Black History Month

American Federation of Teachers: stellar integration record

If a report card were demanded today, The American Federation of Teachers would get an "E" for Excellence.

It's far and away the most integrated union in organized labor from top to bottom. The union has seven vice presidents.

They are Sandra Irons, Jacquelyn Vaughn, Lorretta Johnson, Nathaniel LeCour, John Elliott, Carol Graves and George Springer.

Since its founding in 1916, the AFT has been in the forefront of organized labor's battles to gain civil rights, economic parity and security for blacks.

In the first half of the 20th century, when segregation and discrimination were widespread and many trade unions excluded blacks from membership, the AFT was among the first union to breakdown racial barriers and open its membership to Blacks and other minorities.

In southern states, black teachers in segregated school districts organized their own union's locals and readily affiliated with the AFT, Local 9, an all black Washington, D.C. union, was chartered in 1916.

Black teachers elsewhere joined on equal footing with their white counterparts to organize integrated AFT locals in their respective school districts in other parts of the country.

In 1918, the AFT demanded equal pay for black teachers and years later backed up its plea with a generous contribution to the NAACP fund earmarked for equal pay activities.

Also in 1918, AFT called for the election of blacks to local school boards, and it lobbied for compulsory school attendance by black children, and equal educational opportunity for said students.

In 1928 AFT demanded that the historical contributions of black Americans be taught in the public schools.

The union has not been without racial strife within its own ranks. As late as 1950, it was necessary for AFT to expel. a number of locals who steadfastly refused to admit blacks to their membership. This action resulted in a loss of nearly 10,000 members. The result — a fully integrated union.

The 60's found the AFT in the vanguard of the civil rights movement alongside such vunerable fighters as A. Philip Randolph, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins, James Farmer and other civil rights stalwarts.

Indeed, AFT members helped to organize the 1963 "March on Washington" for Justice and Jobs, and over the next five years AFT staffers and members traveled south to register new black voters and to teach in the "freedom" schools.

Along with other unions and civil rights organizations, AFT also lobbied for passage of key civil rights legislation, re: the Equal Employment Opportunity Act, the Fair Housing Act and the Voting Rights Act.

Further involvement of AFT, along with civil rights groups and AFL-CIO includes lobbying efforts on behalf of a decent minimum wage, for which legislation was favorably passed last year;

Loretta Johnson, AFT vice president

School integration, adequate integrated housing, Medicare, full employment and aid to education. The battles to keep these programs and to expand them continue, and AFT remains in the thick of the battle.

Today, the fight against tuition tax credits is one of the most pressing issues AFT faces in its struggle to build and maintain quality public education for students of all racial extractions.

AFT was recently victorious by a 9 to 1 margin, in Washington, D.C., where the local chapter, with national AFT assistance defeated a local tution tax credit measure.

Headquartered in Washington, D.C., the 680,000 member American Federation of Teachers is an international AFL-CIO union, whose membership is made up of primarily elementary and secondary school teachers, college and university professors and other non-supervisory personnel in the field of education.

While the union represents teachers in urban, suburban and rural school districts throughout the United States, its strongest concentration is in the large cities across the country.

In recent years, AFT has opened doors to other public sectors and professional employees with concerns similar to those of teachers.

The Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals (FNHP) organized in 1978, the nation's massive and largely non-unionized health care industry.

Through the Federation of State Employees (FSE), AFT also serves a broad spectrum of blue and white collar civil service employees working for state and local governments.

Since the late seventies, AFT has affiliated nearly 200,000 new members. It is recognized as one of the most integrated and fastest growing unions under the AFL-CIO umbrella.

In 1967, AFT moved its headquarters from Chicago to Washington, D.C. The national office provides technical assistance to its state and local affiliates in the organizing and collective bargaining activities.

Since AFT is largely a union of professionals, it also gives major attention to the professional concerns of its members and provides support to its locals through legislative and political action, public relations, human rights, research, educational issues and communications departments.

Albert Shanker, a former New York school teacher and union official, has been international president of AFT since 1974.

Robert Porter has been international secretary-treasurer since his first appointment by the organization's executive council at the 47th AFT convention in 1963.

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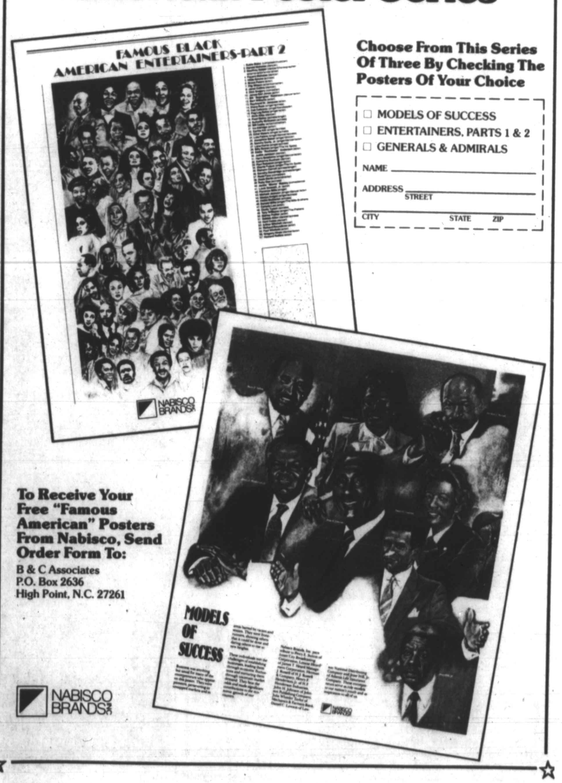

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