

Crossroads and Country Roads: Wildcat West Virginia and the Possibilities of a Working Class Offensive

March 21, 2018

During the four days I spent in West Virginia, I was repeatedly thanked for coming to support teachers from out of state, though mostly people seemed a bit surprised that I cared. Perhaps it was because I arrived at the exact moment that most of the national media was leaving town following the first - false - announcement that an agreement had been reached.



But it was also because the strike seemed, at the time, to be a very local affair to those participating. Then, over thirteen days of striking, it became clear the world was watching, and we had our own reasons. Since the West Virginia Teachers' strike ended in a victory last week, WV teachers have been actively engaged with and supporting teachers from around the country - particularly in Oklahoma - who, too, are poised to strike. Winning made it clear, in a way that few other things could, that West Virginia teachers are at the center of something that goes beyond West Virginia. The strike has opened space for concrete understandings of shared problems teachers - and public sector workers - face across the country, as well as for practical solidarity between them. West Virginia teachers burst on to the national political stage in the last days of February with a statewide strike. It began when teachers and school support staff quickly escalated from walking into the state house to walking out of work in a stoppage that swept all fifty five counties in the state and lasted nine days, before ending in an agreement for a 5% across-the-board raise for all public sector workers.

The action already appears to be a turning point for the renewed power of militant worker action in a country that has seen drastic declines in union membership, wages that were until recently stubbornly stagnant, and soaring health care costs. As strikes of teachers and nurses loom in Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, Pittsburgh and California, West Virginia illustrates why care workers in education and health are at the center of a new upsurge in worker militancy.

They demonstrate the potential for strikes to spark a wave of struggle that can break through the limits of political possibility that have constrained labor and social movements since the era of the Ronald Reagan presidency, and his crackdown on the labor movement and unions. The period was defined by the disastrous 1981 PATCO strike, and an ideological consensus on the importance of "balanced budgets" for government expenditure at the federal and state levels. When the Bill Clinton-era "third way" doubled-down on this framework of fiscal austerity, the federal government and states slashed public funding of education, health and welfare. Together these two moments frame the conditions that teachers still, today, are forced to respond.

It is clear that West Virginia has given us much to hope for. But if we're to take the proliferation of the strike as a serious possibility, the stuff of a new practice of politics, it's imperative to map its internal dynamics, and to grasp the micro-levels of organization that made its exuberant victory possible.

Social Reproduction Crisis: Women, Health and Decades of Cuts

What grievances catalyzed the strike? The school workers walked out demanding a raise for themselves and public employees as well as a funding “fix” for the state health insurance plan, PEIA (Public Employees Insurance Agency), that has been underfunded for more than three decades and has, over time, raised patient costs from zero in 1988 to over four hundred dollars a month today. For teachers, many of whom earn between \$34,000-\$45,000 a year and support staff who earn substantially less, between \$19,000 and \$29,000 a year, the monthly costs were unsustainable and poised to rise.

As costs rose to astronomical levels with no signs of slowing, teachers and staff were offered the “opportunity” to defray costs by submitting biometric data to the private company in charge of the Go365 “preventative health” program; for a discount on access to health care, workers were asked to upload their daily “steps” as well as individual body measurements, weight, height and updates about sensitive health tests. Teachers believed the “voluntary” program was likely to become compulsory, a trajectory they have often seen with “improvements” to school testing and assessment agendas mandated by the state and federal government. While this small humiliation was the proverbial spark that ignited the fire of strike action, denial of claims also played a crucial role. An oft-repeated and possibly apocryphal tale from the picket line involved a striker who fell, hitting her head on the marble steps of the state house; with blood pouring, she was rushed to the hospital and promptly denied coverage for a CT scan by PEIA gatekeepers. Whether or not the unconfirmed picket line rumor is factually true, in each instance I heard the story was repeated, it was followed up by more parochial tales of claims for basic medicines and treatment and outrage at paying high costs for lack of access to care.

For teachers and education workers, the increasing pressure of social reproduction doesn’t stop at their individual health and safety. Many of West Virginia’s education workers, 75% of which are women and mostly born in West Virginia, are also often parents and caregivers for elderly relatives; in several cases, I met teachers who were also the children of retired teachers who themselves depend on PEIA for health care access for treatment of the serious ailments likely to develop in old age. The effects of cuts are intensified in families where more than one member works for the state, which in turn multiplies the burden on women struggling to cover the gaps as breadwinners as well as caregivers for people they love.

