

Return of the Strike: The Teachers Rebellion in the United States: A Forum



A Forum on the Teachers Rebellion in the United States with Tithi Bhattacharya, Eric Blanc, Kate Doyle Griffiths, Lois Weiner. Edited and introduced by Jeffery R. Webber

Few anticipated a labour upsurge in the United States in early 2018, and fewer still expected a blaze to ignite among teachers in West Virginia, or for it to spread to Oklahoma, Arizona, Kentucky, and Colorado. Ellen David Friedman poses one of the questions which immediately springs to mind: “why is this stunning revolt occurring where unions are weak, where labor rights are thin, and where popular politics are considered to be on the Right?” [\[1\]](#)

Just last year, the United States registered the second lowest number of work stoppages involving 1,000 or more strikers since data collection began in the Department of Labour in 1947. There were only seven such stoppages in 2017, amounting to a total of 440,000 idle days. [\[2\]](#) Between January and May 2018, the tide turned, largely as a result of the teachers’ revolt: 16 work stoppages, 556,200 workers involved, and 1,885,200 idle days. [\[3\]](#)

On the back of three fierce decades of neoliberal restructuring, the austerity measures implemented in the wake of the Great Recession eroded the world of work still further.

There were 68,000 state government jobs cut between 2009 and late 2016, alongside 418,000 at the local government level. Teachers, especially, were in the line of fire. 'While between 2008 and 2015 the number of students rose by 804,000,' Kim Moody points out, 'the number of teachers fell by 297,000 – with women accounting for the majority of these workers.'[\[4\]](#) For those still employed, wages and benefits have been ruthlessly scaled back. Job security has been reduced, with the lengthening of probation periods and weakening of tenure systems. Meanwhile, austerity measures have annihilated provisions for student services and public school building infrastructure has been left to decay. Ideologically, a bipartisan pact between Republicans and Democrats has underpinned 'the hysterical drumbeat that public schools are failing and must be replaced with private charters.'[\[5\]](#)

At a more general level, unions have been in structural decline in the United States, and where they have survived they have often been refashioned into business unions, inclined above all to cooperation with bosses and the state. In the private sector, union membership was only 7.6 percent in 2015, with the public sector membership down as well, to 35.2 percent. Union membership overall has declined 45 percent since the 1970s, while strike activity has fallen an astonishing 95 percent.[\[6\]](#) Across the working class, living standards and working conditions have declined, while work has been intensified and degraded through myriad managerial innovations. Hourly and weekly real wages sit below their 1972 level.[\[7\]](#)

On the one hand, the public education sectors endures as a stronghold of unionization within this otherwise bleak landscape. The National Education Association (NEA) is the largest union in the country, with 3.2 million members, while the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) has a further 1.7 million.[\[8\]](#) On the other hand, the bureaucratization of teachers' unions has run in tandem with the turn to business

unionism elsewhere. 'By the 1980s,' David Friedman notes, 'as the numbers of unionized teachers swelled and dues revenue soared, the unions began to staff up and professionalize, precipitating a culture of negotiating instead of fighting, servicing instead of organizing, and relegating members to client status... leaders adopted key principles such as rule by experts, inflated executive salaries, limits on internal democracy, centralization of decision-making, and intolerance of dissent.'[\[9\]](#) For Chris Brooks, likewise, 'the staff-driven, top-down structure of the state associations leaves many teachers and school support personnel feeling only loosely connected to the union,' which helps to explain why in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Arizona, walkouts and rallies were dependent upon alternative, rank-and-file organizations to the union, even when the union itself was involved to varying degrees.[\[10\]](#)

This forum provides both panoramic and fine-grained analyses of the teachers' rebellion, with the discussion spanning everything from large-scale structural conditions to local-level strategies of organization. We examine the relations between union bureaucracies and the rank and file; the wider political context of the United States and how it has conditioned the roll out of the struggle thus far; the geography of the strike and the specificity of the public education sector; the immediate and longer-term grievances underlying the eruption; the relationship between spontaneity and organization in the dynamic of the strikes; the role of specific cultural contexts and labour histories in the different states; the factors involved in strategies and tactics jumping from one state to another; the centrality of social reproduction and the politics of gender; the politics of race and racism in shaping the terrain of conflict; and the potentialities and obstacles facing the teachers in the coming months and years, as well as what it all means for the labour movement more generally in the United States.

Jeffrey Webber: Could you begin by briefly describing your political and intellectual formation and reflect on how this background has affected your engagement with and perception of the strike wave.

Tithi Bhattacharya (TB): I grew up in a staunch Communist Party (CP) family in India in the 1970s. For me, strikes were called by 'Parties' as opposed to labour unions. In my experience political parties, of the left and the right, called strikes, they were often one-day affairs, and were very much managed by political leaders from above. I was too young to remember the brilliant Railway Strike of 1974—very much led by a militant labour union—so my first encounter with a strike of a different order was the Bombay textile strike of 1982. It was majestic: involved hundreds and thousands of workers in India's commercial centre and posed a real threat to the Indira Gandhi government. I remember my parents saying that its defeat was equivalent to the defeat of the miners by Thatcher. It is not that I understood what a struggle from below is, or the power of rank and file organizing, but I knew that the textile strike was different. Later, when I became a Trotskyist and understood the politics of a rank and file strategy, it was the 1982 strike that sutured experience to analysis for me. The teacher's strikes this spring, and the effect of this strike wave in other sections of the labour movement, is history reminding capitalism of the power of workers and the power of the self-activity of ordinary workers over the bureaucratic power of union leaders.

Eric Blanc (EB): I come from a family of teachers, labour militants, and socialists. I began organizing around public education issues in high school in San Francisco, followed by the University of California, Santa Cruz. After graduating from college, I was a high school teacher in the East Bay and I was an organizer in various movements in defence of public education in California. As a socialist, I've always seen these struggles as part of broader movement of working people

against capitalist exploitation. I'm now a doctoral student in sociology at NYU, which has given me some new institutional resources to conduct sustained research on the labour movement and public education struggles in particular.

Kate Doyle Griffiths (KDG): I come from a family with ties to the labour movement and to some extent socialist/communist politics as well as a decidedly feminist sensibility and tradition of women working in health and education; as a teen I was very interested in campaign finance reform and questions of democracy. I was radicalized in 1999, when 'teamsters and turtles' – an alliance between local Seattle teamsters and an international coalition of environmentalists and anarchists—played a starring role in shutting World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle through direct action. It seemed to me then to mark that a kind of political engagement through direct action was possible in the present and shifted my political interest toward the potentially transformative power of the labour movement and worker struggle. I promptly transferred to NYU in part because, at the time, it was the site of a well-developed anti-sweatshop campaign by United Students Against Sweatshops (USAS.) There, I became heavily involved in a group called Students for Social Equality, through which we supported graduate worker union agitation with the UAW and other campus union activity, USAS, and the antiwar movement, among other things. We thought it was important to introduce the idea of local campus and community-based student-labour solidarity into USAS's national agenda and succeeded in doing that. So, the kinds of issues that are driving the wave of teacher strikes have long been the things that have motivated me politically.

During this period, I was involved with Union Summer in a campaign on the Gulf Coast, and a bunch of organizing drives in New York City, I met a pretty large variety of socialist activists, including grad student militants from the socialist organization Solidarity, who were initially described to me by

a UAW staffer as 'the radicals from the History department,' and not meant in a positive light. I was a History major myself, so I figured I should meet them. The department at the time was staffed by an incredible array of marxist historians who led seminars I was lucky to be able to participate in; Robin D.G. Kelley was the chair, and I got to take classes with him as well as with Marilyn Young, Molly Nolan, Manu Goswami and Elizabeth Esh, sometimes more than once. I took a Gender Studies minor, and the periodization of the women's movement and the framework for debates I learned then from Lisa Duggan is still the one that I teach. It was a formative experience of learning about a range of Marxist, feminist, anti-racist analysis in concrete historical contexts, from politically committed intellectuals who were also women and/or scholars of colour. It was important, I think, for seeing myself in that role. Solidarity's commitment to the development of that kind of politics in practice shaped me indelibly, as has the mentorship and example of comrades who are probably too numerous to name or fully explicate within this word count. I'm no longer a member, but it would be hard to overstate the impact the group had on my intellectual and political disposition. Through the New York University History department, and Solidarity, I not only got an education in the history of the socialist movement (broadly anarchist, Communist Party USA, Trotskyist/post-Trotskyist) and labour movements, the women's movement, the anti-war movement, and to the radical black tradition but also a lot of exposure to theories and practices for organizing.

For a period after graduation, I worked as a staff organizer and fundraiser for Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU), an exciting thing for me because that was when I learned about the role that caucusing and fights for union democracy had played as a kind of 'hidden script,' making the Seattle moment of militancy possible, along with the relationship between rank and file organizing and the 1997 UPS strike, one of the few class-conscious bright spots in USA labour history during

the period of my lifetime. Awareness of that 90's moment of struggle certainly situated my interest in teacher strikes from that period and their relationship to what is taking place today.

This background affected my engagement with the strike wave on a number of other, different levels; it attuned me to the difference between the first deal announced in West Virginia and the comments and assessments of rank and file teachers I encountered online; enough to make me get on a plane before a full blown wildcat had been put into action. My political and academic background primed me to see the possibility of a broader wave of strikes, to see them as a potential turning point for the workers' movement, and to hold out faith in the capacity of rank-and-file workers to organize workplace and social networks toward active solidarity in ways that might from the outside seem sudden, and in advance of their expression, unlikely. In South Africa during the period I lived and researched there, similar strikes in the public sector paved the way to widespread and ongoing rank and file action in the private sector, which anticipated and constitutes ongoing political crises for the ruling ANC; this shaped my attention to the role of state-employed workers in acting as a transmission belt, who are in a position to turn a broad crises of social reproduction into a political confrontation between workers and the ruling class precisely because the state, here, is also the boss. South Africa attuned me to the lessons this might hold for workers more broadly and the possibility that the strike may spread. All this also shaped my approach in situ; while I'm always interested in the experiences of formal and self-identified leaders, I was most interested in learning about how the strike was organized and why, where the organization and political line emerged, from the perspective of teachers and other workers who were running the carpools, pickets, student lunches, school-wide voting, and t-shirt design.

Lois Weiner (LW): As an undergraduate in the 1960s, I was immersed in movement politics: anti-war, civil rights and labour, attracted to the ideas of 'socialism from below' and 'third camp socialism.' I trained to become a high school teacher. I taught journalism, English and was a union activist for fifteen years in public schools in California, suburbs of New York, and last in New York City. In New York City's United Federation of Teachers (UFT), I was a building leader, active in city-wide union politics. I later became a college professor and teacher educator, specializing in urban teaching. In 2003, I began to read widely about neoliberalism's global transformation of work and education and began a collaboration with Mary Compton, former president of the UK's National Union of Teachers (NUT), to support teacher union resistance globally. Our edited collection, *The Global Assault on Teaching, Teachers, and Teachers Unions: Stories for Resistance* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) initiated many projects to develop teacher union solidarity internationally and push the international confederation of teachers unions, the Education International, to break with its cooperative relations with the World Bank and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Part of that work was Mary's creation of www.teachersolidarity.com, which a collective has managed since her death. Simultaneous to my research on neoliberalism's global project in education, I again became a union activist, in my higher education local, making equality of adjunct faculty a key principle. The global and local work were key in my producing *The future of our schools: Teachers unions and social justice* (Haymarket Press, 2012), which is being used in the Anglophone world by teachers who see the need for better unions.

