

# UC Berkeley

## Berkeley Review of Education

### Title

Educators Striking for a Better World: The Significance of Social Movement and Solidarity Unionisms

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7zk5p5sw>

### Journal

Berkeley Review of Education, 9(1)

### Authors

Dyke, Erin  
Muckian Bates, Brendan

### Publication Date

2019

### DOI

10.5070/B89146423

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2019 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

# Educators Striking for a Better World: The Significance of Social Movement and Solidarity Unionisms

Erin Dyke<sup>1</sup>

Brendan Muckian Bates<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Oklahoma State University

<sup>2</sup>Bridge Street Middle School

In the spring of 2018, West Virginia educators shut down schools statewide for two weeks to protest poor teacher and staff pay, rising healthcare costs, and perpetually decreasing public education funding, winning many of their demands. Soon after, statewide strikes in Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Arizona followed suit. The following fall, citing inspiration from these red state strikes, the second-most populous school district in the nation, the Los Angeles Unified School District, struck for more school funding and much-needed resources (Quinlan, 2018). Oakland, California, followed soon after, and district actions across states like Colorado, Massachusetts, and Arkansas, among other places, continued. In October 2019, the third largest school district in the nation, Chicago Public Schools, struck for such radical demands as a district sanctuary policy and resources for undocumented students; rent control for educators, students, and families in a rapidly gentrifying city; and more school nurses and social workers (Jaffe, 2019). On November 19, 2019, teachers across the entire state of Indiana—a place with stringent anti-union legislation—conducted a one-day strike (Herron, 2019).

In the United States, these events have introduced hundreds of thousands of educators, staff, and students to direct action, and, collectively, educators have won significant gains in public education spending. Evident from the widespread supportive mainstream media attention, the predominant public narrative has shifted from the need for individual school, teacher, and student accountability via achievement measures *to* the need to hold legislators and low-tax-paying corporations accountable for the siphoning of public resources for private profit.<sup>2</sup>

Many education and labor scholars have experienced this resounding wave of refusals to accept the status quo in education as an exciting surprise. The last few decades have seen increasing attacks on educators' right to participate in formal unions. In urban and more unionized places like Chicago and Los Angeles, the mass privatization of public neighborhood schools has led to a proliferation of non-unionized charter schools, and city leaders have been explicit about their aims to weaken local unions (Lipman, 2011). Many of the red states in which teachers struck in 2018 had seen the effects of decades

---

<sup>1</sup> Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to: Erin Dyke. Email: erin.dyke@okstate.edu

<sup>2</sup> For example, see this *TIME* magazine story from 2014 with the headline, “Rotten Apples: It’s Nearly Impossible to Fire a Bad Teacher, Some Tech Millionaires May Have Found a Way to Change That,” highlighting the need to hold *bad* teachers accountable (Edwards, 2014). This narrative shifted significantly in 2018, when *TIME* ran a cover story highlighting the plight of teachers in the wake of the red-state strikes titled: “I Work 3 Jobs And Donate Blood Plasma to Pay the Bills.’ This Is What It’s Like to Be a Teacher in America” (Reilly, 2018). In 2019, key educator organizers (Jay O’Neal and Emily Comer) were celebrated as *TIME*’s 100 most influential people (Huerta, 2019).

of anti-union, right-to-work legislation dwindle union membership numbers and resources in the years prior to statewide strikes (Blanc, 2019).<sup>3</sup> As we write this paper, educators are striking in Little Rock, Arkansas. The city's school district was the last remaining in the state where educators had any collective bargaining rights, which the state stripped just prior to the strike—a major reason for the action (Madeloni, 2019).

Given the all-time low of formal union power in the United States and the success of anti-union efforts (Shelton, 2017), how and why have the educator uprisings manifested so intensely in the last few years? Our<sup>4</sup> essay draws, in part, on a larger interview study we conducted with more than two dozen organizers of the 2018 red-state strikes in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Arizona. Interviews took place immediately after the strikes and, again, one year later. We draw on key examples from the red-state strikes, as well as historical studies of education labor, to offer two distinct yet overlapping lenses through which we might understand the resurgence of educator militancy. Our first lens centers the rise of social movement unionism in the last few decades in tension with the historical and ongoing predominance of (anti-union) professionalist orientations to the work of teaching (Peterson & Charney, 1999). Our second lens centers the rise of rank-and-file-led solidarity associations—or what we term solidarity unionism. This approach exists in tension with business or service unionist approaches that privilege centralized, hierarchical leadership, and decision-making. We offer key examples that illuminate these tensions and movements and suggest the importance of understanding the local and situated specificities of each struggle. As such, we employ a critical bifocality, what Weis and Fine (2012) described as “a theory of method in which researchers try to make visible the sinewy linkages or circuits through which structural conditions are enacted in policy and reform institutions as well as the ways in which such conditions come to be woven into community relationships and metabolized by individuals” (p. 174). Through mobilizing critical bifocality, we aim to understand how broader histories and political movements shape the terrain of local contemporary educator movements and vice versa.

