargaining Organization (TBO), an alliance of many of the scattered teachers’ groups in the city. Money flowed in from NEA headquarters, and the association’s organizers sent teachers antiunion leaflets headed, “Do You Want Hoffa and Bossism?”⁵⁵ NEA leaders were confident they would win the election in part, one NEA organizer would later say, because “teachers as professionals would never vote for a union.”⁵⁶

Meanwhile, organized labor, including the United Auto Workers, mobilized behind the UFT, providing \$250,000 to the union over a half-year period before the vote.⁵⁷ In the *New York Times*, an ad supporting the UFT was endorsed by political giants such as Eleanor Roosevelt, A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and Herbert Lehman, the former New York governor. On each of the ten days that teachers had to return their ballots, a hundred UFT volunteers phoned teachers to urge them to “vote for the organization that won the right to vote.”⁵⁸ On December 16, 1961, the votes of 33,000 teachers, 77 percent of the city’s teachers, were counted. The UFT won overwhelmingly, receiving 20,045 votes to 9,770 cast for the TBO, and only 2,575 for the TU. The UFT would now speak for all of New York City’s teachers.

But negotiations between the UFT and the Board of Education broke down almost immediately when the board dragged its feet over money, offering little. “What other means are there besides a strike,” asked an exasperated Cogen. “We’ve tried everything else—like gentle persuasion. . . . This is time to stop talking and get a little action.” Teachers, though, were still reluctant to strike, and voted to support one on April 11, 1962, by a margin of only 313 votes—2,544 to 2,231. Once the day arrived, though, teachers heeded the call—about twenty-two thousand of them walked picket lines, seven thousand of whom weren’t even

members of the UFT. Teachers held signs that read that they were tired of being treated as “low-paid babysitters.”⁵⁹

The board was stunned by the teacher response; in that 1962 strike, a full one-half of the city’s teachers didn’t report to their classrooms, crippling the city’s nine hundred public schools. The president of the Board of Education called the stoppage “reckless, irresponsible . . . immoral, and illegal,” and the board convinced a state Supreme Court justice to invoke the Condon-Wadlin Act and issue an antipicketing order.⁶⁰ The afternoon of the strike seven thousand teachers surrounded City Hall, packing Murray Street and overflowing onto Broadway.

Charlie Cogen, the UFT’s five-foot-tall leader, scrambled onto a sedan to address the crowd. “This is the greatest day in the history of education in the City of New York,” he said. The crowd of teachers broke into a chant of “Stay out, stay out,” and cheered their gray-haired leader, a veteran of the Teachers Guild who had taught in the 1930s for \$4.50 a day. A few days later, a *New York Times* reporter called the strike a “revolt by teachers—a revolt against the status accorded them, a revolt against the conditions under which they worked.”

The court injunction ended the strike, but the Board of Education made concessions. In the negotiations that followed, teachers secured a \$1,000 across-the-board raise—the largest pay raise in New York City school history—and established new salary differentials for teachers who had different levels of experience. The contract also guaranteed teachers a free lunch period. For many teachers who had worked during their lunch hour their entire careers, it was like manna from heaven.

A few days after the strike ended, *New York Post* reader Monroe Lockman wrote: “As a union truck driver, I support the teachers’ strike. Perhaps someday, if they fight hard enough, they may earn almost as much as I do.”⁶¹ The most important gain, though, was not more money, or even better work conditions, but more power. UFT leaders had won the right to bargain collectively, which meant that the Board of Education would have to negotiate with the UFT, which represented all teachers in the city. Now, every contract negotiation, said Al Shanker, “opens up afresh opportunities for direct teacher participation in the revitalization of our schools.”⁶²

With this success, New York City’s teachers had ushered in a new era in the history of the American labor movement. The 1880s saw the consolidation of the craft unions and the founding of the American

Federation of Labor. The 1930s saw the creation of the great industrial unions and the Congress of Industrial Organizations. The 1960s, with teachers at the forefront, would see the unionization of government employees. In January 1961, President John F. Kennedy would sign Order 10988, giving legitimacy to union organizing among public employees. New York City teachers had led the way, becoming the first teachers in any major city to win the right to bargain collectively.

Teachers all over the country watched this three-year transformation of their New York City colleagues. They saw the city's teachers, once dismissed as disorganized and impotent, become a powerful, unified force. The word of their success spread from New York City like a fire, igniting rebellion and organizing efforts in elementary schools, high schools, and universities all over the state. Teachers no longer pleaded for respect, decent wages, and fair working conditions; they saw they could demand them—and win.

For New York teachers, the 1960s had arrived.