This strike wave has demonstrated an intensity and scale of self-activity and organization of workers we have not seen in the US in decades and has confirmed the driving principle of my lifetime of union work, Marx's dictum 'the emancipation of

the working class must be the act of the working class itself.' It has also demonstrated the power of ideas that I first experienced in the women's movement in the 1970s, understandings about social relations that have supported my lifetime commitment as a socialist and political activist.

The strike wave is evidence that teaching is real work and teachers are real workers. It is a needed corrective about the marginalization of education as a field of study and analysis for the Left, beyond those directly in the schools. Education has low status within the academy because it is an applied subject – the academy rewards the abstract and theoretical – but also because education is women's work. Teaching is not valued labour in the academy, a reality demonstrated in many ways, from the low pay adjunct faculty receive to the assumption that faculty need no preparation to teach.

Though the strikers have not identified the movement as being feminist, the broad support of the strike among teachers reflects the #metoo movement's rebirth of feminist consciousness. Elementary school teachers, who are one-third of the teaching force, are overwhelmingly female. They are generally not interested in politics and become teachers because they love and want to work with children. My earliest union work taught me that when a union is democratic and encourages voice, and when elementary school teachers see the union supports their commitment to be present for 'their kids,' they support militant action. Neither democracy nor support for non-monetary concerns has characterized teachers unions for many years, because of their embrace of business unionism.

As a union activist, I was often not sure about how to address racism, but as an educator of city teachers, I've learned from and with my colleagues of colour about how to address the unions' silence about systemic racism in education. In the Oklahoma and Kentucky strikes, race and racism were unspoken.

Yet Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Louisville were all strongholds of the walkouts and have African American communities that have uneasy relationships with teachers' unionism. Arizona's intense anti-immigrant politics have been inseparable from the Right's attack on public education. I've found that race doesn't emerge as a subject in union discussions unless those of us who are alert to racism's salience and are outside the union but support its struggles push on it.

Because of my background as an educational researcher, I've tried to correct the lack of analysis about how teachers' work has been altered by the project to privatize the education sector. The other aims have been to diminish access to higher education and control what is taught, synchronizing education with capitalist economic and social relations assumed (by the ruling class) to be inevitable.

JW: Each of you has conducted analytical reportage from the scene of one or more of the different strikes which constitute this ongoing cycle. Can you explain which strikes you have covered and what your point of entry was into each of them?

TB: When it was clear that something was going to happen in West Virginia, I just got in my car and started to drive. If this was going to be the first wild cat strike in decades, led by and shaped by hundreds of women, I had to be there. My friend, the feminist journalist, Sarah Jaffe gave me the names of the teachers that she had spoken with in a recent interview. One of them was Jay O'Neil. I did not know then that I was about to meet someone who was one of the first to start a process of organizing that was going to become this tsunami.

After my time in West Virginia, undoubtedly one of the best weekend of my life, I slowly began to speak with other teachers and education activists around the country. This was not because I had some genius inkling that the West Virginia strike would spread. It was the outpouring of solidarity from

teachers and workers in other states that I witnessed while at that statehouse in WEST VIRGINIA. As one Arizona teacher later told me 'when they did it, I know we could too.' So this was why I again just got in the car and drove to Louisville, Kentucky where, thanks to the contacts shared with me by Lois Weiner, I met some fantastic teachers who were fighting a difficult battle of organizing against a racist bill that was being tacked on to the bill that attacked teachers' pensions.

EB: I was Jacobin's on-the-ground correspondent during the West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona strikes and I helped organize national solidarity efforts to support the strikers. In part due to my experience as a teacher and as an activist, strike leaders in West Virginia and Arizona gave me access to their organizing meetings and Facebook groups.

KDG: Unfortunately, I have only been able to travel, so far, to West Virginia. I have developed phone contact and conversation with a few different activists and organizers in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona and Colorado. My point of entry to each was, to be honest, Facebook. In retrospect this makes sense given how much organizing has taken place on Facebook and Twitter; I was able to read comments and debates from rank and file West Virginia teachers, who were the first people to alert me that an initial victory might not be all that it seemed, and that teachers were talking wildcat. Since then, and as facebook discussion in new strike states has gotten to be more public I've been able to keep up with the online teacher debate. That said, my new contacts in states beyond the first strike have come largely through online feminist and queer networks; people I already 'knew' through non-labour and largely non-hard-left internet spaces, including in one case an online discussion group for atheist mothers. Of course, for left contacts in each area on and off-line left contacts and relationships are also quite important.

But there is really no substitute for being there and meeting

people 'IRL.' Because I went to West Virginia primarily as an organizer for the International Women's Strike (IWS), I was initially introduced by my left contacts (from Democratic Socialists of America [DSA] and Working Families Party [WFP]) to liberal feminist activists, from West Virginia Free and Planned Parenthood, those were the first people I met. I could have taken this to be diversionary to my aims of investigating the strike, but instead it furnished me with two crucial insights. First, that even among liberal activists who were habituated to understanding struggle purely in terms of lobbying and elections, the conflict between union staff and leaders and the rank and file was, at least in the moment I arrived, quite apparent and obvious to people who might not be attuned to looking for that. Second, that the struggle by teachers and support staff for wages, health care and resources was taking place concurrently with a direct legislative attack on the rights of women and queer people in West Virginia, and later, I realized, also across the country in states where the strike has spread. It made it easy to identify both the points of convergence and of conflict between a strike framed by its activists as 'not about politics' and the efforts of Democratic Party partisans who were suspicious even of activist women workers because they included among their ranks (as a minority) some of the voters that had helped to turn West Virginia into a 'red' state in the sense of being dominated by Republican Party politics. I found both categories of activist surprisingly open to the more explicitly feminist and political (but nonpartisan) approach of IWS on the one hand, and to the more direct action and class-oriented elements of the IWS framework on the other. Talking to strikers and activists in West Virginia reminded me a lot of liberal-left politics in my home state of Texas, and gave me a lot of hope for the development of a class politics that takes on political issues and which can bring some clarity to the conflicts between 'women' and 'workers' that, in my view, are often artificial and exacerbated by bourgeois political parties and interests.

To me, the most important aspect of the victory in West Virginia was the degree of solidarity, in practice, between teachers, support staff, and other public sector workers. While they weren't able to win concretized gains on health care, just winning a state-wide raise beyond their own pay checks set a tone for the strikes that followed and represent still a high water-mark of the strike; since then teachers have had more difficulty winning broad demands or consolidating them; the element of a successful state-wide wildcat is, I think, what made that possible and makes West Virginia still particular. The goal is to understand dynamics that made that happen and how those can be deepened in West Virginia and elsewhere.

LW: As a career teacher and union activist with a second career as an education researcher and teacher educator, involved in socialist politics and anti-racism work for many years, I'm in many networks of people who don't ordinarily connect with one another. My involvement with radical teachers precedes this strike wave, going back even before I met with Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) activists as they were organizing their campaign to win the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) election. I think of my relationship to the movement as a 'critical friend.' Sometimes my contact with teachers is negotiated by progressive education faculty who work with communities of colour and teachers active in anti-racism and immigrant rights struggles. In several places, teachers have contacted me directly after having read my book.

In the current strike wave, I was put in touch with leaders in two states by a labour activist in the Midwest who admires my work. A teacher active in the Bad Ass Teachers (BATS) in New Jersey is in contact with BATS in almost every state. If I want to become involved, I ask her how to do so. Once I was invited/allowed onto the closed or secret Facebook page I identified myself as a guest and supporter. If I thought I

could help, I offered to do so. As I'm fairly well-known in education circles as a friend to teachers and union supporter, I'm asked to participate in phone calls. I've been involved advising leaders in West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Arizona. North Carolina is not yet on people's radar, but a walkout is in the works there. Organize 2020, a reform caucus already exists and is taking responsibility for the action.

I have seen my role as learning about what is new in this movement and establishing relationships with activists, so I am available to support them when they are ready to tackle transforming the unions. That should be on the agenda, everywhere.

JW: These strikes took place against a historical backdrop of a major decline in union membership in the United States, and a longstanding and debilitating turn toward business unionism. Walkouts often began outside of official unions. Can you explain what part the legacy of business unionism played in different cases, the role of union bureaucracies, and the evolution of relations between the mobilized strikers and their union leaderships over the course of these disputes?

TB: We have all written about the complicated relationship the strikers had to the union. There were three components to that relationship:

(a) a large number of strikers had no union experience, and even less knowledge of labour history;

(b) those that were unionized had a set of expectations from the union. But these were expectations that were about what the union could *deliver* for them, seeing the union as a service provider rather than as a tool for their own struggle. There is a reason for this. The post war 'labour peace' in the US was achieved by capital through a disastrous partnership with unions. The business union model that developed from it was marked by unions negotiating health care and pensions with

private employers for their members. These strikes, whether by unionized workers or non-unionized ones, are an effort to defend those past gains;

(c) when the union leadership failed to 'deliver' that's when a leap in consciousness and struggle was made with strikers defying their union and refusing the mealy compromises the leadership was offering. The other challenge to the business union model posed by these strikes has been in what can be called the 'solidarity model' where in several states including West Virginia and Kentucky, strikers have insisted on fighting for all public sector employees, not just teachers. This is an important blow to a sectoral understanding of struggle and has real potential for the future.[\[11\]](#)

EB: In all of these states, labour-management 'cooperation' has led to concession after concession over the past decades. Instead of building workplace power or strikes, unions have generally focused on public relations campaigns and lobbying Democratic Party politicians.

The initiative for work stoppages in Arizona, Oklahoma and West Virginia clearly came from rank-and-filers, not the top bureaucracy. But relations between the ranks and the union differed considerably in each state.

Many commentators underestimate the importance of unions in West Virginia's strike. Of course, the state-wide Facebook group created by Charleston radicals in November 2017 was a crucial rank-and-file organizing hub throughout the course of the movement. And while it's true that West Virginian unions were weakened by the absence of collective bargaining, the decline of coal, and years of retreats, some of the most influential rank-and-file strike leaders were elected local representatives of their unions.

These leaders, including the local union presidents,

functioned like shop stewards, since they were still full-time workers. They were able to lean on the existing union infrastructures to organize the strike and to overcome the initial hesitations of the top union officials – and to continue the strike after the labour leaderships prematurely called the strike off after reaching a deal with the governor.

In contrast, Oklahoma's rank-and-file activists had virtually no base in the unions, which made it much harder for them to cohere a militant network to drive the strike forward. This lack of roots in the unions – combined with their lack of organizing experience generally – pushed Oklahoman rank-and-file leaders to rely very heavily on Facebook, a useful but limited mobilizing tool. It also facilitated an often unproductively antagonistic relationship with the union. As such, Oklahoma did not experience the months of build-up actions and school-by-school strike votes that played such a key role in building, unifying, and legitimizing the West Virginia action. In Oklahoma, the rank-and-file's level of organization at the workplace remained weak, even after the strike began.

Through strategic clarity and tactical creativity, Arizona's rank-and-file group – Arizona Educators United (AEU) – not only surpassed the level of rank-and-file organization reached by West Virginia, it built an organization almost double the size of the official education union. The organizational strength and legitimacy of AEU transformed it into a body resembling a bona-fide trade union more than a loose rank-and-file network.

Part of the reason for this anomalous development is that the wariness or hostility that labour officials tend to display toward militant rank-and-file movements was generally absent in Arizona. In other words, a critical factor enabling the rise of AEU has been the active support of the Arizona Education Association (AEA), Arizona's official educators' union. Various AEU leaders and site liaisons are also local

AEA union activists. More surprisingly, the top union leadership also backed the rank-and-file movement.