### **The Rising Tide of Social Movement Unionism: Tensions with Professionalism**

Various approaches to organizing educators to influence decision-making, in practice, operate with specific theories of power, even if only implicitly. Different theories of power have different implications for what, how, and for whom union movements understand and try to effect change (Maton, 2018). Historically, in-tension theories of power and change have always imbued teachers unions (e.g., tensions between theories that center lobbying efforts and electing more favorable lawmakers versus theories of power that center shop floor organizing and direct action; Shelton, 2017; Weiner, 2012). The small body of education and social sciences scholarship on social movement unionism has most directly attended to theories of power and change in unionisms. In Dandala's (2019) review of the literature, the author articulates social movement unionism as a broad category or approach, one that addresses social concerns that students and communities face. Likewise, within education research, scholars have articulated social movement unionism as a form of organizing that often transcends the distinct category of *worker* beyond only immediate economic interests and toward transforming social institutions via direct action (Peterson & Charney, 1999; Stark, 2019). Thus, for social movement unionism, power is the product of organized

---

<sup>3</sup> Although right-to-work legislation varies by state in certain details, this type of legislation generally serves to take closed shops—or workplaces where everyone who benefits from the union-negotiated contract must pay dues to the union—and turn them into open shops, where workers can choose whether or not to pay dues but benefit from the union-negotiated contract regardless. Such legislation has had the overall effect of weakening the resources of the union (e.g., paid organizer positions) to build its membership and bargain effectively with employers (Shermer, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> Erin and Brendan met through their involvement with the Industrial Workers of the World. Erin participated in organizing the Industrial Workers of the World's Social Justice Education Movement in the Twin Cities, Minnesota, while Brendan was a key organizer for the 2018 and 2019 West Virginia education strikes. He is a steering committee member of West Virginia United, a caucus that emerged from the strikes. Erin is an assistant professor of curriculum studies in Oklahoma, and is currently undertaking a co-research project with 13 educators and activists to create a public archive of oral histories of teachers and staff who participated in the 2018 Oklahoma education strike.

## EDUCATORS STRIKING

relationships and the resource sharing of those most directly affected by white supremacy, colonialism, heteropatriarchy, border imperialism, and capitalism (e.g., students, communities, the rank-and-file). Change is possible through leveraging the power of these networks of relationships to pressure and influence people in key decision-making positions, thereby democratizing the power of those positions (e.g., lawmakers, mayors, superintendents).

In the scholarship that emerged from the 2012 Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strike, several scholar-activists elaborated on the significance of the social-movement-oriented caucus, the Caucus of Rank and File Educators. Movement and scholarly studies have highlighted Caucus of Rank and File Educators's emphasis on community-based organizing and a commitment to building grassroots power (Nuñez, Michie, & Konkol, 2015). The Caucus of Rank and File Educators' research arm has linked various city leaders' redistribution of public money and power to the reshaping of working-class neighborhoods close to city centers into masses of luxury condominiums (Gutstein & Lipman, 2013). Following the 2012 CTU strike and the influence of the 2011 Occupy movement, a network of rank-and-file social justice caucuses emerged in the form of the United Caucuses of Rank and File Educators. As Stark (2019) illuminated in her years-long nationwide research with the United Caucuses of Rank and File Educators' caucuses, similar groups emerged from their geographically situated struggles against anti-democratic urban planning and its effects of racialization, dispossession, and privatization. In this way, social movement teacher union activists and scholars have sought to articulate theories of power founded in critiques of capitalism, white supremacy, and, perhaps to a lesser extent, heteropatriarchy (Quinn & Meiners, 2009).

As Rottmann, Kuehn, Stewart, Turner, and Chamberlain (2015) articulated, social movement unionist efforts have marked the landscape of education labor organizing for more than a century. Yet, for just as long, administrators and educators have articulated teaching as a profession along the lines of medicine and law. Proponents have argued for increasing emphasis on coursework and credentialing mechanisms in undergraduate and postgraduate higher education programs and coalescing a professional body of educational scholarship to guide the purpose and practice of such programs of study (Labaree, 2006).