At the same time, family and community networks connect a large number of people in the general public directly to school staff and the PEIA. In my short visit to West Virginia, three people asked me if I was “a teacher from out of state here for the strike.”

The first was an Uber driver who turned out to be married to a school speech pathologist. He “admired” both her work in schools and her second job aiding stroke victims in recovery – his mother had been plagued by strokes at the end of her life – and had proposed marriage so she might be relieved of her *third* job as a waitress. So he proposed, asking her to meet him the following day at the courthouse, where he waited with some trepidation to find out if she would arrive. She did. Now he works two jobs himself: a weekday electrician and a weeknight and weekend Uber driver.

Later, when I was leaving the state, a TSA agent in late-middle age also correctly guessed my profession and reason for visiting West Virginia; she explained that her husband was a retired school teacher and that both she and he had resumed working to pay for health care costs. She thanked me for coming and said “they have to hold the line on PEIA.” Not the usual case of airport profiling.

Beyond their family networks, school employees also live and work in cities in towns in the rural state that are wracked by poverty. In 2015, just under half of children in the state lived at or below federal poverty levels, already a flawed measure of families’ basic ability to attain a stable livelihood. And teachers care about their students. In addition to the regular demands of teaching, one

elementary school teacher, Lynn,* expressed her frustration: “It’s like we are also social workers. There’s not a lot of resources for these kids. If a student needs extra help, I try to give it, whether its for keeping up with exams or something more. It’s not legal but I know of teachers in my own school who have taken kids into their homes or found other families to do so.” Long bus routes take drivers to the poorest and most inaccessible parts of each county, where the often hidden poverty of West Virginia “hollers” comes into full view.

One driver explained how the 2018 strike differed – and why it was stronger – than a previous teacher strike that took place in 1990, also primarily over health care funding, the year after cuts to PEIA were initiated. “In 1990, we didn’t go out. But we also didn’t cross picket lines. I just drove my route, and maybe one or two kids would get on the bus, I’d drive to the school and turn around, and take them back home.” This time around, because drivers and cooks were also on strike, the total closure of schools was less tenuous. According to strikers, 10 teachers absent can shutter a school for safety reasons, but a cook or bus driver walking off the job closes the whole school. In contrast, this strike had “more hands on deck” for supporting students and families during the nine-day work stoppage. Strikers prepared food for students who rely on free lunch and breakfast programs and, where needed, delivered the packages directly to student’s homes. This tactic expanded support for the strike among families, and pushed the strike past a conflict at the point of social reproduction, to one in which reproduction is partially reorganized, albeit temporarily, on the basis of workers’ control for the benefit of the broader working class. Ultimately, students returned the support, with a student march that wrapped around the state house on Friday, March 2, bolstering teacher and staff morale amidst the insistence of lawmakers that the strike was “losing public support,” and a sense of urgency around the looming end of the legislative session.

Interestingly, Oklahoma teachers also walked out in 1990, over similar issues of education funding and pay. Like in West Virginia, the 2018 strike already appears more unified than the last action 28 years ago, when only part of the state participated in the walk out and teacher-members of the AFT went to work.

Women and others in education, in health and other paid sectors doing the work of social reproduction find themselves at an untenable crossroads. That is why they must be and are now leaders in working class struggle. The increasing demands of their jobs intersect with increasing pressures at home and in their communities in such a way that makes it evident to them that not only are their personal standards of living at stake, but so is their ability to educate, to heal, to parent and to participate in their families and communities. Even to the degree that this burden is increasingly shared across genders, the tension is not resolved. Instead, men are brought into the struggle for changing the conditions that have produced a crisis of social reproduction of the working class as a whole.



Right to Work, Forced to Strike: How the Strike was Won

Social strike tactics (like free lunch and breakfast provided by teachers) and school-wide strikes represent an escalation since the 1990 West Virginia teacher stoppage, reflecting the amplified pressures on teachers and staff. Not only do schools themselves face funding shortages, but the work of teachers has become increasingly intense, as new tasks related to evaluation and testing wring control of the education process out of their hands. The imposition of these external benchmarks on teacher and student performances restructure how time is spent in the classroom, intensifying state command over labor-power and training pupils receive.

These combined pressures have caused many teachers to leave the state for higher pay. Nearly one fifth of teachers who start in West Virginia public schools leave after one year, a “brain drain” centered on the poorest and most inaccessible areas. As a result, the schools rely on a number of “long-term” substitute teachers who may or may not meet the standard qualifications. One less-often discussed demand of the strike, won in its early days, centered on maintaining standards for teacher certification in the face of a rule change that would liberalize them.