'Teachers are the drivers of this bus, we're steering the struggle,' noted AUE leader Rebecca Garelli. 'But the union is our parallel and it has really supported us.' Whether this dynamic will continue now that the strike has ended remains to be seen.

KDG: The most important and overriding failure of business unionism that is relevant here is the failure to meaningfully challenge the right-to-work[\[12\]](#) labour regime when it was limited to the South and broadly the failure to organize the unorganized or push back against labour laws that often outlaw strike action and even collective bargaining for public sector workers. This is tied to a second, crucial error, the commitment of the organized labour movement to operate as a source of funding and foot soldiers for a Democratic Party that has failed to defend unions against a four decade long ruling class offensive, and which, in the particular situation of teachers, has often led the charge.

That has set the context of the strikes; in some cases right-to-work is a very recent development, and in most cases statehouses dominated by Democrats initiated the cuts to wages, health care and funding in education starting in the late eighties and early nineties. It put teachers unions in very marginal position when teachers and support staff began to move; the idea that the union could or should be the place to organize that movement was pretty far removed from most people's experience and instinct. As a result, most of the teachers I have spoken with see unions as useful when they have followed and consolidated teacher demands, and often as a positive resource in the legal defence of teachers, for striking unlawfully and in regular workplace disputes. On the other hand, when unions have pushed for premature deals and a slower process of escalation, teachers have seen them as a source of conservatism and at times betrayal. Union

leaderships themselves, where they don't have bargaining power, industry density or the legal right to strike, have a hard time positioning themselves as the only or main legitimate leaders of the teacher struggle, and have a lot of catch up work to do in terms of educating members and potential members about the internal democratic mechanisms that exist within unions, if that's a goal. Of course, current union leaders have a contradictory interest in terms of seeking new members while not necessarily encouraging those new and newly activated to run for office as political opponents in future union elections. Instead, they have tended to push teachers into less confrontational and more symbolic action, and toward state-wide and national government elections as the arena for long term change, while also playing a crucial role as bargaining agent, albeit an agent whose only power to bargain is directly derived from the more militant actions led and propagated by teachers themselves, given their legally marginal role as minority representatives without collective bargaining rights.

To me, that means that the left, and newly activated and organized teachers are the main potential source for any organized attempt at spreading and deepening strike action, and for consolidating the lessons and victories of the strikes.

LW: This question is very important because it asks us to look critically at the unions, which makes many on the Left uncomfortable. As I've written elsewhere and told activists, if the unions had been doing what they should, the Facebook pages and the movement they spawned wouldn't have been needed. The vast majority of teachers in these states are not union members, and they give reasons familiar to teachers in most districts, not only in Red states: the unions are invisible in the schools and seem irrelevant to teachers' lives. Facebook provided the forum and organizing space most of their state teachers unions would not. With one exception, discussion and decision-making on the FB pages were

extraordinarily democratic, especially in contrast to the secretive functioning of officers and staff of the state unions. Still, local union activists, on the county level and in cities, especially in West Virginia, were often key in coordinating the energy and activism of the Facebook pages.

In addition to defining their purpose primarily as protecting members' narrowly conceived economic interests, business unions construct a very limited role for the workers they represent. Members are passive, with limited authority and voice. Their sole 'power' is to pay dues and cast votes in what are generally uncontested elections for officers. The implicit arrangement is that members do what the experts (staff and officers) tell them and in return, the union delivers at least modest economic gains in contract negotiations. Even under the best of circumstances, the union is limited in what it can 'deliver' to improve teachers' work lives (and the quality of education) because collective bargaining laws strictly limit what can be negotiated. Many issues teachers care most about, like selection of teaching materials, fall outside the scope of bargaining. These issues have become increasingly important as teachers' work has been transformed: standardized testing and 'data driven instruction,' methods of surveillance and control, have reduced autonomy and increased work load while reducing time for interactions with students that actually help them. Regulations that 'push in' students with special needs without providing needed supports create tremendous stress for teachers. 'Merit' pay based on 'performance,' defined as scores on standardized tests, means that those who teach the students with most needs are under the most pressure, yet the conditions in their schools are often the worst.

Though they differ in their rhetoric, in practice both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA) act on the assumption that gains are won through the personal relations highly-placed union officials

have with politicians who are 'friends of labour.' This disempowers members and encourages passivity. The strikes have shown that we need organization that gives access to politicians to realize our economic and political demands. We also need mobilization to make that access happen.

JW: With regard to the wider political context, these strikes have taken place against a backdrop of contradictory trends in the United States. On the one hand, the last several years have witnessed the Occupy Movement, the immigrant rights movement, the Wisconsin protests, the Chicago teachers' strike, Black Lives Matter (BLM), the Fight for Fifteen, Me Too (#metoo), the International Women's Strike (IWS), the politicization of new layers of young people around the Bernie Sanders campaign, and the concomitant growth of socialist organizations – especially the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) – among other dynamics. On the other hand, we have witnessed the bankruptcy of Hilary Clinton and the ascendancy of Donald Trump. Many of the teacher strikes are occurring in Red states, controlled by the Republicans. What role has this political backdrop played? What are the dynamics of party politics in all of this? To what extent could the November 2018 pull of electoralism – a call to vote for the Democrats – stifle the nascent growth of a fighting, rank-and-file infrastructure in the labour movement in these states and others?

TB: Many of the social movements you list – Occupy, BLM, IWS etc – are non-workplace struggles. The CTU strike and Fight for 15, being the two big exceptions. It is also a list of movements most of which emerged from the wreckage of the crash of 2008-09 (the immigrant right movement slightly preceded it). I see the following as challenges to how we, as the Left, understand, prognosticate and participate in the struggles ahead:

Naming: We must jettison the notion once and for all that only struggles at the point of production can bear the name of

class struggles. All the social movements of the last decade or so are examples of the US working class responding to the various dynamics of capitalist social relations.

Expressions: Politicization of the class, then, has been rapid if somewhat uneven, but the expressions of this politicization has remained largely sectoral. The various struggles, important exceptions exist, have not generalized their issues/demands beyond immediate goals or made conscious efforts to seek allies.

Tools: The above two challenges are themselves shaped by a third: What tools exist with which the class can fight against capital? This is the vital question of organization. The tools that the working class traditionally used in its battles—unions, socialist/communist party forms – have been spectacularly weak since the 1980s. In the US, their place has been taken by business unions, liberal NGOs masquerading as the radical left and by the Democratic Party. This legacy of progressive neoliberalism is not going to disappear overnight, and so the election, or voting for progressive Democrats, is definitely going to be seen, at least in the near short term, as a political alternative.

EB: Partly out of conviction, and mostly out of electoral opportunism, the Democratic minority in the legislatures of West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona consistently supported the strikers' basic demands. One of the most common chants throughout the strikes was, 'We'll remember in November.'

On the one hand, the strikers' political intuition is correct. Protests aren't enough. To systematically transform social priorities requires political power. Given this fact, and the role played by local Democrats during the strike, it's understandable that most teachers and staff will enthusiastically vote for Democrats in November.

The problem, of course, is that the Democratic Party is a

party of Capital – not a party of, or for, the working class. Not only have past attempts to ‘take back’ the Democratic Party failed, but such efforts often played a critical role in demobilizing and defanging unions and social movements in the 1930s and 1960s. Sentiment to pivot to the November elections also played an important role in undercutting the potential for a more prolonged strike in Kentucky, Oklahoma and Arizona.

Of course, we shouldn’t minimize the importance of electoral politics in an advanced capitalist democracy like the US. The Bernie Sanders campaign in many ways laid the foundation for these strikes by radicalizing and cohering a new generation of socialists. And the whole political dynamic in the US would be different if we had a real workers’ party, something like the Labour Party led by Corbyn in the UK. But there’s a danger that this historic labour upsurge will get channeled into traditional Democratic Party politics; the turn to electing Democrats this November could really undercut the momentum generated by these strikes.

West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona have demonstrated that mass struggle can win major gains no matter who is in power. Even if most workers vote for Democrats in November, the labour movement will be in a better position to defend the interests of working people if it mobilizes independently and resists absorption into the Democratic Party. Maintaining the political independence of the unions and the broader movement is a burning question – and the question of building a mass workers’ party remains a necessary strategic horizon.

KDG: This backdrop has played a mixed role, to some extent crystallized in the politics and role of the DSA. For the ‘movement’ backdrop, it’s clear to me that Occupy, the Dakota Pipeline Access Protests (NoDAPL), BLM, the Immigrant Rights Movement, the Women’s March and the International Women’s Strike have had significant and in some cases transformative effects on the consciousness of newly radicalizing layers. I think the Day Without An Immigrant (February 16, 2017) and

Occupy, and later, IWS, certainly were among the things that helped to popularize and revitalize a broader understanding of the potential power of strike action (where IWS strikes that shut down whole workplaces happened in 2017, they happened in 'red state' schools districts) ; BLM has invigorated a debate about the class nature of the police and the role of racism in working class organizing that at times has emerged as clearly class conscious rejection of neoliberal 'leadership' of the black movement and a move toward what seems to me to be a transitional, and during the peak of the movement, organic demand to not only reform but abolish the police. IWS has tried to play a similar role in the feminist movement, raising and consolidating 'from below' push back against boss-driven/white/Zionist/trans-and-sexworker-exclusive feminism originally proposed by Democratic Party organizers.

That much of this has become common sense for a newly radicalized layer of socialists and a subject of hot debate in the DSA is promising, almost especially because the source of new membership has been so heavily drawn from white, 'professional' layers of proletarianizing people in their 20's and 30's. It certainly has created new space for leadership of previously sidelined categories of people as well as strains of socialist and Marxist thought.

I think the role the DSA has played as a catchment for this group of people moving left has been mixed, but also quite hopeful. DSA members old and new, and newly politicized teachers inspired by Bernie have played a key role in consolidating strike organizing in West Virginia and elsewhere, and provided some organizational scaffolding that could potentially build the strike in more states, deepen its demands and consolidate the lessons of victory and of defeat. No other socialist organization, or organization generally, in the USA today is in a position to play this role; consolidating networks of teacher activists, propagation techniques for strike action and organization developing and

spreading a strategy for making demands and escalation of struggle to win them through meetings and caravans across state lines, development and dissemination of analysis building a winning strike strategy as well as one for union reform. The level of debate and its wide ranging character seems to be, to me, improving over time and too often hit important notes; about the nature and use of the Democratic Party, the degree of emphasis on elections versus building working class institutions, the class nature of the police, and the relationship between 'identity' categories (like gender, race and disability) and working class oriented politics have all been exciting entry points for discussion fueled by the sense, for the first time in a long time, that the conclusions of these debates might matter, and might have a chance of being put into practice by a critical mass of people willing to do serious organizing work.

But the fact that Bernie made so many new socialists in the context of an Democratic Party electoral campaign and that most of them landed in an organization once almost wholly committed to the realignment of the Democratic Party, and which has historically housed the left-wing of the labour bureaucracy is a double edged sword. It means that the emergence of a truly rank-and-file led strike wave initially focused on winning demands through direct strike action produces some immediate conflicts of interest as well as a tendency to push the struggle toward support for left Democratic candidates as primary solution for achieving reform and toward emphasis on union recruitment (even towards the ends of union democracy and reform) as the immediate goal of socialist organizers relating to the strike.

