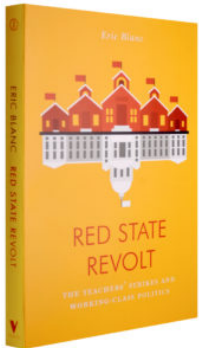


Learning from the “Red” State Walkouts



RED STATE REVOLT IS BASED ON Eric Blanc’s “on the ground” reporting for *Jacobin* on the 2018 walkouts of education workers in Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Arizona. He aims to tell the stories of the walkouts and their leaders, providing a “behind the scenes” look at the organizing as well as presenting the political take-away for labor and the left.

Blanc captures the excitement strikers and the public felt at these unexpected mass job actions in Republican strongholds. He explains facets of this movement, including some that he previously reported, others new. An insight he nails in this book that is especially vital as activists try to extend lessons to other labor work is that framing the walkouts as being exclusively about salary obscured teachers’ fight for the dignity of their work and their personhood: “Like most labor battles, these strikes were about winning respect as much as anything else. More often than not, fights around pay are simultaneously struggles for basic human dignity; economic demands are rarely *only* economic.” Another strength of the book is Blanc’s close-up view of how key leaders shaped the movement—and vice-versa. Much of this background information is new, and Blanc does a service by compiling it in this volume.

These strengths emerge from Blanc’s method of gathering information: meeting “the local organizers,” explaining his mission of writing about the job actions, and doing strike support. “Ultimately, I spent the bulk of my time organizing national solidarity for the strikers and talking politics with the core teacher activists over nightly beers” (12). While the stories Blanc tells are rich in detail about individual

activists, the interviews are primarily with radicals and socialists. This is problematic because activists not affiliated with socialist or radical groups played a significant role in building the movement in various regions, a reality apparent in the Facebook page discussions. As Blanc himself discusses, many walkout participants voted not only for Trump in the 2016 election but for the Republicans in the state legislatures against whom they were protesting. How exactly did Blanc locate the activists with whom he hung out and had beers? Did he try to connect with teachers who self-identified as “conservatives” and perhaps weren’t interested in having beers in the evening? How did their perspective differ—if it did? These questions illuminate a key weakness in the book: Blanc often makes unsupported claims based on his political assumptions (most of which I share) without acknowledging he does so. One glaring example is his assertion that “nonwhite teachers in these states were undoubtedly just as committed as their white colleagues to the fight for better pay, working conditions, and school funding” (68). Why “undoubtedly”? We know from a significant body of educational research that African American teachers often see their work and political commitments differently from their white counterparts. Systemic racism in schools—and on the job—is often on their radar but was not taken on by the movements in these states. Further, Blanc’s statement that “proactive anti-racism among white educators was certainly not commonplace” (65) significantly understates the problem. Race was a salient factor in all the “Red” states, with the exception of West Virginia, which is rural and 96 percent white. The walkout in Oklahoma was moored in Tulsa and Oklahoma City, both urban, both highly segregated. And in Arizona, the importance of alliances with the Hispanic community evolved as activists grew politically. The earliest photos on social media of the Arizona walkout were of Anglo teachers, a problem movement leaders corrected when it was flagged. So while this book mentions race and racism, and in so doing corrects a significant omission in coverage of the walkouts, it does not

grapple with racism's pervasive influence on schools and teachers' work—or the left's unwillingness to name its importance from the start.

Blanc posits that U.S. unions, having rejected strikes and grassroots organizing, need these stories of the walkout to encourage more militancy. His book provides that needed narrative and welcome encouragement. Still, the ruling class has learned from these walkouts, and so must we. That learning requires both objectivity and critique in analysis, more than this book gives readers. The walkouts showed stunning resistance to neoliberalism's project of destroying public education and teachers unions. The complete story needs to be told. Perhaps that's the next book.