In her expansive history of the National Education Association (NEA) and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), Marjorie Murphy (1990) wrote, "The ideology of professionalism in education grew into a powerful antiunion slogan that effectively paralyzed and then slowed the unionization of teachers" (p. 1) during the early 20th century. To be clear, many unionists, even social movement unionists, have articulated professional dignity and respect for teachers' pedagogical expertise. Such calls for dignity, trust, and autonomy can exist within educator movements that acknowledge and attend to the class, race, and/or gender hierarchies within the education system. We are after a different sort of call to professionalism. Our use of the term refers primarily to a movement within education that seeks teachers be granted status in the professional class and attempts to improve the quality and rigor of education through advocacy and cooperation with the state. Whereas other unionisms within education are rooted in the structural divisions between the employing and employee classes, professionalism—as a way of thinking—rejects such a structural understanding. Professionalism imagines teachers, staff, and administrators to be on the same team with similar interests (i.e., our students' educational welfare).

During the NEA's early meetings, white women teachers were prohibited from speaking or participating in the association's proceedings, and people of color were disallowed from attending at all (Murphy, 1990). White women fought for the right to speak and organize within the association to promote their interests in the early 20th century. It is important to note that the NEA was segregated up until the 1950s—with some state associations integrating as late as the early 1970s—and so women's interests in the organization were decidedly rooted in the interests of white women. At the time, white women wanted the association to more directly address their interests, namely: (a) academic freedom; (b) better and equal pay to men teachers; (c) the ability to marry, have a family and continue teaching, as most married or pregnant women were fired; and (d) more autonomy over their lives outside of school, as contracts often included requirements about when and with whom women teachers could socialize. Subsequently, women began making some gains within the NEA, even electing a woman president in 1910 (Urban, 2000).

In the mid-20th century, the NEA turned toward building strong state and local associations through a top-down, soft approach to negotiations. Local teachers, historically mostly women, had little power within their state affiliates or the national association. Although teacher strikes occurred in 1946, 1947, and 1948, the NEA adopted a no-strike clause in all of their contracts, refusing to endorse them in order to build cooperation between teachers and administrators (Urban, 2000). At this time, the NEA took a hard stance, discouraging its members from becoming involved with the rising communist, socialist, and radical progressivist movements in education research and practice (Murphy, 1999). Instead, it pushed a professionalist theory of change that suggested teachers, school administrators, superintendents, and university faculty work together to lobby for educational changes in the best interest of all children. Urban recounted that the NEA's nominal commitment to gender-pay equality served to bolster women's support of the organization in relation to the male-dominated AFT, a trade union that rejected the notion that administrators and teachers maintained the same interests. It is important to note that during this time, the AFT also swiftly subjugated radical political factions within its organization, which contributed to its leadership remaining staunchly white, male, centralized, and hierarchical (Murphy, 1990).

As our discussion of the professionalization movement suggests, white women have been historically conscripted into making certain sacrifices (e.g., wages, academic autonomy) in order to care for and educate the nation's children. Care along these lines has often been articulated as an individualist project for academic achievement, a civilizing project that positions the nation-state as the best parent for rearing its young (Grumet, 1988). Yet, as Bhattacharya (2018) suggested, the most radical visions for what care might look like in education have emerged from feminist movements based in communities of color. Generally, for these movements, an ethic of care is deeply interwoven with collective freedom and responsibility. To understand the possibilities and challenges of new teacher uprisings, we must engage with differentiated understandings of care and their implied visions of education.

### **Kentucky: The Influence of Black Community-Led Movements for Education Justice**

Kentucky offers an important example for understanding differences in notions of care and education, and also professionalism and social movement unionism. Years prior to the 2018 strike, Black Lives Matter activists and Louisville educators organized locally to combat systemic racism in their school district. Tia Kurtsinger-Edison and Tyra Walker, two Black educators and Louisville activists, had been working with the Jefferson County Teachers Association, an affiliate of the Kentucky Education Association (KEA), to prevent statewide takeovers, implement restorative justice programs, hire more Black educators, and create spaces within the union for Black educators to present concerns in a safe environment. Their fight brought in a local activist, Gay Adelman, who would become the creator of several popular online social media pages for Kentucky education activists. They came together and forged a coalition to fight against austerity and racism. Online spaces germinated what would later become KY 120 United, a structured, independent group of public employees led by Nema Brewer.

Despite the Kentucky strikes' origins in grassroots movements for Black lives and against austerity, the mainstream media has, at times, downplayed the uprisings' connections to already existing social movements and instead emphasized the struggle as a unified movement of educators (Bhattacharya, 2018). The move to narrate the strikes as a movement to (re)professionalize teaching is in stark contrast to Nema's description of their efforts in 2018. In an interview with Brendan (the second author), she said:

We became activists accidentally, and [the NEA-affiliated KEA] is still in the lobbying mindset. There's a big difference between being a lobbyist and an activist. We had gotten to the point that we were done talking, we were tired of sitting down and holding dinner. We wanted to put our boot on someone's throat and flex our muscles. We couldn't hold back anymore.