I'm certainly in favour of both union recruitment and reform, but my ideal socialist intervention would primarily focus on building the strike, and transmitting the lesson that direct action wins even against overtly hostile political majorities

within and beyond the strike. In fact, I think that's the best way to build unions and union reform. I think the goal should be to develop the emerging network of strike leaders – some of which is certainly underway in long standing left-labour institutions like Labor Notes – towards winning greater demands and expanding the strikes already political nature both in terms of the demands themselves and the analysis emerging within leadership networks. Ideally, in part, doing this by building relationships with the working class sections of aforementioned movements, even as those movements themselves have been weakened by elements (within and outside the DSA). These are elements oriented toward Democratic Party elections and legalistic defence and revitalization of feminist, queer and anti -racist non-profit layers of lobbyists and service providers.

In some ways this vision is more immediately achievable in so-called red states where the internal left and Democratic Party debates are less central as immediate questions of elections and individual Democratic politicians, but I'd like to see and I think we are seeing the strike begin to spread to 'blue' cities.

LW: I think a key factor is that Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, although campaigning on diametrically opposed premises about capitalism, refocused attention on job creation and federal policies that could alleviate economic inequality. They implicitly rejected education as the key vehicle for economic progress, the 'one true path out of poverty,' as Arne Duncan phrased the neoliberal project in education. The bipartisan consensus that education is the best or only lever to improve the nation's economic prospects and workers' well-being has been shattered. Moreover, the GOP's and Trump's explicit encouragement of racial, religious, and sexual bigotry, and the mass popular opposition to the new administration that has emerged, have radicalized a new generation, including many teachers. For the first time since

teachers unions won collective bargaining in the 1960s, we are seeing a generation of activist teachers who want to engage in union activity. Many are socialists, in the DSA.

One contradiction post-election is that teachers unions feel pressures from social justice movements, especially Black Lives Movement, that emerged before Trump's victory, to confront the Trump administration, not negotiate with it. The political tightrope NEA and AFT must now walk was illustrated shortly after Betsy DeVos was approved as Trump's Secretary of Education. Parent and community activists blocked DeVos from entering a Washington DC school; AFT President Weingarten tweeted a reprimand to the protestors for blocking the school. She later invited DeVos to visit schools and engage in dialogue; the NEA President issued statements the organization had not decided how to engage with DeVos. Weingarten also met with Steve Bannon before he was ousted, arguing she wanted to 'make the case' for public education. However, both actions show the union leadership's willingness to desert allies when it's convenient.

The on-going challenge for union reformers is negotiating the tensions between defending members on economic concerns while showing parents and students how unions can use organizational strength and political power to defend good schools for their children. One element in the emerging reform caucuses in unions, inspired by the victory of CORE in the Chicago Teachers Union, is the effort to develop new kinds of alliances with parents and community, taking traditional coalition work to a different territory, one that can make unions uncomfortable because they must share power in ways that are often unfamiliar and difficult to manage with legal strictures of collective bargaining. However these alliances, in turn, generate new tactics and strategies. We saw the need for a broad-based political movement in the Red states, to 'up the ante' politically. Though the teachers were militant and united, even when they had organized 'wall to wall' with other

school workers as occurred in West Virginia, despite their having deep parent support, they could not achieve the goals for which they walked out.

These strikes are the first round in a struggle to make space for Left ideas and build a new labour movement in the South. That's why it's vital for the movement to demand that school funding come from increased taxes on corporations and that historic inequalities in education due to race and racism be addressed. The strikes and the movements may be able to generate the critical mass other struggles, like the fight for 'single payer' healthcare and union organizing efforts need. The movements have also been characterized by the hope that once they disband, they can win at the ballot what they couldn't in struggle. This optimism wasn't supported by debate about whom to support and why. It's a phenomenon that shows the inexperience and naivete of the movement. It may be they have to learn through error that electoral politics is a dead end without a mobilized membership and a broad political movement. But remember that many teachers in these walkouts are Republicans. Or rather, were before they started this radicalizing journey. Comments on the Facebook pages were testimony to the power of struggle in altering consciousness.

JW: The geography of the strike wave is interesting beyond the fact that many of the states are controlled by Republicans. For one thing, it is notable that many strikes are unfolding in desperately impoverished states, like West Virginia, Kentucky, and Oklahoma. While the austerity of neoliberalism has been unleashed everywhere in the country, the bite has been particularly hard in states such as these. Cuts to education have been a crucial component of neoliberal restructuring, which perhaps is one part of the explanation for why it is this sector in particular in which there has finally been a labour explosion. Could you speak to the deterioration of the education sector generally in the United States in the past few decades in the context of

neoliberalism? Could you explain the role it has played in fomenting these strikes in general and particularly in the poorest states?

TB: One of the common things teachers always say, and I have heard several strikers say is 'I am not doing this for the money.' We should take this statement seriously, because it is not a sentimental statement but a political one. Primarily it is a tribute to the fact that people choose to be teachers because they are actually happy teaching young people and being around them. Neoliberal school reforms, such as high stakes testing, data driven instructional models, have attacked precisely the joy and dignity a good teacher associates with her classroom. This in addition to the attacks on her wages, health care, and benefits. In most states it is nigh impossible to raise a family on a teacher's salary and teachers, just like preschool workers, often hold down multiple jobs to sustain themselves and their family. Studies show that public school teachers earn 17 percent less than other workers in comparable jobs. The strikes are a call to restore dignity and value to teaching as work and in that they are about the defence of the future of public education as a whole. One of the most popular chants of the West Virginia strike was 'we are worthy', a slogan that beautifully unites the struggle for wages with the struggle for workplace dignity and power.

KDG: I'm from Texas originally, which in many ways has been a particular laboratory for the 'deterioration' of the education sector, which, I think, should not be only understood as a simple matter of underfunding. There are two levels here of underlying conditions for the strike; first a broad crisis of social reproduction which is particularly acute in 'red' states, particularly those with large urban populations, and, second, a specific assault on education. Both have been intensely bipartisan affairs, particularly but not exclusively in 'red' states.

I have argued, along with others developing an analysis of Social Reproduction Theory, that work centered on social reproduction, like teaching, provides workers with an immediate window and experience of a broader crisis of social reproduction, because they are often both immediately responsible for organizing the paid and unpaid work of reproducing their own (often extended) families in the context of a broad decline in working class security and living standards, and because the nature of their work exposes them on a daily basis to those in even more dire straits, often making them personally responsible for making up for the effects of austerity. In education that means children with less support at home, due to overworked and/underemployed parents, and to those affected by hunger, homelessness and a nation-wide drug epidemic.

I think we've often been less developed and less clear on the specific role of restructuring broadly in the way this social reproduction crisis has played out for teachers. It's not only cuts to education that produce needy students, large class sizes, and lack of access to resources. It's also that educators have been increasingly tasked with the work that might previously have been done in other public sector institutions that have also been hit with austerity and restructuring; increasingly schools and teachers have been made responsible for the health of their students and that has played a role in the intensification of their work, with increasing and specific legal and professional obligations toward students with disabilities and individual health needs. They more systematically encounter immediate health (including mental health) crises that might have been previously addressed first in medical settings. The same can be said for social work, supplementary educational programs, and even within school for arts and physical education programs.

This change in the work process has not only been driven by cuts, but also restructuring in the guise of educational

reform and 'innovation,' the assault on public education is clearly indicated in defunding-focused, overtly racist, Republican-led measures like school district gerrymandering and 'voucher' programs, but also in charterization[13] led mostly by Democrats and piloted in urban districts across the country. Harkening back to the Oceanhill/Brownsville debacle which pitted disproportionately white unionized Brooklyn teachers against politicized black parents advocating to community control, these 'reform' efforts are often highly funded and lucrative for NGO and for-profit networks of schools. Much of the money is poured into Potemkin-like exemplary models of 'new' and small schools, couched in anti-racist progressive educational rhetoric, and buttressed by seemingly objective measures which largely consist of standardized testing. These schools rely on their economic model for deskilling and union busting of teachers, on consolidating formerly distinct areas of work, and increasingly on support staff who are wildly underpaid and whose job categories require less comprehensive educational preparation. The 'model' versions of these school almost universally make the model work by quietly expelling students with lower scores and who require more help, foisting them on the very schools – 'old', unionized, large – public schools they are being compared with and propose to replace. Ironically, in this instantiation, less qualified, younger and whiter teachers are proposed as replacements for unionized older teachers more likely to be women of colour, as black and Latina women in particular have made headway in unionized public sector work.

On the one hand this intensification of work and deskilling, at the centre of a crisis of social reproduction, has created the dire conditions and the consciousness that has propelled people to strike. It has also been the basis for increased solidarity between teachers and support staff, which, when compared to the 90s' iteration of teachers' strikes, has been one of the most crucial aspects of these latest strikes.

Teachers depend in an unprecedented way on support staff, while austerity has only increased the specific strategic power of cooks and bus drivers, who have a concentrated power to shut down schools for safety reasons and put pressure on districts; when drivers and cooks face overwork, overtime, and staff cuts, their ability to shut down an entire school with small numbers of 'sick' or striking workers increases.

On the other hand it's important to recognize that this background phenomena is not geographically centred on poor or red states, but particularly on poor and urban school districts. If anything, this will be the reason strikes are able to spread beyond border-states and the west and to blue coastal states and the Deep South and Midwest via big cities. But to do so, the strikes will have to directly confront Democratic Party machine politics in 'blue' urban islands in red states that are more solidly in the South along with Democrat-dominated states like New York, California, and Illinois.

It will also mean an increasingly practical debate about the degree to which teachers directly confront the role of racism in attacks on public education and its broader role in the crises of social reproduction, some of which came to the fore in Chicago's teacher struggle several years ago.

LW: It's essential to understand neoliberalism's project in education has been global, starting in Chile under Pinochet, endorsed by the World Bank, then spreading to Latin America, Asia, and Africa, enforced by structural adjustment programs of the International Monetary Fund. The World Bank has been explicit that teachers unions have to be weakened or destroyed because they are the greatest threat to the goals of the capitalist elite: privatizing the education sector; eliminating democratic oversight of schools; making teaching a revolving door of low-paid, minimally educated people who will teach to tests over which users of public education have no voice. These goals are cast as improving services for poor

people so teachers unions and teachers are attacked as being enemies of prosperity. It's rather amazing that the teachers unions have for so long not exposed or attacked the ideological grounding of the reforms.

The footprint is essentially the same everywhere, with the worst 'reforms' imposed on those least able to resist.

The most intense, newest forms of exploitation generally occur where there is opportunity, regardless of geography. For example, Hurricane Katrina allowed the federal government and the local ruling class to raze New Orleans' public school system, replacing it with networks of charter schools owned by private operators. It's mostly experienced Black teaching force was fired, replaced in good part by Teach for America recruits – young, white, monolingual females with no previous teaching experience. In the takeovers by state legislatures of city school systems, said to be failing, city residents lose their right to elect school boards and are subjected to an essentially colonial relationship. In Detroit, a city that was taken over by the Michigan legislature, teachers organized their own 'sick out' in 2016 using Facebook, because of abominable conditions in schools that posed health risks for teachers and students, like rat bites, and mould on the floors and walls. Schools in Baltimore lacked heat in the winter. Other than Finland and North Korea, it's hard to think of a country in which teachers have not organized about terrible working conditions in schools, threats to public employee pensions, and salaries that are so low teachers must hold two or three jobs. In Africa, teachers often strike for back wages that have been promised and not paid, for months. Liberia privatized its entire education system until international outcry forced the government to pull back. Conditions we once thought were limited to the global South are now endemic in the US, and not just in large urban districts.

