

# Social Movements Gave Rise to the “Teachers’ Revolt,” Not Bernie

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In Eric Blanc’s recent article for *Jacobin Magazine* titled, “How Bernie Helped Spark the Teachers’ Revolt,” Blanc condenses one of the primary claims he originally made in his book, *Red State Revolt* (2019): that Bernie Sanders’ 2016 presidential run is one of the singular reasons for the recent resurgence of educator militancy. Such a claim is ultimately harmful to contemporary educator movements because it short-circuits our understandings of the often gendered labor, historical underpinnings, and complex relationships that entail igniting, organizing, and sustaining these movements.

What we need, in this moment, are public thinkers who can pose and contribute to questions that educator organizers are grappling with in their everyday work, to produce knowledge useful for growing our movements. Making instrumental use of contemporary educator movements to forward a political candidate sounds a lot, to us, like a familiar strategy that many educators have already resoundingly refused through striking.

In the following, we strongly disagree that Bernie Sanders played a central or significant role in sparking and sustaining the education strikes (while we appreciate his enthusiastic endorsements). Instead, we suggest that the involvement of many educators in intersecting social movements -including the movements for Black lives, ethnic studies, labor and economic justice, and immigrant justice, among others — is what sparked and what will sustain the potency of the educator uprisings.

First, we address his oft-repeated claims that key West Virginia educators’ political activism originated with the Sanders’ 2016 presidential campaign. Next, we consider the context of Kentucky and the roots of its 2018 educator insurgency in the movement for Black lives (a context that Blanc glances over in his book and recent writing). Finally, we draw on the rigorous, empirical research of many movement scholar-activists, including Lauren Ware Stark, Rhiannon Maton, Dana Morrison, and others to illuminate how the recent strikes are significantly indebted to a constellation of local, national, and transnational movements. These movements informed the creation of a network of

social justice caucus and educator organizing efforts across the nation, which have been important in articulating common good demands in the recent educator strikes.

### **West Virginia: Organizing for Rank-and-File Power in the Union**

In his book, Blanc uses a quote from West Virginia educator Anna Simmons to describe the moment when West Virginia educators balked at their state union's calls to return to work with only a verbal agreement as "the continuation of a movement that *started with Bernie Sanders* and is going to result in a power shift from the elite wealthy to the working people (p. 100-101, emphasis added).<sup>\*</sup> He continues this framing in his recent *Jacobin* piece, writing: "Bernie's 2016 primary run played a crucial role in legitimizing class-struggle politics and inspiring strike leaders in each of the red states that experienced illegal statewide walkouts in early 2018 - West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona."

As he does in *Red State Revolt*, Blanc tries to show that a small select group of organizers in these three states played an outsized role in their formation and ultimate success (the "militant minority" thesis). His writing further implies that the origins of the strikes that have taken place in the last two years are neatly located in the 2018 red state strikes.

To make these "origin" claims, Blanc cites West Virginia educator organizers Emily Comer, Jay O'Neal, Nicole McCormick, and Matt McCormick. In the quotes that he selected from these four, Blanc asserts that Bernie is what tied these four teachers together to organize, plan, and fight to win a successful strike, primarily on the now-famous "West Virginia Public Employees UNITED" Facebook page.

Both Jay O'Neal and Nicole McCormick knew each other prior to the November 2016 election, and as Jay has reiterated in interviews conducted for our own research, he had always been an active union member. Coming to West Virginia, he saw the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), a National Education Association (NEA) affiliate, incapable of making necessary changes to restructure itself for the needs of its membership. Other disaffected members, such as Brendan himself, saw this first-hand at the 2017 WVEA Delegate Assembly. His report on the Delegate Assembly led Jay to reach out to him over the Summer of 2017 to inquire about starting an online space for a couple other angry union members hoping for greater action.