Nema's suggestion that Kentucky educators were "tired of sitting down and holding dinner" alludes to the gendered relations that comprised these struggles. KY 120 United broke away from a popular public employee's Facebook page (KY United We Stand) and Adelman's various groups to implement a coordinated effort to find local representatives in each school, county, and congressional district capable

## EDUCATORS STRIKING

of leading a statewide walkout. The success of this new group helped to shut down 30 school districts in one day, followed by every district throughout the state the next day.

In the year following the 2018 strike, with pressure from the KEA, Nema redirected KY 120 United away from more confrontational actions and back toward lobbying and electoral-focused organizing in collaboration with the state union. This shift—and KY 120 United leaders' resistance toward addressing issues of systemic racism—caused significant tensions with Black urban communities in Jefferson County, who felt that the priorities of the KEA were not addressing the issues facing Louisville public school students. These tensions emerged most prominently around the increased emphasis on policing young Black men via the passage of HB-169 (An Act Relating to Gang Violence Prevention and Declaring an Emergency, 2019). Colloquially referred to as the gang bill, it empowers law enforcement to stop and search people based on whether they look like a gang member (Bhattacharya, 2018). Tia Edison describes these tensions:

This [Louisville] school's needs are completely different from other schools . . . . If you go to a predominantly white neighborhood and the schools there, the students there have resources at home, they have support at home, they are not going through trauma.

We cannot ignore the gang bill or separate this issue from [the general attack on] public education. Let's say we get our pension fixed, there still will be kids getting hurt, or getting arrested, at a very young age: it is a school-to-prison pipeline. We've got to connect the issues and pull them together. (Bhattacharya, 2018, para. 10)

As Tia suggests, Black educators and allies in Jefferson County operated with a sense of collective responsibility toward their communities and students who disproportionately experience the impacts of school disinvestment, epistemic violence, school-to-prison disciplinary regimes, and the trauma of systemic racism and economic dispossession.

Similarly, yet distinctly, the foundation for igniting such widespread, statewide actions existed significantly in the efforts of Black-led organizing for education justice (in Kentucky and Oklahoma) and the movement for ethnic studies and Latinx self-determination in Arizona (Acosta, 2014). In West Virginia, experiences in community organizing for economic justice and Appalachia's strong tradition of labor militancy served as the seeds for many key organizers' actions.<sup>5</sup>

As we discuss next, although some key educators and organizers had roots in and/or were inspired by social movement unionist approaches that centered issues of economic, racial, gender, and other intersecting justices, it is also important to understand the overlapping emergence of solidarity associations. Many solidarity associations had social movement aims (e.g., Arizona Educators United organizers had roots in rural Latinx movements and the 2012 CTU strike). Yet many educators who participated in the red-state strikes had long held, deep antagonism toward local and state unions, and many educators contributed to each state's overwhelming support of Trump in the 2016 election. As was evident in Kentucky and other red states during the strikes, educator organizers with social movement orientations grappled with conflicts over whether and how addressing issues of race, migration, and gender would alienate conservative supporters and the wider public.

### **The Emergence of Solidarity Associations: Tensions with Business Unions**

Although the history of the NEA detailed above contextualizes the professionalization movement, the history of the AFT and repressive U.S. labor law contribute to understanding some historical anti-democratic, anti-feminist, and racist tendencies in business or service unionism. Veteran union activist

---

<sup>5</sup> We also take up the significance of social movements in Kentucky, West Virginia, and Arizona in our recent article for *New Politics*, which challenged assertions that Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign *sparked* the teacher strikes: "Social Movements Gave Rise to the 'Teachers' Revolt,' Not Bernie" (Dyke & Muckian-Bates, 2019).

and scholar Lois Weiner (2012) suggested that since winning collective bargaining rights in the 1970s, formal education unions have pushed aside serious conversations about race, class, and gender through the predominance of business unionism, or representative and centralized leadership distanced from educators' everyday work. Weiner described the service or business model as such:

[T]he union is run like a business and exists to provide services including lower rates for auto insurance; benefits from a welfare fund; pension advice; contract negotiations; and perhaps filing a grievance. Officers or staff make decisions on the members' behalf. The union as an organization functions based on the assumption (generally unarticulated, unless it's challenged) that paid officials know best about everything. . . . Exclusionary ways of operating that are accepted out of what seems like necessity morph into principles. (pp. 33–34)

Such an approach coupled with a lack of structural accountability has stultified rank-and-file participation in unions and their study of for whom, for what, and how educators are fighting.