Having pointed out those similarities, I should note what is

unique in the Red states is the explosiveness of the struggles, how quickly the movement grew and spread. One reason is the lack of collective bargaining, which acts as a brake and legal straight jacket but also provides some economic gains. But another factor is the 2016 election and the broad popular resistance to Trump and his policies.

JW: What were the immediate trigger causes of the strikes you're most familiar with? What do these specific grievances reveal about our present moment? How were these specific grievances linked to wider issues and demands over the course of distinct disputes?

TB: Wages, pensions and healthcare have been the immediate triggers for the strikes. But in reality there are two aspects to these strikes. First, as I said above, they are a response to decades of neoliberal attack on wages and benefits on the one hand, and the dignity of the profession on the other; second, while the neoliberal period has seen virulent attacks on public education the period has also been marked by a countervailing tendency— an unprecedented growth in the sectors of social reproduction. Kim Moody has recently assessed that service jobs grew by 14.2 million between 1990 and 2010 and more than half of these jobs have been in the sphere of social reproduction such as social care, health and food services. This has given workers in these sectors – teachers and nurses – unique social power that was bound to run up against their complete lack of political power. The strikes should be seen within this framework because I think we should expect more of them in this sphere.

EB: Since conditions in West Virginia are relatively well known, I'll focus my comments on Oklahoma and Arizona. In both states, the fundamental factors driving educators into action were low pay and brutal cuts to public school funding.

Years of austerity devastated Oklahoma's education system. Since 2008, per-pupil instructional funding has been cut by 28

percent – by far the worst reduction in the whole country. As a result, a fifth of Oklahoma's school districts were forced to reduce the school week to four days.

Textbooks are scarce and scandalously out of date. Innumerable arts, languages, and sports courses or programs have been eliminated. Class sizes are enormous. A legislative deal to lower class sizes – won by a four-day strike in April 1990 – was subsequently ditched because of a funding shortage. Many of Oklahoma's 695,000 students are obliged to sit on the floor in class.

The gutting of public education was accompanied by a push for vouchers and, especially, the spread of charter schools. There are now twenty-eight charter school districts and fifty-eight charter schools across Oklahoma.

Pay, of course, was also a central grievance. Public school teacher pay was the forty-eighth worst in the nation. Like in West Virginia, many teachers were unwilling or unable to work in these conditions. Roughly two thousand teaching positions are currently filled by emergency-certified staff with no teaching degrees and little training. Those teachers and staff who stay in state are often forced to work multiple jobs.

The roots of this crisis are not hard to find. Taxes have not been raised by the Oklahoma legislature since 1990. Due to a right-wing 1992 anti-tax initiative, a supermajority of 75 percent of legislators is now needed to impose new taxes. Yet the need for a supermajority was not a major political issue until very recently, since there was a strong bipartisan consensus in favor of cutting taxes. Some of the first major tax breaks for the rich and corporations began in 2004 under Democratic governor Brad Henry and a Democratic-led Senate. One recent study estimates that \$1 billion in state revenue has been lost yearly due to the giveaways pushed through since the early 2000s.

Republicans swept into the state government in 2010 and promptly accelerated this one-sided class war. Governor Mary Fallin and the Republican legislature slashed income taxes for the rich. They have also passed huge breaks for the oil and gas companies – not a minor issue in a state that is the third-largest producer of natural gas and fifth-largest producer of crude oil in the country. Even the fiscal fallout of the 2014 oil bust did not lead the administration to reverse course.

The mundane brutality of this free-market fundamentalism set the stage for the strike and turned Fallin into one of the country's most unpopular governors, with an approval rating hovering around 28 percent.

In Arizona, the public education system reached a breaking point after years of austerity. Students and educators across the state are faced with the same litany of problems as their colleagues in Oklahoma: excessive class sizes, broken desks, crumbling ceilings, chair shortages, rodent infestations, school buses without air conditioning, and outdated school material.

Arizona salaries are also infamously low. Pay for the state's elementary school teachers ranked fiftieth in the US and high school teachers came in at forty-ninth. When adjusted for inflation, teachers have received a 10 percent pay cut since 2010.

Unsurprisingly, there is a drastic teacher shortage. Roughly 2,000 positions remain vacant and another 3,400 have been filled by individuals who do not have standard teaching credentials. Almost 1,000 teachers have quit since August 2017 alone.

Years of drastic funding cuts also took a toll on Arizona's schools. The state's annual investment in public education was \$1.1 billion lower than it was before the onset of the Great

Recession, which wiped out the housing boom upon which Arizona's tax base had relied. Per-pupil funding plummeted since 2007-08: Arizona currently ranks forty-eighth in the nation.

Though Arizona's funding crisis arose in the wake of the Great Recession, its roots lie much deeper. Two decades of tax breaks for the rich and corporations have been no less damaging.

Since 1990, the Arizona legislature has cut taxes every year but one. According to a recent study, the tax giveaways passed in this period amounted to roughly \$4 billion in lost revenue in 2015. And while Arizona's Republicans have been the main drivers of these policies, the Democratic Party has also been complicit. Democratic governor Janet Napolitano, for instance, partnered with the GOP-dominated legislature in 2006 to push through \$500 million in tax breaks.

These cuts went hand in hand with one of the most concerted privatizing offensives in the country. About 17 percent of Arizonan students currently attend a charter school – more than three times the national average.

KDG: I've emphasized elsewhere the role of a particular preventative health program – Go 365 – on triggering the strike in West Virginia. The voluntary program asked teachers to upload sensitive health data – including body measurements and sexual activity – to a third party provider. Teachers made it into a joke, but it was clearly humiliating and I was honestly inspired by their response, both rejecting the invasion of privacy and bodily autonomy and the widespread sense, derived from the progression of innovations in work, that 'voluntary' now could only mean 'required' in the future.

Broadly, the defunding of teacher health care was crucial in most of the states that have gone on strike, followed by teacher pay as the most central concern. Again, Democrats led

the way with their active development of Health Maintenance Organisations (HMOs) and defunding of public workers health funds over the last three decades; in Colorado and Oklahoma deep austerity enforced by Republicans led to the drastic measure of reducing teachers paid work days, as states formally recognized the degree to which teachers continued ability to work as teachers is completely dependent on having multiple part time jobs and threatened by having little time to pursue these supplementary wages. In what we've seen so far, wages and school funding are the easiest to win, and health care funding the hardest (though any sort of win has so far been predicated on the rank and files willingness to push past the union leaderships' inclination to settle quickly and walk away from strikes before the ink is dry; where this hasn't happened or happened yet, there are no results to show). This is precisely because teachers linked their wages to a broad sense of solidarity with other public sector workers and with their students. From the beginning teachers emphasized this solidarity across categories of work, beyond education and with their communities, both rhetorically and with social reproduction strike tactics, including taking over the daily obligations of schools to provide lunch for children who depend on it.

Broadly this tells us that the crises of social reproduction that set the stage for strikes is in many way fundamentally a struggle for bodily autonomy, in a collective sense. I think it's hard to overestimate the importance – often triggering – of this basic dignity in any workers struggle, but teachers' strikes make this extremely apparent.

LW: The strikes have focused on economic issues, take-home pay and school funding. I'm not persuaded these issues should be identified as 'triggers.' Strikes are never just about money. They're about the desire for dignity and respect for one's work, feeling valued. Wages, money is how we show value in capitalism, so it's the natural demand for workers to take

up first. But dissatisfaction about wages doesn't by itself produce strikes or militancy. What I saw on the Facebook pages was an astounding development of political consciousness. Someone would post 'Where is the money going to come from to pay for the salary increase?' and, bam, we were off in exchanges about who should pay for public services and why, the control of the Koch brothers and the Right of the state legislature. Note that many of the striking teachers self-identify as Republicans and conservatives. The dynamic of the struggle was to radicalize them. Each time the right-wing governor issued a statement belittling and ridiculing the teachers, you'd see an explosion of rage, postings saying 'I voted for him and now don't see how I made that mistake. It's not one I'll make again.' Still, I also saw 'Trump wouldn't have done that' on the West Virginia page. So consciousness was very mixed.

The strikes with more politically conscious leadership, Arizona and West Virginia, had more sophisticated discussions about political options. These leaders understood that the strikes had to include all school employees and that the movement needed to use the unions – rather than allowing the unions to use them.

JW: In much of the media's reporting on the teacher strikes they are made to seem as if they emerged out of nothing. Eruptions such as this are rarely as spontaneous as they appear on the surface. To what extent has there been a militant layer of organizers in these different struggles? Who are they? What role have they played? What tactics and methods of organizing have they found to be most effective, and what obstacles have they come up against?

TB: There is no such thing as a spontaneous strike. In each state there was a core of people who took a lead in organizing. The fact that many of the strikes began in right-to-work states meant two contradictory things: that workers in these states lacked access to the history and strength of the

union movement; but because this was so they had to create, from below, their own networks of political mobilization and organizing. In some states, such as West Virginia, this was a self-conscious process with a handful of socialists from the DSA doing the hard work of building the campaign months before the strike. But we should not underestimate the power and potential inherent in self organizing even *without* a conscious militant minority. Movements create leaders. Even newcomers to movements, through collective action, quickly learn to formulate, what Gramsci has called 'good sense' against the prevailing 'common sense'.

EB: Many people seemed to get the impression from West Virginia that all you needed for a successful strike was a lot of anger and a Facebook page. But the course of the strikes in Oklahoma and Arizona prove that leadership, organization, and strategy are indispensable.

It's unlikely the West Virginia strike would have happened – or succeeded – without the efforts of a small group of radical teachers rooted in their workplaces. Many of West Virginia's rank-and-file leaders first coalesced during the 2016 Bernie Sanders campaign and subsequently joined the DSA. It was this group based out of Charleston that first initiated the state-wide Facebook group and state-wide organizing efforts in late 2017. Other teacher activists, particularly in the southern part of the state, were part of a multigenerational tradition of class-struggle politics going back to the Mine Wars of the early twentieth century; the first walkouts in February 2018 came from the initiative of these southern teacher leaders.

Since the role of socialists in reviving the labour movement is often deeply underestimated, it's important to underscore the fact that key strike leaders in West Virginia were organized socialists. They had a basic understanding of capitalism and the class struggle; they studied the 2012 Chicago teachers' strike and they consciously sought to implement its key lessons. Though there were not many of them,

these young socialists were able to intervene collectively in West Virginia's movement and they played a crucial leadership role.

Oklahoma had a similar number of socialists, but none of them had jobs in the schools. Because of this, they weren't able to transmit class politics or organizing know-how into Oklahoma's education movement either in the lead-up to the strike or once it began. Without any members working in public education, Oklahoma's socialists were limited to providing outside support to the strike.

One can't help but wonder how Oklahoma's movement would have developed had there existed a core of radical teachers capable of providing it guidance. In the absence of such a militant minority, Oklahoma's inexperienced rank-and-file leadership punted on big political questions, over-relied on Facebook, failed to work within (or with) the union, did not see the centrality of workplace organization, and neglected to prepare for the strike through a series of escalating build-up actions.