This is what would become the UNITED page, but at a time when only a dozen or so members were active online. Likewise, American Federation of Teachers (AFT) members joined the Facebook page, too, people that had known each other through teaching in the Kanawha Valley region but who had no ties to one another politically, ideologically, or through the Sanders campaign. Some of these members without ties to the Sanders campaign are still active administrators on the UNITED page two years later, and have likewise played active roles organizing in their counties before, during, and after the 2018 walkouts. The Sanders' campaign could not have brought together these organizers beforehand because none of these individuals met up as a result of his campaign at the time.

Blanc refers to the four West Virginians he interviews as "strike leaders" throughout this article and elsewhere, but the linguistic challenge of such assertions must be raised: what good is a leader in a leaderless movement? In West Virginia, there were no "strike captains" that could be accounted for during the walkouts, no prior organizational flow chart to speak of. There was simply an online platform for members to voice their anger and organize organically, independent of the prying eyes of union leadership. Brendan, Nicole, Jay, Emily, and Matt were leaders as much as the many other members who were actively aware of the situation day-in and day-out, and were unwilling to compromise with reactionary politicians or intransigent union leaders. Blanc conveniently leaves out

the hundreds of other leaders, who will never be named, because they do not fit his narrative.

### **Kentucky: Seeds in Organizing for Black Lives**

In the Summer of 2017, at the same time that West Virginia activists were building the UNITED page, Katie Hancock, a social worker, created a similar group for Kentucky public employees: KY United We Stand. Her page would act as the primary online catalyst for information sharing and digital organizing prior to the 2018 walkouts. It was so successful that it helped bring together a loose coalition of public employees and other trade unionists at a 2017 rally to block Governor Bevin's upcoming special session.

Years prior, Black Lives Matter activists and Louisville educators had organized locally to combat systemic racism in their school district. Tia Kurtsinger-Edison and Tyra Walker, two Black educators and Louisville activists, had been working with the Jefferson County Teachers Association (JCTA), an affiliate of the Kentucky Education Association (KEA), to prevent statewide takeovers, implement restorative justice programs, hire more Black educators, and create spaces within the union for Black educators to present their concerns in a safe environment. Their fight brought in a local activist, Gay Adelman, who would become the creator of several popular online pages for Kentucky education activists. Their gathering together was forged due to a common fight against austerity and racism, much as Hancock's online space was created due to a state law banning public employees from collective bargaining.

These online spaces were the germination for what would later become KY 120 United, a structured, independent group of public employees led by Nema Brewer. KY 120 United broke away from KY United We Stand and Adelman's various groups to implement a coordinated effort to find local representatives in each school, county, and congressional district capable of leading a statewide walkout. The success of this new group helped to shut down thirty school districts one day and the entire state the next. It was only after the 2018 *Labor Notes* Convention that Nema redirected KY 120 United away from direct action and towards conciliatory actions to the anger of others in the movement.

In our interviews with Kentucky education activists and organizers, none of the respondents listed above who helped act as leaders, insofar as the term is defined loosely by Blanc, took their inspirational cues from Sanders or his 2016 presidential run. Kentucky's inability to capitalize on the similar successes of West Virginia can be attributed far more to pre-existing racial and geographic divides than a lack of class consciousness on the part of their organizers.

Kentucky's walkout presents serious problems for Blanc's claims about Sanders' role in sparking the recent upsurge of teacher strikes. It is therefore no coincidence that, after his interview with Nema in April 2018, he has refused to write about Kentucky's role in the so-called "red state revolts." Indeed, Kentucky's example can act as a measured counterweight to Blanc's narrative. Whereas the WVEA (and AFT-WV) leadership was much more hostile to rank-and-file actions, the KEA worked to smooth over tensions between themselves and KY 120 United's membership. The friction between leadership and membership in West Virginia was not replicated in Kentucky, nor were the racial divides between a large, predominantly Black city and a rural, white state.

To better understand the complex social issues and movements that sparked and fuel contemporary educator movements, Tithi Bhattacharya's analysis of the racial politics of Kentucky and the red state strikes is an excellent place to start. While Eric suggests that race was not an issue in his books and other writing, Bhattacharya argues, "Race is not an add-on to the struggle for wages. It shapes the terrain of struggle."