Although unions in the general public discourse tend to be synonymous with union organizations officially registered with the National Labor Relations Board to enact their legally mandated collective bargaining rights (e.g., NEA- and AFT-affiliated unions), we take a much broader and simpler definition of a union: a group of two or more workers acting together to improve their working conditions.<sup>6</sup> Solidarity unionism as a theory of radically democratic—and often anti-capitalist, anti-racist—unionism arises from the intellectual traditions of industrial union and poor workers' movements in the United States and globally (Lynd, 2015; Tait, 2005). Briefly and simply, solidarity unionism suggests workers build collective power by determining their own issues, demands, and actions via democratic processes of decision-making and participation. Critical attention to the limits of business unions and legal impositions on workers' abilities to organize, solidarity approaches rely on creatively withholding labor, whether it's legal or not. As an Inland Steel worker from Chicago in the late 1930s described, when workers wanted to make a change to their conditions, “the people in the mill . . . had a series of strikes, wildcats, shut-downs, slow-downs, anything working people could think of to secure for themselves what they decided they had to have” (Howard, 2013, p. 11).

It is not merely an unfortunate development that the service or business model predominates within established teachers unions. The infrastructure and organization of business unions arose through battles between workers to exert more control over their own labor power and the state and capital, which sought—and continues to seek—to do the same. The genesis of contemporary labor/business unions was a direct result of cataclysmic strikes that occurred in the pre-World War I era of the United States. Typically, when workers struck, employers would shore up their side with armed guards to force strikers back to work, disrupt pickets, or protect scabs when they crossed the picket line (Smith, 2006). For example, in the Homestead Strike of 1892, a collection of over 6,000 unionized steel workers clashed with 300 agents of the Pinkerton Detective Agency, who had been ferried up the Ohio River and began firing upon the strikers on the shore (Smith, 2006). In 1894, more than two dozen workers died after the National Guard teamed up with private security forces hired by the Pullman Company to break the nationwide rail workers' strike effort. After the Ludlow Massacre of 1914 and the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921, where more than 25 people—including 11 children—and around 100 people were killed, respectively, the state began to formally mediate labor-capital relations via the passage of labor laws (Roediger & Esch, 2012; Smith, 2006).

With precursors in the 1926 Railway Act (Wilner, 2009), the passage of the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, also known as the Wagner Act, provided government-protected union activity in the workplace, including the right to collective bargaining and to engage in a strike if the employer failed to meet certain conditions. Though the Wagner Act provided a legal framework through which unions could negotiate, it had the effect of shifting unions' focus from militant action for winning change toward

---

<sup>6</sup> In our definition, we follow scholars of caucuses and autonomous workplace organizing (Lynd, 2015; Stark, 2019).

## EDUCATORS STRIKING

building central administrative structures that could negotiate contracts and hold employers to legal account (Brecher, 1972/2014). Eventually, as organized labor's relationship to Democrats waned, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 amended the Wagner Act and introduced prohibitions on certain labor actions. No longer could workers legally engage in solidarity strikes, in which workers of one industry strike with workers of another industry in solidarity to contribute additional pressure; or in wildcat strikes, in which strikes occur without a formal vote or ratification by National Labor Relations Board-recognized unions; or in secondary boycotts, in which community members boycott the goods or services of the industry whose workers are striking, to name a few. In essence, workers lost many of the tools that had yielded union recognition prior to the Wagner Act as the federal government reinterpreted unionism through a far more narrow, legalistic, non-militant framework. Since the 1940s, labor law has become increasingly hostile toward union organizing. For example, the U.S. Supreme Court's 2018 ruling in *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees*, which limits public unions' ability to recruit members and collect dues, broadened the scope of statewide right-to-work laws (i.e., right to work without having to participate in the union). This broadened the scope of labor law nationwide, targeting public sector unions which currently have a unionization rate of 33.9% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019).

Restrictive labor law and the power it provides employers has significantly contributed to the centrality of what Weiner (2012) called the service or business model of unionism. Despite its prevalence, the red state strikes illuminate that other forms of worker organization can and do emerge to challenge the conditions of education. Though the walkouts were nominally called by the unions themselves and the negotiations that proceeded took place between union and elected representatives, we use West Virginia as an illustrative example to illuminate the emergence and significance of solidarity unionism in opposition to business unionism.

### **West Virginia: Ineffective State Union Strategies and the Emergence of Solidarity Unionism**

Solidarity unionism emerged in West Virginia out of members' deep frustrations with the inaction of their state union, the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA). The WVEA had stalled organizationally since the November 2016 election while educators' and staff's working conditions continued to deteriorate. At their annual delegate assembly in April 2017, WVEA President Dale Lee stated, "The WVEA is broken." Few locales had operating budgets, monthly meetings were scattered and never attracted more than a handful of members, and local political action committees could not mobilize enough voters to get out strong Democratic votes for endorsed candidates. Unpaid building representatives (i.e., stewards), did not always attend monthly meetings or transmit pertinent information to fellow union members at their schools on policy or electoral matters. Electorally, the unions could do little to stem the tide of conservative lawmakers sweeping into office on the back of Trump's populism.