The teacher shortage increased teachers’ workloads, but also became a source of power. In comparison with other state workers, teachers felt they could not easily be replaced and, thus, threats of injunctions about an illegal strike had little sticking power. Teachers and other state workers reported that the threats had a much stronger impact on workers outside of schools.

Strike discussions initially emerged in a “secret” Facebook group for WV public sector employees that eventually had over 20,000 members – nearly the total number of workers who ultimately went on strike. From that group, smaller Facebook groups developed, focused on each county, and in some cases on individual schools. Teachers moved discussion from Facebook to “IRL” and face-to-face discussions in schools, but Facebook remained central to the organization of the strike. While most of the crucial votes to strike took place in mass meetings in each school or county, in one case a small school took the crucial wildcat vote via Facebook Live, sending a tally of unanimous comments in support of continuing the strike in to the school superintendent, alerting him that no school would be held tomorrow. On Twitter, in a public debate with high stakes, teachers and staff, supporters and some detractors, could be seen openly debating the merits of various proposals floated by the governor, union leaders and other teachers, using strike specific hashtags #55strong and #FixPEIA among others. One teacher told me that, in her view, taking the “wrong” position on

Twitter or Facebook was in-and-of-itself tantamount to crossing a picket line. Social media also made it possible to coordinate between strikers on picket lines and those in the capitol, to share news and photos of inter-state and international solidarity and significant developments in negotiations broadly and quickly.

In addition to its facilitation by social media, the bottom-up organization of the strike had several specific, historic roots that are worth exploring. First, West Virginia became the 26th state to adopt “Right-to-work” legislation in 2016, an anti-union measure that was once law-of-the-land only in states of the Deep South. In recent years, former union strongholds like West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Michigan have adopted the measure, which makes “closed shop” organizing illegal, drastically reduces already falling union membership and drains union coffers. One reason the West Virginia strike resonates beyond the state is that union members nationwide are expecting a ruling soon in the Supreme Court of the United States on *Janus vs AFSCME*, which would generalize “Right-to-work” to every state in the country, and particularly decimate public sector union membership in states where the right to collective bargaining for public sector workers is not specifically preserved.

Additionally, public sector workers in West Virginia have no legal right to collectively bargain with the state, making any strike action, as the Attorney General Patrick Morrisey carefully declared, “unlawful.” As a result education workers are members of one of three unions acting as “employee associations” – the AFT (American Federation of Teachers), the NEA (National Education Association) or the WVSSPA (West Virginia School Service Personnel), a local independent union – rather than bargaining agents. Though the two teachers’ unions compete for membership, union staff and leaders cooperated in negotiating with the state in response to pressure from a united workforce ready to act. The weak organization of national unions at the WV state level made possible the democratic, rank-and-file organization of the strike. Though unions leaders acted as bargaining agents, their power to negotiate depended entirely on in the heat of the moment, on the power of the strike, and on self-organized teachers, union member status aside, rather than on the independent power of more robust union bureaucracies that exist in other states. At the level of schools and county, whether one was a member in a particular union or not played no role in a workers ability to vote on the crucial questions of the strike. At least 700 teachers signed or resigned union cards during the course of the first week of the strike.

It remains to be seen whether teachers themselves will continue to lead in West Virginia, or in new states that go on strike. Can the teachers movement retain its grassroots organization by replacing the union leadership that failed to represent them? Or should they devote their energies to building something entirely new? Whether the movement remains self-organized and led by regular teachers will determine how far it can go. We can look to the organization of the WV strike to see why, when it comes to the power of a strike, there’s no substitute for working class self-activity.

The grassroots organization of the strike was visually represented in the capitol by groups of strikers moving in small-to-medium sized cliques of 3-10, usually wearing matching t-shirts that named their county or town and represented its specific characteristics: from Boone County’s “UNION THUGS” to Lake, WV shirts that highlighted parent support for and student benefit from teacher action. Many shirts sported maps of the state and slogans of unity, like #55strong. If you were to compliment someone’s shirt, they were sure to let you know who had been responsible for designing and ordering the shirt, and from what company they secured the bargain from. (Teachers take pride not only in their incredible sign and costume-making skill, but also in bargain shopping.) The result was something noticeably different than the visual optics of top-down union “mobilization,” often characterized by a sea of matching and often ill-fitting t-shirts handed out by staff organizers. Unity between different categories of workers was also made visible with teachers wearing red bandanas, staff wearing yellow and other public sector workers in blue. Senators and delegates who supported the strike wore “badges” which had a ribbon representing each color to show their support.