The experience in Arizona was similar to West Virginia. Arizona's key rank-and-file leaders were either open socialists or labour militants trained in class struggle politics, e.g. through direct participation in the 2012 Chicago teachers' strike. Many first became politically active in the Bernie Sanders campaign. Though Red for Ed is a completely non-partisan movement, the radical political perspectives and accumulated organizing experiences of these leaders informed the Arizona Educators United's (AEU) successful organizing drive. Anybody interested in how a militant minority of workplace radicals can build workplace power and strike momentum should closely study the organizing blitz led by AEU over the two months preceding the strike.

AEU began small, by asking educators to wear red on Wednesday, 7 March. The action caught on and has been repeated on every

Wednesday since. Soon afterward, AEU leader Rebecca Garelli called on educators and allies to put supportive messages and red markings on their cars, small businesses, and homes. The next mobilization was a 12 March protest of Governor Doug Ducey's monthly radio interview. This was followed two weeks later by an afternoon rally of a few thousand educators at the state capitol, where the AEU issued its demands.

In the process of mobilizing for these actions, the Red for Ed movement began systematically building a network of 'site liaisons' at each school. The idea came from Garelli's experience in the Chicago Teachers Union. To gauge its organizational capacity, and to build parent support, AEU organized educational walk-ins before school on 4 April. The following day it issued a joint letter with the union calling on the governor to meet with them to negotiate on their demands – a request Ducey never ended up accepting.

AEU leaders began openly raising the possibility of a walkout, while simultaneously pushing for more mass actions to build up community support. On Wednesday, 11 April, over 110,000 educators, parents, and students participated in walk-ins across Arizona.

Encouraged by the massive walk-ins, AEU leaders on 15 April issued a call for a state-wide strike vote. After multiple days of voting through paper ballots at each school site, AEU and union leaders made the results public at a joint press conference on 19 April. Of the more than 57,000 teachers and school staff who participated in the vote, 78 percent supported a walkout. Armed with a clear mandate for action, Red for Ed leaders announced that the walkout would begin on Thursday 26 April. And now that the strike is over, AEU is consciously building off the momentum to continue the movement, in the form of a ballot initiative to tax the rich to fund schools.

KDG: I think we don't yet have the full answer to this. It's

clear to me that DSA and WFP people in West Virginia played an important role in creating space for discussion and debate, raising and developing the idea of strike action, partly in multi-thousand person Facebook discussion groups. It also seems to me that Bernie-influenced teachers there did important work face-to-face organizing across counties with road trips and in person meetings with key leaders from different communities. West Virginia also demonstrates particularly the ability of teachers, who likely have a uniquely historical perspective, to mobilize the experiences of coal mine militancy and solidarity toward a practice that was incredibly anti-scab and pro-solidarity. At the same time, it seemed important that many teachers themselves had personal experience of striking, and generational continuity among families of teachers, and that they had largely learned a lesson from the previous strike, namely that solidarity with support staff was a critical difference between winning real gains and false promises of future compromise. I also heard about a more recent grocery workers strike that had apparently educated more than a few people on how to handle scabs in practice.

Facebook and left/labour movement organizational connections have played an important role in spreading the lessons of the strike. It's easy to find discussion and debate online between teachers from different states and in different stages of struggle, and it was exciting to see a pretty local West Virginia consciousness develop quickly into the voice of experience. I wasn't able to attend but a Labour Notes workshop that included leaders from Arizona, West Virginia, and Oklahoma really pointed toward the possibility of developing the militant layer of teacher-leaders that are clearly emerging.

I do think about not only the structural challenges of the strikes in larger states, but also the social ones. It seems to me that if this wave spreads one thing that both history

teachers and socialists can contribute is drawing out broad histories of militancy that can inspire and inform teachers struggle; histories of native and black independent communities and self defence, womens and queer struggles, as well as less well-known moments in the history of socialist politics and workplace strike and struggle. This broader reservoir seems particularly interesting and fruitful in places like Arizona and Oklahoma.

LW: Visible resistance emerges from molecular changes, in consciousness, in relationships, in knowledge, configured by and acting on material conditions. So I think the phrase 'militant layer of organizers' is misleading. It flattens a complex reality of social relations in the workplace and outside of it. The term also assumes there is one way to be an 'organizer.' In my experience, some people are natural leaders, respected by their peers, on issues unrelated to union concerns. Other workers may be 'organizers' outside of the school and yet not in their workplace. In education the way these differences play out is that teachers are often activists in social struggles outside of education or in schools on issues unrelated to the union domain, such as curriculum (what's taught) and instruction (how we teach it). Often the people who are activists in teachers unions are White, male, hetero radicals who are high school teachers, often Social Studies or History teachers, who have a theoretical commitment to unionism. Teachers who are committed to a social justice agenda, often anti-racism, immigrant rights, or LGBT students' rights often have no interest in the union because it seems irrelevant or even hostile to their political ideals.

Moreover, the term ignores the alliances that have formed between activist teachers and parents for many years, to stop testing or make instruction and curriculum culturally responsive.

I'll give just a few examples of the activism, the networks,

and organizing that preceded the walkouts. The Bad Ass Teachers (BATS) should be considered the pioneers of this current strike wave. Several years ago teachers who were frustrated by the attacks on them formed a Facebook group by this name, committed to fighting against the degradation of teaching and teachers in the media. They did not feel protected or defended by the unions. Teachers have been working with parents in the opt-out (of testing) movement, in Red states and Blue, without support from teachers unions. In fact, the unions did not oppose testing until legislation was passed to link teacher evaluations and salaries to their students' test scores, using a pseudo-scientific statistical formula, called Valued Added Measures (VAM).

One of the leaders of the Kentucky movement is a BAT. Save our Schools Kentucky, a group of teachers, parents, and education activists allied with the Network for Public Education, the advocacy organization Diane Ravitch formed, provided pivotal leadership.

Labour is not strong in the Red states, but it's telling that often other unions stepped in to support striking teachers well before the teachers unions did so. I saw pictures on the Facebook pages in all the states of workers from various union locals showing up at picket lines and reading news of motions of support. United Food and Commercial Workers Union has contributed to the fund Arizona teachers have created to help school workers who helped them by supporting their strike and so lost wages but will not get wage increases in the new state budget.

JW: In different states we have seen the teachers draw on and reinvent distinct cultural reservoirs of local labour histories, some quite distant and subterranean vis-à-vis the contemporary culture, others more evidently embedded in the living social fabric of the present, even if somewhat eroded. How important is this element to understanding the development of the movement in particular cases?

EB: I think the role of labour traditions has been relatively low in these strikes, with West Virginia being only a partial exception. On the whole, this strike wave marks a first step in generating *new* labour traditions in these states and across the US.

West Virginia's strike has often been attributed to the state's labour traditions. Of course, this legacy of militant trade unionism was significant: many strikers wore red bandannas in homage to the mine wars, many came from coal-miner families, and many repeated that they were trained as children never to cross a picket line. The weight of this history was particularly strong in the southern counties.

But it's also true that by 2018 these traditions were dormant or fading away. Unions have been in decline for decades and were widely discredited, enabling the state to turn right-to-work a few years prior. The public sector, unlike coal, has not historically been a hotbed of militancy in West Virginia – though there had been a strike in 1990, for most current teachers this was their first strike ever. And the initiative for the action came from a core of young teachers, motivated more by political conviction than tradition. If anything, the current action helped many people rediscover and reclaim a political legacy that was fading away.

Even once the strike took off, the level of political-cultural continuity with the traditional labour movement was lower than portrayed in most outside accounts of the strike. The critical role of Facebook was just one manifestation of this relative political-organizational novelty. It's also significant that protestors at the West Virginian capitol didn't ever sing labour songs – songs like 'Country Roads' or 'Seven Nation Army' were the norm, not 'Solidarity Forever.' Nor were traditional labour chants a part of the action. Protest signs were more likely to reference Beyoncé than Mother Jones.

The relative absence of labour traditions was even more marked

in the Oklahoma and Arizona strikes. Oklahoma has a deep, but forgotten, history of militancy. It's a little-known fact that Oklahoma had the strongest Socialist Party in the country a century ago. Yet this experience has been almost completely erased from the state's textbooks and collective memory.

At most, this socialist history left some political sediment in the form of a generalized collectivist ethos in Oklahoma. 'Oklahomans who are traditionally religious, with strong family values, also often have a very strong communitarian mindset,' observed DSA organizer Xavier Doolittle. 'That collective sentiment really still does exist here, it's one of the main reasons why the striking teachers have so much support.'

Specific labour and radical traditions, however, remained very weak in Oklahoma. The amazing thing about the strike is how massive it was despite the absence of such traditions in the state. Oklahoma's capitol protests – peaking at 50,000 on Monday, April 9 – were actually significantly larger than in West Virginia. Likewise, popular support for the Oklahoma strike was very high: over 72 percent, according to the most recent poll. So the divergent strike outcomes in West Virginia and Oklahoma can't be explained primarily by differences in the depth of popular support or the strength of labour traditions.

Arizona's strike was perhaps the most remarkable. Of the three states, it had the strongest right-wing and by far the weakest labour or collectivist traditions. Strikers consistently expressed their shock that a strike of this depth could happen in Arizona. By all accounts, the Red for Ed movement marked a definite break with Arizona's strong traditions of individualism and conservatism.

The following tweet by Arizona educator Warren Faulkner gives a good sense not only of the defiant mood on the ground, but also the breadth of the popular radicalization:

'I'm a registered Republican and a conservative. I've taught high school math for 27 years and the last thing I ever thought I'd do is a walkout, but I will walk out this Thursday. Enough is enough. ... I love my job and I love the students I teach. I don't want to walk out, but I will for my students.'

Despite the unfavourable political context and the absence of strong labour unions or traditions, Arizona's teachers and staff were remarkably well-prepared for their strike. In less than two months, under the guidance of AEU leaders, they cohered themselves into a formidably organized force and won important concessions from the state in their walkout. The victory in Arizona, in comparison with Oklahoma (which many teachers felt was a defeat, despite the important pay raise won on the eve of the action), underscores the important role that radical organizers can play at a moment of crisis and mobilization, irrespective of the presence or absence of labour traditions.

JW: How does a strike wave like this unfold? It began first in West Virginia, how did it expand from there? Which kinds of experiences, tactics and strategies move easily between states with very different labour movement histories, and which kind are more difficult to replicate?

EB: West Virginia's example was a critical factor in the emergence and development of the strikes in Oklahoma and Arizona. Usually, the conscious intervention of organized radicals is required to transmit the lessons of the past into today's struggles. But because West Virginia's successful strike took place so recently and was so widely publicized, its lessons diffused widely across the country, even in places like Oklahoma where there was no significant militant minority of radical workers.

Rank-and-file teacher Micky Miller recalled: 'Oklahoma teachers have felt hopeless and powerless for years. So when I

first heard about West Virginia, I didn't think it would spill over for us. But teachers here started closely watching the strike. They began saying, "Wait a second, they did it there, they were able to get all counties to go out. Why can't we do that here?" People saw that West Virginian strikers were strong, that they didn't back down. The legislature gave a little and the union leaders said to go back to work, but the teachers and staff continued to strike anyways, until they won all their demands.'

In Arizona, it also took the example of West Virginia to ignite labour action locally. Rebecca Garelli explained:

'People were scared to rock the boat – and then West Virginia happened. All of a sudden, the catalyst was there. They're doing it, why can't we? So in the first days of March I got in touch over Facebook with one of the West Virginia strike leaders, Jay O'Neal – we discussed how they had organized their walkout and how we could do the same in Arizona.