One reason WVEA members were expected to take on the brunt of these challenges in 2017 was that association staff were continuously overworked. An Organizational Development Specialist (ODS) with the WVEA—whose task is to be both organizer and representative of the union—had to cover an average of 7.85 counties in the state. Commutes from one end of a staffer's region to the next could take up to two-and-a-half hours. In Monongalia County, for example, there were 18 K-12 schools. This is only one of nine counties that the ODS of the Northeast district had to cover. If an ODS only visited schools—one of their multitudinous daily tasks—it would take anywhere from 15 to 17 weeks *just* to make a long-term visit to each school. In a 36-week school year, almost half of the year would be devoted to making rounds to the counties an ODS represented, ensuring that members' concerns were fully heard and understood. The capacity of union staff to be everywhere, providing the much-needed support for building local leaders to take action themselves, was practically non-existent, as travel and representative concerns ate up much-needed organizing energy.

In the previous national election, members were mailed endorsement lists while mass emails were sent out months and weeks beforehand. Directives informing members of whom to vote for, rather than *why* they should cast their votes in that direction, created a transactional relationship in the mind of many members—vote for the Democrat because the Republican is a worse choice. "It's easy for leadership to



say, ‘We don’t have any power because our members just won’t show up to meetings,’” stated Emily Comer, a Spanish teacher in the Kanawha Valley and West Virginia United organizer. “But who wants to show up to a meeting to talk about lobbying? People want to belong to a vibrant, organizing-focused union that puts its money where its mouth is.” John, a veteran social studies teacher from Mercer County and a WVEA member, stated that the tactics of “lobbying a hostile legislature and holding the occasional rally” were typical of the union. Despite the organization of a one-day walkout in the 1990s, “there was a longstanding trepidation that manifested any time that the word ‘strike’ was broached.”

When members did have an idea for making changes to union strategy, they were met with little confidence from leadership. Jay O’Neal, co-founder of the West Virginia Public Employees UNITED page, moved to West Virginia in 2015 and quickly realized that it would take more than asking nicely to move leadership in the ways he felt were needed. He stated:

When I would go to leadership in the past with some ideas, I got either a non-committal response, it might take forever to get to someone on the board, or I would get a ‘thank you’ email but no follow up. One of the biggest problems is the split between AFT and WVEA, and even though they want most of the same things, it was hard to work between the unions because of their bureaucracy.

It was out of these feelings of alienation that West Virginia educators began to organize on their own, outside the purview of their formal unions. The rise of secret and public social media pages and the use of internet-based messaging and polling technology have further illuminated both the longstanding tensions between rank-and-file organizers seeking to inspire direct action *and* rank-and-file educators’ commitments to developing direct democratic forms of decision-making. Similarly, in Arizona, a core group of educators formed AEU, which worked in tentative collaboration with their state education association. AEU organizers—especially Tucson-area educator Vanessa Arrendondo-Aguirre—created an infrastructure of communication and coordinated organizer trainings for more than 2,000 liaisons across the state. Prior to her involvement with the AEU in the months leading up to the strike, Vanessa had never organized before. She had felt alienated from her union and thought that its priorities were especially disconnected from the everyday struggles of her bi- or multilingual students. By the end of the strike, Vanessa developed relationships of care and solidarity with about nine other core AEU organizers who sought not to dictate the terms of the struggle along the lines of the NEA’s centralized forms of decision-making. She stated:

It started with asking people to volunteer to work as liaisons. We are a grassroots movement. People slowly started volunteering, I created a list, with two lists, one for charter and one for public, which helped people to see which schools were missing liaisons. And then others stepped up and started getting themselves organized.

Organizers like Vanessa, Jay, and Emily used social media to build support and capacity and organize mutual aid for students and families during the strikes.

One of the most significant moments of tension between solidarity and business unionism emerged about halfway through the two-week West Virginia strike, when presidents of all three state associations instructed educators to return to work after one cooling-off day, with only a verbal commitment to some of the union’s demands. Emily Tanzey, a middle school English Language Arts teacher, described a secret meeting on that cooling-off day at an old mall that could serve as a central meeting point for her county’s educators. At this meeting, “teachers demanded our local union leadership and region reps to wildcat.” The term wildcat meant that teachers would rebel against the mandate handed down by the state unions to return to work and continue to strike.