Along with the constant, visual reminder of unity, strikers stuck together in the face of an initial agreement announced on Tuesday, February 27th, by Governor Jim Justice and union leaders that would have granted teachers a 5% pay raise with lower 3% raises for non-education public sector workers. When the deal was announced at a press conference, strikers booed the governor, as well as presidents of the AFT-WV and WVEA, Christine Campbell and Dale Lee, ultimately rejecting the deal the following day, defying the period designated for “cooling off.” The vote launched a wildcat strike, amid concerns about divide-and-rule-tactics, lack of motion on PEIA funding, and fear that Justice didn’t have the power to force Republicans to bring a new bill to the floor, let alone pass one, and after Republican Senate President Mitch Carmichael indicated that he didn’t accept the proposed deal. To many, the quick announcement of “victory” amounted to a bait-and-switch designed to get the national media spotlight off West Virginia and break the strike.

That night, the map of school closings on the state department of education website was watched by bar patrons in a downtown pub as intently as an electoral college map during any presidential election. The combination of support from superintendents bound by “school safety” concerns to shutter schools that wouldn’t have enough staff, and a kind of competitive solidarity that would have publicly embarrassed teachers from hold-out counties, propelled the map to go full red for “closed” over the course of several hours. In the end, this was the crucial moment that paved the way for a second deal – one that granted a significant raise to the whole state, rather than just school staff, and which establishes a basis for broader solidarity in the future.

But without the strike spreading beyond schools, it was impossible to win on the strike’s main demand: fixing PEIA and funding health care. The experience of building statewide unity between and among sectors of work and parts of the state that are usually divided by infraclass politics is one that can be learned from and built on.

Teachers also credited West Virginia’s history of militant coal miners’ strikes – particularly the Battle of Blair Mountain – as a living memory that inspired unity and militancy in the strike. That argument was borne out in the particular militancy of “radicals” from counties in the south of the state, including Mingo county, remembered by labor historians for the 1920 Battle of Matewan and the John Lewis and Mother Jones period of UMWA history. More prosaically, but more importantly, not a few 2018 strikers had previously walked out in 1990, while many more second generation teachers credited their parents with their understanding of the history of teacher struggle in the state; the direct experience and legacy of struggle means that there is a strong culture opposed to “scabbing” and crossing picket lines among union members, non members and the public at large. Over the last three decades, for instance, a small group of dedicated public sector workers and advocates have manned “PEIA watch,” keeping track of cuts and their consequences and exposing the complicity of elected representatives from both parties in draining West Virginia’s working class of basic resources for survival.

Some of these factors that strengthened the strike – self-organization on social media, independence from but cooperation with union officials, open voting and debate, and support from school superintendents (who were under direct pressure from teachers on a day-to-day basis during the strike) – are already being replicated in elsewhere. Others, like the lived experience of striking and participating in militant union struggle, are harder to replicate.



Bernie or Bust?: On Red and Blue in West Virginia

Much commentary and reportage of the strike has emphasized that it took place in “Trump country” in a “red” state with a GOP-dominated state legislature. Red was also the overwhelming color of the strike: from teachers’ shirts and bandanas to the county-by-county maps showing schools shut down statewide over the course of nine days. More than one teacher called up a deeper significance to the choice of red, asking me if I “know what ‘redneck’ *really* means,” before proceeding to explain that red bandanas harken back to the days of coal mine militancy, when the term was coined as a pejorative by coal bosses to describe striking miners identifiable not by the combination of sunburn and white skin as people often think, but by the red bandanas they wore to signify union membership and radicalism.

The contrast suggests the contradictions underneath the surface-level characterization of West Virginia as a Republican stronghold. Governor Jim Justice himself is a recent convert to the party, and whether it was a display of “good cop/bad cop” tactics during the course of the strike or a genuine difference of opinion, he certainly did not appear to hold sway over a Republican-led Senate. At one point on Thursday, Justice was confronted directly by teachers as he rolled into the state house at 1 pm in a two-SUV motorcade where he promised to address the Senate with teachers’ concerns. The Republican caucus not only blocked him from doing so, but they rejected his attempt to simply address the caucus. Explaining his weak negotiating position to teachers, he simply said, “well, I’m not the king!”