## **Understanding the Role of Social Justice Caucuses and Solidarity Associations**

In *Red State Revolt*, Blanc spends the first chapter outlining the devastating impacts of neoliberal austerity politics on his three surveyed states, alongside a policy-deficient Democratic Party that continuously sided with corporations over working-class interests. He avoids discussion of the already-in-motion community organizing that has long been fighting these impacts on the frontlines, long before Sanders' 2016 run.

Scholar, high school teacher, and organizer with Social Equity Educators (SEE), a rank-and-file caucus of the Seattle Education Association, Lauren Ware Stark has spent years traveling across the U.S. studying social justice caucuses and the development of the United Caucuses of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE). Caucuses are groups of educators within a union with shared affinities or political perspectives which work to steer the priorities and resources of the union. Social justice and rank-and-file caucuses, like the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), are often behind demands that reach far beyond "bread and butter" wage issues. CORE, via the mobilization of community-based and grassroots organizing with students and community organizations, led the 2012 and 2016 Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) strikes, and the most recent strike, which made such radical demands as rent control for educators, staff and families in a rapidly gentrifying city.

Stark's ethnographic studies have illuminated that the proliferation of social justice caucuses has important connections to the 2011 Occupy movement and the 2012 CTU strike and the rise of CORE. Further, Elizabeth Todd-Breland's recent book on the history of education organizing in Chicago argues that Black women's organizing, historically and today, has been central to these efforts. Rhiannon Maton, and Dana Morrison, in their respective work, illuminate that educators' experiences in and inspiration from intersecting social movements in their cities have led to the creation of educator-led organizations that aim to address the neoliberal urban policies that impact their schools and their students' lives.

### **Educators, Staff, and Social Movements Gave Rise to the Strikes, Not Bernie**

In Oklahoma and Arizona, two other prominent states Blanc suggests the Sanders campaign inspired to walkout, in-depth conversations with organizers suggest similar complexities as West Virginia and Kentucky.

In Arizona, one of the key organizers of the Arizona Educators United (AEU), the solidarity association working in tentative partnership with the NEA-affiliated state union, Vanessa Arrendondo-Aguirre became involved after seeing year after year of decreasing resources for her students, particularly her emergent bi- or multi-lingual students. New to organizing (but not to leadership work), Vanessa organized an intricate communication network among more than two thousand school liaisons. "It started with asking people to volunteer to work as liaisons. We are a grassroots movement," she said. "People slowly started volunteering, I created a list, with two lists, one for charter and one for public, which helped people to see which schools were missing liaisons. And then others stepped up and started getting themselves organized." Vanessa's organizing labor and sophisticated use of technology in building this communication and decision-making infrastructure enabled the AEU to practice a radically democratic approach in the lead up to and during its statewide strike in 2018.

In suggesting Sanders started the teachers revolt, Blanc erases and diminishes the massive amount of heavy lifting, tedious organizing, and emotional labor undertaken by so many, especially women, educators fighting and striking for a better world. Further, Blanc ignores the immense amount of scholarly labor that many, like Todd-Breland, have undertaken to illuminate the silenced histories of women, especially women of color, organizing in education.

West Virginia educator Emily Comer learned much about class warfare as a community organizer, just as key Arizona organizer Rebecca Garelli did as a rank-and-file educator in the 2012 CTU strike or her earlier participation in anti-war activism, two people Blanc cites repeatedly as evidence for Bernie's ability to spark class struggle in young radicals. How does suggesting that the Sanders' campaign "started" or "helped spark" the movement honor and enable others to learn from the skillful knowledge and intense, messy relational labor that Vanessa, Rebecca, Emily, Tia, Tyra, Gay, Nema, Nicole, Matt, Jay, and so many hundreds of others poured and continue to pour into the educator uprisings in their respective places?

If Blanc is truly interested and invested in understanding and supporting the ongoing educators' revolt, he might use his access to media and idea dissemination to sincerely and descriptively center the perspectives and analyses of those organizing in and for the rising tide of social movement unionism in education.

*\* Note from the authors: an earlier version of this article incorrectly indicated that this quotation was from Eric Blanc.*