On the Public Employees UNITED page that had been the site of much organizing, a video began circulating of union officials pleading with members to accept the deal and return to work. Pleading turned to hostility as members openly defied their unions, yelled back in protest, and walked out of these meetings. Other counties held similar meetings that day. Impromptu organizing efforts spread across the

## EDUCATORS STRIKING

various secret pages and back channels that teachers and service personnel had set up during the walkouts to ensure all workers maintained open lines of communication. Meetings were set up in schools, churches, and malls so that district workers could determine whether they would accept the deal as it stood, or if they would inform their superintendent that there would not be enough staffing for the following day. By the next day, all 55 counties in West Virginia had shut down, and teachers continued to strike for another week until the deal was signed and sealed by the state.

The primary reason for West Virginia's success, then, relates to their organizers' understanding of solidarity unionism and building networks in which solidarity unionism could be practiced in the day-to-day. Online communication became decentralized with no clear leaders capable of dictating demands to others. Everyone became, in one way or another, leaders in their own right. Union titles and bureaucratic chains of command did not give certain members permission to dictate the course of the 2018 strike. Members became empowered through organizing in their schools and within their communities, setting up food for their low-income students or debating when a strike should begin. Given that much of this work had already been done through purely volunteer efforts, organizers recognized the power they had to determine how the strike should end. Solidarity unionism, as a theory of building worker power, was both a catalyst and determining factor for the course of the 2018 West Virginia strike.

### Conclusion

The proliferation of education uprisings across the nation—and globally—are intricately connected to the many other struggles that ordinary people face in their everyday lives under racial, colonialist, and heteropatriarchal capitalism. For many, struggles on educational terrain are struggles for a new mode of world-making (Meyerhoff, 2019). Many social movement unionists imagine places of learning that honor and study multiple ways of knowing via ethnic and decolonial studies, in which the carceral state that serves as the foundation for the school-to-prison nexus is abolished, and the terrorization of undocumented students and families no longer exists. In contexts like the red-state strikes, where solidarity unionism emerged to challenge weak, hierarchical formal state unions, ordinary people learned together and continue to learn how to organize themselves to confront state power. Our study suggests the significance of understanding the specificities and complexities of how these uprisings are composed historically, politically, and geographically.

Such understandings help us see the limits and possibilities for struggles in the U.S. education terrain, and how they might help us imagine and create a better world. In her memoir, historian and Okie Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz (2006) wrote that in Oklahoma, *red* historically signifies much more than just right-leaning. Red conjures a painful and submerged history of Oklahoma's thriving communist and socialist past, the violence of Indigenous forced migration and genocide, and, for her, the red soil of Canadian County where her mixed-heritage family labored in poverty as tenant farmers during the Dust Bowl. AEU's #RedforEd campaign, inspired by the radical red attire of CTU's striking educators in 2012, further suggests that the struggle for political hegemony and historical consciousness in these states is active, contingent, and ongoing.