Until 2000, West Virginia was a “blue” state in Presidential elections, if unreliably so, having gone for Reagan in 1985. At the national level, the WV shift took place in the first term of the Bush/Cheney era. At the same time, at the state house level West Virginia was mostly blue until ten years later in 2010. In the same vein, West Virginia is one of the states in which Bernie Sanders won the Democratic Party primary while in the general election Donald Trump came out on top.

Strikers tend to describe the lack of political loyalty to a given party or candidates as “not about politics”; this was true even as Republican state delegates and senators remained recalcitrant party-

line voters in the early days of the strike. Instead, the goal for strikers in directly negotiating with legislators was not only to pass a resolution for raises and (and health care funding) but to make the natural gas companies in the state pay for the increased costs. In the days leading to the strike, a striker was removed from the senate chamber for reading out a list of campaign contributions by gas companies to senators. In line on a rainy day Lynn* explained “we haven’t learned from our history: from coal and timber. We cant let the natural gas people take our resources and our people and give nothing back. And the way they do natural gas... they get in, they get out. It’s fast; it’s stealing.”

It’s true. West Virginia has recently become the leading natural gas producer in the country, up from ninth three years ago. While coal extraction remains significant in the state and an important symbol of its reliance on energy production (including the governor’s own unpaid taxes on coal extraction), natural gas is becoming increasingly important to the economy. And it’s an industry characterized by short-term “boom” investments often involving capital-intensive rather than labor-intensive processes and a high level of environmental damage along with reliance on a mobile, temporary workforce. In West Virginia, with its single-industry, energy-based economy, it’s patently clear who the enemy is in working class struggle, and teachers are clearly taking aim.

If any figure in state house politics represents this perspective, it is Democrat Richard Ojeda. In the first days of the strike, he introduced a bill that would have increased the “severance” tax on natural gas companies. It was quickly shut down in a party-line vote. As a result, his presence in the state house during the strike had a rock-star quality; he provoked cheers on appearance and could be seen holding court with strikers on session breaks. Once a Trump voter himself, Ojeda has recently moved visibly to the left on social issues: a tattooed, buzz-cut, ex-military, former social conservative, he brought down the house at an Rally for Women’s Lives outside the statehouse while teachers chanted inside. Confessing his changed position on abortion rights, he said his “life would end” if he ever lost his wife to pregnancy complications. At the same time his appeal underscores a danger of turning working class action in the state back toward a populist game of ping-pong between two ruling class parties.

Justice’s move to the Republicans and Ojeda’s move to the left represent opposing trajectories of West Virginia’s historically mixed partisanship – a kind of ruling class centrist consolidation around the far-right-led Republican Party and the possibility of left populism in the Democratic Party. The teachers’ strike exposed the weakness of right-populism in the state, rooted mostly in folksy aesthetic put-ons by energy execs like Justice and attacks on women’s rights like the ongoing attempt to ban abortion in the state. First, disappointed by “3rd wave” Democrats using coalition politics to attack workers’ rights and livelihoods it’s increasingly clear to teachers that Republicans are not the solution, but part of the problem that will not be solved through friendly local demeanor and promises of trickle-down prosperity. On the picket line, issues of women’s and queer rights seemed low priority, but also surprisingly uncontroversial. While there was an obvious effort to bridge differences between “socially liberal” and “socially conservative” strikers, a live and let live attitude held sway. A few clocked me as some kind of gay and told me about lesbians they knew and loved or at least liked and tolerated.

At the same time, a glance at the history of state politics and the history of teachers’ struggles there helps to explain the weakness of the Democratic Party; for twenty-two years, Democrats were the party primarily responsible for underfunding PEIA even after teachers settled the 1990 strike in good faith with an unfulfilled “plan” to fix rising health care costs. If teachers make good on their frequently repeated chant-threat to unsympathetic statehouse politicians that they will “vote [you] out,” and vote Democrats in, its is apparent that they are likely to quickly register and reject Democratic betrayal. Nothing inspires action like winning. It seems unlikely that teachers will wait again for three decades to see if underfunded post-strike promises are fulfilled. The basis for a new political paradigm has been laid and suspicion of the Democratic Party has not been alleviated. That

said, the intimacy and influence of direct contact with politicians means people have a “wait and see” attitude and openness to any politician who will take up their concerns, rather than a hardened stance against ruling class parties.