As can be gleaned from Garelli's quote, one of the most novel aspects of this strike wave is that rank-and-file teacher leaders in different states have been in constant communication with each-other ever since West Virginia's strike. Most of these discussions of strategy and tactics have taken place over Facebook. The recent Labour Notes conference, and the United Caucuses of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE) network in particular, also played an important role in connecting these militants to each other and facilitating an interchange of experiences.

KDG: Similar to the large Day Without an Immigrant and 2017 Women's Strike, the mainstream media played a significant role. Teachers with no connections I can discover to left political formations started Facebook groups on the model reported in the media, which played a similar role and benefitted from being public in the sense that they also attracted experienced strikers. In Oklahoma these groups were

able to push forward a strike date and reject slower levels of escalation proposed by teacher union officials. But I think the difference between strike action and protest or lobbying, anti-scab culture, and the strategic importance of support staff strikes has been harder to communicate and actualize. Still the lesson of unsigned, insufficient deals did make the jump across state borders even as the Arizona Education Association (AEA) and the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) seem to have completely folded in the face of legislative intransigence. We're starting to both see union officialdom take a more proactive role, polling states still yet to strike, and coordinating mass actions at the capitals. We're also starting to see teachers' consolidation of rank-and-file organization outside of unions, in Oklahoma and Arizona, as a response to failures of leadership. It's not entirely clear to me what effects these developments will have in places like Louisiana or Texas, let alone in 'blue' states where unions have more power and more immediate ties to state and local government. Teacher union internationals have the resources to build the strikes and the ability, when they take teachers lead, to win real gains, but it doesn't seem like that's the lesson they learned from West Virginia.

One thing both unions and socialist organizers have so far been unable to achieve is a sense of pushing the understanding of demands and strikes beyond a legislative horizon, one underwritten by balanced budget guarantees; so far, even militant teachers seem to often imagine themselves both responsible for the legislative calendar and for the 'funding source' that can reverse austerity. This is something that, if the struggle is going to develop, will have to be challenged more directly.

To do so, I think, requires a concerted plan and a team of skilled organizers with this in mind, more than simply imposing a new more political program through new leadership, this will require concerted agitational interviews and

strategic relationship building through concrete solidarity that can broaden the frame and a strategy of escalation and coordination with other immediate struggles to win the intermediate and maximum demands of teachers and others in motion. Widespread strike action is a crucial environment for this kind of activity.

LW: I think the idea of replication is unhelpful and even misleading. Every context is different. We have to ground our work in the specific material conditions and ideological frame. Of course one of those material conditions is struggle that has preceded ours and changed consciousness, which is what happened with the victory in West Virginia.

Though our strategies and conditions differ, our goal is the same, what I've referred to as the 'trifecta': a commitment to workers' self-organization and mobilization of members; democratic structure and culture; and integration of social justice commitments that speak to the needs of the broader society into the union's functioning.

One question is how to do that when we have collective bargaining, as in the Blue states. Another is how to do it when we don't, as in the Red states and the Blue states like Wisconsin, where we've lost it. We shouldn't be re-creating CORE. We should take what we know works for us from what CORE has done.[\[14\]](#)

JW: Close to 80 percent of teachers in the United States are women, with the highest concentration in elementary schools. Both the deterioration of the public sector under neoliberalism – that is, the foundational environment for these strikes – and the process of the strikes themselves, have been deeply gendered. Could you comment on the importance of this facet of the latest cycle of labour militancy in the United States?

TB: I am going to be repeating myself on this issue as I have

written so much on this. First, not only are the majority of teachers women, teaching is also seen as 'women's work.' The institutional efforts to erode dignity from the profession is fuelled by this sexist assumption. Second, because teaching is gendered in this manner it is also seen as 'care work.' Neoliberal education bosses often treat teachers, especially elementary school teachers, as glorified baby sitters thereby attempting to de-professionalize a vital profession. Third, because women still disproportionately do the actual work of care in homes and communities, health care costs and pensions are unfortunately and uniquely 'women's issues'. While these can be catalogued as 'causes' or triggers for the strike it would be wrong to underplay the fact that there has been a real growth in specifically feminist organizing and consciousness in recent years. Since the recession there has been both an escalation of sexism (think legal restrictions on reproductive rights, a complete misogynist in the White House, repeated defence of rape by politicians) as well as open resistance to it. The success of #metoo in cleaning out the stables is matched by the fact that for the first time in decades there is an anticapitalist feminism in the making in the form of the International Women's Strikes with its slogan of 'feminism for the 99 per cent'. This general backdrop cannot but play a role in how militancy is shaped amongst teachers and will undoubtedly continue to do so in the future.

EB: It's certainly true that the objective social conditions that generated these strikes – and the dynamics of the mobilizations themselves – are deeply gendered. Low pay for teachers, as many analysts have shown, is rooted to a significant extent in the fact that K-12 teaching in the US is a predominantly female profession. The strategic location of education at the heart of social reproduction meant that these work stoppages impacted workers far beyond the schools. That most educators are women also certainly shaped the course of the strike. It was no easy feat for striking mothers charged with family obligations to find the time or means to

participate in – and lead – these strikes. Particularly given these challenges, these actions were remarkable expressions of the agency and leadership of working-class women.

At the same time, I was struck by how few strikers in these states saw the strikes – or the social context that they arose from – in gendered terms. In West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona, an organic, bottom-up stress on unity to win common demands was so strong that participants tended to avoid talking about (let alone stressing) internal differences, either in regards to gender, race, political affiliation, or religion. In the words of Charleston high school teacher and union activist Emily Comer: 'For a successful mass movement, people don't have to agree on partisan politics, on religion, or anything else for that matter. But they do have to come together and fight in solidarity around a shared issue.'

In West Virginia I interviewed a dozen female teacher leaders for an article I planned to write for *Jacobin* on gender and the strike. I ended up not knowing what to do with the piece since the overwhelming majority of these women insisted that issues of gender had *not* played an important role in emergence or development of the strike. When I asked them about the particular challenges facing female teachers and strikers, they almost always replied by pivoting the discussion and insisting that the salient feature of the movement was that it united all educators, all public employees, or working people generally.

KDG: It's nothing new. Both historical and sociological accounting of workers' struggle in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries point to the importance of social reproductive sectors, inhabited mostly by women, and disproportionately by queer people, paid and unpaid, in kicking off new waves of worker militancy. Partly this is simply due to the disproportionate impact of crises of social reproduction on women and gender-oppressed workers, particularly as austerity is itself gendered and combined with direct political assaults

on women (like abortion bans, trans bans, FOSTA/SESTA[\[15\]](#), welfare reform, hospital closings, etc). It's also partly that the gendered nature of organizing daily survival gives women workers social networks on and off the job that can be mobilized as they are politicized for action.

The issues raised in these struggles are gendered, but it's important to note, they are also universal; women and other gender oppressed and racialized people have particularly intense experiences of humiliation and loss of control over their personal and bodily autonomy, extreme experiences of managing precarity as it is distributed across the class among high and low wage workers across family and social networks, and face particularly dismissive and chauvinist reactions to their organizing (dumb bunnies in West Virginia, 'like teenagers' in Oklahoma) but these issues are *also* experienced by men, white workers etc. This kind of alienation is universal; all workers experience it. And the bills—abortion, anti-gang bills, anti-sex work bills, anti-trans ones—impact everyone. Racist anti-gang and FOSTA/SESTA have clear direct implications for organizing on and offline; anti-trans bills (in North Carolina and elsewhere) have nullified local municipalities' abilities to set minimum wages. Anti-immigrant bills press all workers to have and show papers, and increase employers role as law enforcement. Far from being a diversion or a distraction, the conditions of the vulnerable sectors of the class set the conditions of work and organizing for the whole working class.

A solidaristic approach to understanding and responding to the universal sense of humiliation, degradation and precarity is precisely the fuel that can spark wider strikes and other direct action. I think it's notable that where we've seen notions and concrete steps toward secondary strikes, those have been among the trades and in logistics. My home tradition of socialist thinking about class composition and labour organizing has long recognized the strategic

necessity of activating these sectors, and their tendency toward militancy; I think the teachers' strikes are a good example of the kind of political – in the most small p, democratic sense – context crucial for inspiring and activating these sectors.

It's also important to consider, as this struggle develops, assuming it does, how workers' power and the example of strikes might move toward effective resistance to laws and policies that specifically target women and other so-called particular sections of the working class. That's certainly one of the aims of IWS, and we've seen that used to great effect in other places, including Poland, Spain, Ireland, and across Latin America.

JW: The politics of race has been distinct across different teacher strike scenarios in recent years. There are variegated experiences rooted in urban versus rural contexts, and disparate demographics across states. How do the politics of race enter into the latest strikes in specific ways, according to specific, local particularities?

TB: I went to Kentucky to specifically report on this. In Kentucky, along with the bill that attacked the pension plan for teachers, state legislators had passed an overtly racist 'gang bill', giving the police the right to stop and frisk people of colour at will. Unfortunately when teachers and students of colour and their supporters wanted the pension campaign to include a demand to reject the 'gang bill' many opposed such a merger of issues. But, as I pointed out in my essay, race is not an 'add-on' to the struggle for wages and benefits. In all these states of teachers' revolt—Arizona, Oklahoma, and Kentucky—an increase in the concentration of students of colour is associated with a decrease in dollars spent per pupil. The school to prison pipe line is an everyday reality for thousands of teachers and students. With this strike wave we have a second chance to rebuild the labour movement such that race and gender are not considered boutique

issues of interest only to feminists and antiracists, but are seen as vital to how they are harnessed by capital to make certain sections of the working class more vulnerable than others. All wage struggles arise on this landscape of differential degradation and it is vital that questions of social oppression be included within the purview of labour organizing and collective bargaining.

EB: In all of these states, like in the country as a whole, African Americans and Latinos are disproportionately poor and criminalized. Across the board, schools tend to be worse off in non-white communities. People of colour are underrepresented in the teacher workforce and overrepresented in support staff positions. At the same time, open or coded racism and support for regressive policies that disproportionately hurt working-class communities of colour have long been part of the strategy of Republican leaders, as well as a significant number of Democratic politicians.

In both West Virginia and Oklahoma there was little discussion of race or racism among the majority of strikers. This was partially due to the fact that the overwhelming majority of strikers and students were white. A large number of strikers were also Republicans and had voted for Trump. The consciousness of most white educators on racial justice certainly fell short of where socialists and anti-racist activists would have liked it to be. But the eruption of these strikes also undermines the widespread idea that white workers, particularly in 'red states,' are so blinded by their racism and whiteness that they are incapable of fighting for their own interests or allying with workers of colour against the bosses. The blind-spots, or unconscious prejudices, of many white educators did not prevent them from striking together with non-white teachers and staff for their mutually shared interests. Not incidentally, the main rank-and-file leader in Oklahoma was a Latino teacher, Alberto Morejon.

Racial justice and immigrant rights were more clearly part of

the strike dynamic in Arizona. The state has a particularly vicious recent history of anti-immigrant attacks and Latinos are a single-largest group of students in the school system.

Mass incarceration was one important factor in the state's funding crisis for schools. Disproportionately locking up Latinos and African Americans, Arizona has one of the highest incarceration rates in the nation. With an annual expenditure of approximately \$1 billion – over 10 percent of the state's total budget – the Department of Corrections was the rare state agency that continued to receive funding increases even after the recession began.

The privatization offensive in the state has also led to a significant racial re-segregation of the school system. While 44 percent of Arizona students are Latino, they make up only 36 percent of charter-school students. Unsurprisingly, the most vocal proponents of 'school choice' in Arizona, such as Debbie Lesko and other American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC)-funded politicians, are also open advocates of the anti-immigrant border-wall plan, stepped-up ICE deportations, and Arizona's infamous SB 1070, a 2010 bill that sanctioned racial profiling.