## References

- An Act Relating to Gang Violence Prevention and Declaring an Emergency, H.B. 169, Kentucky General Assembly, § 403.322. (2019).
- Acosta, C. (2014). Dangerous minds in Tucson: The banning of Mexican American Studies and critical thinking in Arizona. *Journal of Educational Controversy*, 8(1), 1–18.
- Bhattacharya, T. (2018, May 1). Why the teachers' revolt must confront racism head on. *Dissent Magazine*. Retrieved from [https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online\\_articles/why-teachers-strikes-must-confront-racism](https://www.dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/why-teachers-strikes-must-confront-racism)
- Blanc, E. (2019). *Red state revolt: The teachers' strike wave and working-class politics*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Brecher, J. (1972/2014). *Strike!* Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019). *Union Members—2018*. Retrieved from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>
- Dandala, S. (2019). Teacher social justice unionism and the field of industrial relations in the United States. *Journal of Labor and Society*, 22, 571–584. <https://doi.org/10.1111/wusa.12426>
- Dunbar-Ortiz, R. (2006). *Red dirt: Growing up Okie*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Dyke, E., & Muckian-Bates, B. (2019, November 6). Social movements gave rise to the “teachers’ revolt,” not Bernie. *New Politics*. Retrieved from <https://newpol.org/social-movements-gave-rise-to-the-teachers-revolt-not-bernie/>
- Edwards, H. S. (2014, October 23). Rotten apples: It’s nearly impossible to fire a bad teacher, some tech millionaires have found a way to change that. *TIME*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/3533615/in-the-latest-issue-11/>
- Grumet, M. (1988). *Bitter milk: Women and teaching*. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.
- Gutstein, E., & Lipman, P. (2013). The rebirth of the Chicago teachers union and possibilities for a counter-hegemonic education movement. *Monthly Review*, 65(2), 1–11. [https://doi.org/10.14452/mr-065-02-2013-06\\_1](https://doi.org/10.14452/mr-065-02-2013-06_1)
- Herron, A. (2019, November 17). What is Red for Ed Action Day? Here’s why teachers are marching. *IndyStar*. Retrieved from <https://www.indystar.com/story/news/education/2019/11/17/red-ed-action-day-teacher-pay-driving-thousands-indiana-statehouse/4179338002/>
- Howard, W. (2013). *The essential Staughton Lynd*. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.
- Huerta, D. (2019). Jay O’Neal and Emily Comer. *TIME*. Retrieved from <https://time.com/collection/100-most-influential-people-2019/5567709/jay-oneal-emily-comer>
- Jaffe, S. (2019, November 16). The Chicago teachers strike was a lesson in 21st-century organizing. *The Nation*. Retrieved from <https://www.thenation.com/article/chicago-ctu-strike-win/>
- Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees, 585 U.S. (2018).
- Labaree, D. F. (2006). *The trouble with ed schools*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Lipman, P. (2011). Contesting the city: Neoliberal urbanism and the cultural politics of education reform in Chicago. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education*, 32, 217–234. <https://doi.org/10027/10522>
- Lynd, S. (2015). *Solidarity unionism: Rebuilding the labor movement from below*. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
- Madeloni, B. (2019, November 7). Fight for racial justice fuels Little Rock educator strike preparations. *Labor Notes*. Retrieved from <https://www.labornotes.org/2019/11/fight-racial-justice-fuels-little-rock-educator-strike-preparations>
- Maton, R. M. (2018). From neoliberalism to structural racism: Problem framing in a teacher activist organization. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 48, 293–315. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2018.1474711>
- Meyerhoff, E. (2019). *Beyond education: Radical studying for another world*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. <https://doi.org/10.5749/j.ctvvp3vm2>
- Murphy, M. (1990). *Blackboard unions: The AFT and the NEA, 1900–1980*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

## EDUCATORS STRIKING

- Nuñez, I., Michie, G., & Konkol, P. (2015). *Worth striking for: Why education policy is every teacher's concern*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Peterson, B., & Charney, M. (1999). *Transforming teacher unions: Fighting for better schools and social justice*. Milwaukee, WI: Rethinking Schools, Ltd.
- Quinlan, C. (2018, August 23). Los Angeles teachers might go on strike for first time since 1989. *ThinkProgress*. Retrieved from <https://thinkprogress.org/los-angeles-teachers-vote-on-whether-to-authorize-a-strike-0039145021cd/>
- Quinn, T., & Meiners, E. R. (2009). *Flaunt it!: Queers organizing for public education and justice*. New York, NY: Peter Lang.
- Reilly, K. (2018, September 13). "I work 3 jobs and donate blood plasma to pay the bills." This is what it's like to be a teacher in America. *TIME*. Retrieved from <http://time.com/longform/teaching-in-america/>
- Roediger, D., & Esch, E. (2012). *The production of difference: Race and the management of labor in U.S. history*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rottmann, C., Kuehn, L., Stewart, C., Turner, J., & Chamberlain, J. (2015). Remembering, reimagining, and reviving social justice teacher unionism. In N. Bascia (Ed.), *Teacher unions in public education: Politics, history, and the future* (pp. 53–67). [https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137426567\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137426567_4)
- Shelton, J. (2017). *Teacher strike!: Public education and the making of a new American political order*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press. <https://doi.org/10.5406/illinois/9780252040870.001.0001>
- Shermer, E. T. (2018, April 24). The right to work really means the right to work for less. *The Washington Post*. Retrieved from <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/made-by-history/wp/2018/04/24/the-right-to-work-really-means-the-right-to-work-for-less/>
- Smith, S. (2006). *Subterranean fire: A history of working-class radicalism in the United States*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.
- Stark, L. (2019). "We're trying to create a different world": Educator organizing in social justice caucuses (Doctoral dissertation).
- Tait, V. (2005). *Poor workers' unions: Rebuilding labor from below*. Cambridge, MA: South End Press.
- Urban, W. (2000). *Gender, race, and the National Education Association: Professionalism and its limitations*. New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.
- Weiner, L. (2012). *The future of our schools: Teachers unions and social justice*. Chicago, IL: Haymarket Books.
- Weis, L., & Fine, M. (2012). Critical bifocality and circuits of privilege: Expanding critical ethnographic theory and design. *Harvard Educational Review*, 82, 173–201. <https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.82.2.v1jx34n441532242>
- Wilner, F. N. (2009). *Understanding the Railway Labor Act*. Omaha, NE: Simmons-Boardman Books.