Even in their success, we saw how this particular relationship to the state curbed the scope of the teacher’s probable victories. The deal they cut, for instance, does not fully address PEIA funding. Instead, in a move that echoes the conclusion of the previous WV teachers strike 28 years ago, it grants a temporary freeze on hikes and promises to establish a committee that will investigate the issue of full funding. Meanwhile, Governor Justice and other WV Republicans floated the idea (not written into the teacher pay bill) that the raise would be funded through Medicare cuts. West Virginia strike leaders insist that plan is a non-starter for them, that it goes “against everything they struck for.” It seems to be still just a rumor, but one that demonstrates politicians’ real and grounded fear that classwide and statewide unity between respectable teachers and people addicted to opiates, between public employees and the unemployed could get well out of hand.

Though the deal passed through the senate this week doesn’t fully address the question of PEIA funding, Republican lawmakers insist that they plan to take state worker pay raises out of the hide of Medicare recipients in the state. To be clear, the pay raise bill doesn’t specify any Medicare funding cuts. Concretely, one possibility is that the networks of social reproduction already organized in the victory of an across-the-board pay raise, along with the relationships reinforced through a social strike, can empower teachers to escalate actions that could break through the balanced budget consensus.

One reason Republican divide-and-rule baiting about Medicaid and a drug epidemic draining the state of resources found fairly weak purchase in the soil of teacher politics is the degree to which teachers and school staff are not only personally familiar with but socially intertwined with the state’s most poor and vulnerable. At the same time, nothing impresses like success; its possible that the teachers example will embolden other groups of workers in the public as well as private sectors. Already, we’ve seen CWA (Communications Workers of America) members who work at Frontier Communications take strike action, now on its 8th day.

Social Reproduction Strikes and the Limits of the Possible

What happens next in West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, and California has broader strategic consequences. It remains an open question if strikes at the point of social reproduction can push the past the the horizons of contemporary American politics: “balanced” budgets that shift costs between different sectors of the proletariat. Can the rolling wave of teacher strikes clear a path toward the political recomposition of the American working class?

The victory in West Virginia is already a startling display of the power and promise of broad based solidarity. It was organized, crucially, through the intergenerational memories of solidarity in struggle. Popular unity from below was also built through the classwide demands raised by school workers. Winning an across-the-board pay raise for all public employees, after rejecting a deal that tried to pit striking education workers against the rest of the state, proved to be a strategic wager worth repeating across the country. Finally, the strike was socialized because of its location at a concentrated point of reproduction: schools. Like other care workers, school employees often have possess highly articulated relationships with a wide range of society. Schools and hospitals simply interface with more people than most other workplaces do, at least in an immediate sense. That these workplaces are connected to other ‘kinship networks’ mean that there’s an imminent possibility that they can be activated politically, becoming a privileged site of class organization.

Now teachers across the country will test whether the West Virginia model can be made a pathway

to victories in health care, working conditions and the deteriorating character of social life outside of schools. These teachers share the overlapping pressures of reproducing themselves, their families and their students along with the increasing intensification and deskilling of work. Like their predecessors in Appalachia, they have deployed social media as an arena of organization, where the appeals of a militant minority is echoed by comments from West Virginia teachers egging them on. In both Oklahoma and Arizona, teachers have already pushed back on union leaders' moderating suggestions, such as a late-semester strike date and rolling walkouts, opting instead for sooner, more militant strike action. All over the map, it seems that all are just as "fed up" and "fired up" as those in WV.

But this new trench of struggles is unfolding in states that are bigger, more diverse demographically and economically, and often with state governments that have been solidly red from top-to-bottom for almost a decade. As a result, each has been a "Right-to-work" state for at least ten years, and has a deeper history of racist, sexist and xenophobic legislation that will make building unity within the strike, as well as potentially beyond it, more difficult than in WV. For these reasons, the strike action is also potentially more powerful.

With these challenges, it remains to be seen to what degree strikes there can repeat the social aspects of the WV teachers strike that built public support for and accountability from striking teachers from the ground up. A deep culture of solidarity explicitly rooted in a history of struggle is hard to replicate. That too may have to be built from the group up, though, as in West Virginia, inspiration may be located in the repressed histories of these states and revived for this moment. A second, even partial, victory for Oklahoma or another of these looming strikes will mean a "wave" is well underway - and perhaps, after decades of defeat, not just the labor movement but the working class has turned a corner, led by women striking for our lives and theirs.

**Names with asterisks changed for those who preferred to keep their quotes anonymous. This report is based on 15 formal, open-ended interviews with strikers including teachers, two bus drivers, one long-term substitute and one teacher's aid. It's also based on 35 informal conversations with strikers and supporters of the strike.*

Originally posted at Viewpoint Magazine.