Arizona's strike represented an alternative to this right-wing racism and xenophobia. It was consciously multi-racial and multi-lingual: all Red For Ed placards, for instance, were bi-lingual, not a minor detail in a state where the politics of language has long been central to the right-wing agenda. Unlike in other the states that struck, various Arizona union leaders – including the vice president of the AEA, Marisol Garcia – were not white. Speakers at the rallies, including teachers from Arizona's Native American reservations, often spoke in their native languages and openly criticized anti-immigrant policies. AEA union president Joe Thomas has also openly denounced the school to prison pipeline. The Arizona strike's model of multi-racial unity for a common working-class goal will hopefully set an example for other states – it

could also help generate the political space and momentum in Arizona for a revived immigrant rights movement to stop deportations and win papers for all.

In all states, rebuilding a militant labour movement will be crucial not only for defending public education and winning broad demands for wealth redistribution, but also in helping beat back attacks on immigrants, African Americans, women, and all other oppressed groups.

KDG: The politics of race enter in because they inseparable both from the politics of austerity generally and of education particularly. Even in states where the population is overwhelmingly white, racist dog whistles are used both to pass regressive social legislation and to bait workers in motion; for example, in West Virginia, the abortion ban was motivated by legislature particularly against patients on 'medicaid,' while the legislature threatened to move funds from medicaid to fund increased wages for public sector workers, though this wasn't ultimately part of the bill. Teachers declared this unacceptable, but this attempt to pit higher paid teachers (who of course aren't all white) against real and imaginary poor and black workers is only likely to intensify, and so must the level and directness of teacher's refutation of this tactic.

In the longer view, the attack on public education itself has been highly racialized, with constant invocation of failing schools and lazy tenured teachers perpetually identifying black students, black teachers, and black schools as the source of a problem needing fixing. Recent student walkouts, and the variegated demands from different sections of the country and sectors of the education system emphasized the conflict between a racist anti-gun violence politics and a clearly anti-racist one. On the one hand, we saw demands for more police in schools and decreased Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) protections as part of a plan to deal with gun violence in schools, coming out of

Parkland, Florida, and Florida Democrats. On the other an articulation of BLM influenced demands for more funding, fewer police in schools and more student support emerging from Philadelphia, Chicago, Brooklyn and even from dissident black students at Parkland. Clearly, the later set of demands has more in common with the demands of rank and file teachers, who themselves strongly oppose any weakening of HIPAA, but it's not clear to what extent that identification has or can be made.

BLM, and broadly the black movement that has long highlighted the racial inequalities in education and their connection to mass incarceration, seems like a point that will repeatedly emerge as the teacher struggle develops and one that is deeply ingrained in both its long and its recent history, for example with CTU in Chicago, where a demonstration with BLM speakers raised the question of teacher and teacher union support for the demands of BLM and where teachers didn't clearly rise to the challenge. In New York, explicit pro-BLM demands and anti-police demands were supported by the rank-and-file caucus but rejected by the leadership of the United Federation of Teachers (UFT). To say nothing of the internal racial disparities and divides within and between teachers' organizations and school support staff, and the labour movement as a whole. The class nature of the police, and the racial divide between sections of white workers who tend to be generally supportive of police, and racialized workers who tend to be less so is going to keep emerging directly from the fight itself, probably particularly in education. Philando Castile, famously executed by police while carrying a legal gun, was himself a school cafeteria worker, apparently much loved and deeply involved in the formal and informal social reproduction of students and staff at his school. He was a member of a Teamsters local in Minneapolis that includes law enforcement, as a result his union local had little to say on the matter. To win initial significant demands, build solidarity, and to keep winning, unions and other workers

organizations are going to have to take up the basic demands of BLM, not merely as 'resolutions' but as an active process of developing members as they get involved in militant worker action. This is not an easy task and building that solidarity in practice requires a concerted vision and effort, but a primarily electoral strategy for winning even bread and butter reforms relies on a majoritarian accommodation of unchallenged right-wing impulses and sensibilities of teachers and workers-as-voters in a way that tends to work against raising demands that seem particular or divisive. So I think the strike wave represents a unique opportunity for building a class conscious layer of workers, and a strategy for struggle that, while not in contradiction to some electoral action, poses direct action as specific point of emphasis and focus.

For me, this again highlights the degree to which a particular working class experience – that of black, disabled, and queer workers with police violence and vigilante fascists – has universal implications that require attention and advancement by socialists and militant worker activists. International examples – for me South African ones – are particularly instructive. Already in the United States, we've seen fascists attack the strike of public sector workers in the university system with a moving car as they did anti-fascist demonstrators in Charlottesville. In South Africa, as we've seen time and time again in the history of worker struggle, the wildcat at Marikana was met with a brutal massacre of striking miners at the hands of national police and directed in part by now South African President and former union-organizer-cum-mining-industry-capitalist Cyril Ramaphosa. It's not simply that the police-in-our-unions question is a matter of racial justice, though it is, but that it's an existential question for a rank-and-file workers' movement exercising its power through direct action.

JW: What is the potential for expanding this new labour militancy into other sectors? If there is potential, where do

you think this is most likely to happen?

EB: Since attacks on educators are part of a more generalized offensive against public services and public employees, there exists the potential for this movement to spread beyond education, particularly in those states where it was generally felt that teachers won major gains by striking. In the short run, the most likely place this militancy could emerge is the rest of the public sector in West Virginia and Arizona. (I'm less optimistic about the short-term prospects in Oklahoma, which was not generally felt from below to be a clear-cut victory, unlike West Virginia and Arizona.)

Had other public sector employees struck in any of these states this spring, it is possible that the strikes could have gone significantly further in winning concessions from the government. Unfortunately, the level of trade union – and rank-and-file – organization in the non-education public sector remains very low. Public employees were inspired by the actions of teachers, but they remained more fearful of taking any illegal job actions. And unlike in teaching, there are few organized radicals in the rest of the public sector. It will likely take a sustained organizing effort by union organizers and socialists to start laying the basis for public employees in West Virginia, Arizona, and beyond to join in militant job actions.

KDG: The teacher strikes themselves seem likely to spread as new states come into legislative session, and to major cities. The obvious next sector in line to strike is health care, both because this has been historically true, because the conditions are similar, and because it's already happening with strike action on the agenda for California in university hospitals. As teacher and other public sector strikes develop, the lesson of broad public sector and working class solidarity is I think the most important one: where teachers and support staff have together won gains for the whole public sector, or where teachers have held out for education funding in general,

I think are the examples of victory that should be propagated. Where gains have been isolated, only teacher pay, or not fully consolidated (as in Oklahoma and Arizona), the lesson must be that that isn't enough. It certainly doesn't represent the totality or even the main focus for the striking teachers I have spoken with across a range of political party allegiance or general skepticism toward electoral politics. I anticipate the possibility for another large Teamsters strike at UPS, again, still fuelled by the same problems of part-time work and extreme exploitation that loomed in the 1990s, only worse. It will be interesting to see if this moment can develop, and if unions themselves can develop, beyond the partial and sectorally isolated strikes of that period, to connecting the crisis of social reproduction with the issue of part-time work and to the reactionary agenda being broadly pushed at state and national levels. It will be interesting to see if drivers in privatized school bus companies can harness the strategic power drivers put on the table in West Virginia; we've seen a few localized attempts in this direction. Public sector strikers have a unique role in setting the agenda in terms of winning through strike action; they've demonstrated the possibility of negotiating directly with the employer – in their case, the state – through strikes and winning demands. Emphasis on that lesson, and on its political implications, can pave the way for public sector strikes that go beyond narrow bread-and-butter affairs to ones which are broadly engaged in advancing and defending gains for the working class as a whole.

References

Brooks, Chris, 'What Should Unions Do After The Strike Wave Recedes?', *New Labor Forum*, 2018 <<http://newlaborforum.cuny.edu/2018/04/27/unions-strike-wave-recedes/>> [accessed 24 June 2018]

David Friedman, Ellen, 'What's Behind the Teachers' Strikes', *Dollars* &

Sense<<http://www.dollarsandsense.org/archives/2018/0518edfriedman.html>>; [accessed 24 June 2018]

'Major U.S. Labor Strikes Second Lowest on Record in 2017', *Bloomberg.com*, 9 February 2018 <<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-02-09/major-u-s-labor-stri...>>; [accessed 24 June 2018]

Moody, Kim, *On New Terrain: How Capital Is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War* (Haymarket Books, 2017)

'Work Stoppages', *United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics*, 2018 <<https://www.bls.gov/wsp/>>; [accessed 24 June 2018]

Contributor Bios:

Tithi Bhattacharya is a professor of South Asian History and the Director of Global Studies at Purdue University. She has recently edited *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression* (Pluto Press, 2017) and is a national organizer for the International Women's Strike US.

Eric Blanc is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Sociology at New York University. He is the author of *Anti-Colonial Marxism: Oppression and Revolution in the Tsarist Borderlands, 1881-1917* (Brill, forthcoming).

Kate Doyle Griffiths is a doctoral candidate in Anthropology at the CUNY Graduate Center. Her research focuses on social reproduction in South Africa, and more recently in the USA, with a focus on gender, sexuality, the family, waged and unwaged work, health and health care, strikes, politics and the elaboration of a Marxist theory of Social Reproduction. She is a member of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), and of Fordham Faculty United, as well as an organizer with the International Women's Strike (IWS) and the Red Bloom Collective. She is a regular contributor to the Historical Materialism series of conferences in the USA, UK and Canada

and her political writing has appeared in *Viewpoint Magazine*, *The Nation*, on the *Versoblog* series, and in *Truthout* as well as in scholarly venues in her field.

Lois Weiner writes for a wide range of popular publications and scholarly journals about teachers' work, urban education, and labour, focusing especially on teacher unionism. Her writing is informed by her two careers in education, the first as a career teacher and union activist and subsequently as a teacher educator and researcher. Her book, *The Future of Our Schools: Teachers Unions and Social Justice* (Haymarket, 2012), widely read by activists in the Anglophone world, explains the nature of neoliberalism's global project to destroy public education and the role of transformed teachers' unions in reversing the attacks. A life-long socialist, she is on the editorial board of *New Politics* and informally advises education activists in a wide range of settings.

This foru was first published in [Historical Materialism](#).

[1] David Friedman 2018.

[2] Bloomberg 2018.

[3] United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2018.

[4] Moody 2017, pp. 97–98.

[5] David Friedman.

[6] Moody, pp. 78, 82.

[7] Moody, p. 30.

[8] David Friedman.

[9] David Friedman.

[\[10\]](#) Brooks 2018.

[\[11\]](#) I am grateful to Charles Post for pointing this out.

[\[12\]](#) Editor's note: Right-to-work laws allow individuals who work in a union shop to refuse to join the union.

[\[13\]](#) Editor's note: Charter Schools are publicly funded independent schools established outside the public school system, which are often run by businesses, non-profit organizations, or universities that have established charters and won approval from local authorities. Their rapid growth in the United States parallels and contributes to the undermining of traditional public schools.

[\[14\]](#) Because I have already addressed the answers posed below in what I have said thus far I'll end my contribution here.

[\[15\]](#) Editor's note: Stop Enabling Sex-Trafficking Act (SESTA) and Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) impinge upon the rights of sex workers.