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USA

Walkouts teach U.S. labor a new grammar for struggle

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Like the Arab Spring, the U.S. “education Spring,” was an explosive wave of protests. State-wide teacher walkouts seemed to arise out of nowhere, organized in Facebook groups, with demands for increased school funding and political voice for teachers. Though the walkouts confounded national media outlets, which had little idea how to explain or report on the movements, for parent and teacher activists who have been organizing against reforms in public education in the past four decades, the protests were both unexpected and understandable. What was surprising was their breadth of support (state-wide), their organizing strategy (Facebook), and their breathtakingly rapid spread.

For most of the far-Right, the West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona, and North Carolina walkouts showed greedy public employees exploiting their job security to get pay and benefits better than hard-working taxpayers have. However, teachers won wide popular support, even from Republicans, forcing the media-savvier elements of the Right to alter their tone.

The American Enterprise Institute (AEI) posted a blog with a sympathetic tone pushing the same stance. “While teachers are justly frustrated by take-home pay, their total compensation is typically a lot higher than many teachers realize. That’s because teacher retirement and health-care systems are much more expensive than those of the taxpayers who pay for them — whether those taxpayers work in the private or public sector.” Shedding crocodile tears for teachers who are underpaid and retirees without adequate pensions, AEI rejects the idea more school funding would help. What’s needed is tweaking neoliberalism’s (failed) policy of “merit” pay.

As I explain later, policies that link teacher pay to their “performance,” judged by students’ scores on standardized tests, underlies much teacher anger. The AEI authors, who write for people in education, adopts the bouncy, cheerleader-like prose to argue the real challenge is “how to pay terrific and invaluable teachers more appropriately.” Teachers now understand these policies force them to compete against one another for elusive bonuses which replace funding pay schedules for everyone that are based on years of experience and education. [\[1\]](#)

From the start in West Virginia, local coverage of the state walkouts was impressively accurate. Reporters interviewed teachers, school workers, and parents, hearing from them how and why their movement had gained momentum, noting they were protesting salaries, health care, pensions, but also the need for increased school funding for school supplies and improvements to dilapidated facilities. In contrast, national media were clueless about how the walkouts had been organized, relying on interviews and press releases from union officers and politicians. Few reports explained that in these “right to work states” both the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), the two national teachers unions, had state affiliates with a tiny number of dues-paying members and state union officials did not speak for the protestors. Though the AFT President showed up for a few publicity opportunities, in all of these states the AFT affiliate is far smaller than the NEA and is essentially irrelevant politically in teacher union politics.

One singular aspect of the walkouts is that they were organized from below, outside of (and despite) attempted control by state union officials. Though teachers and other school workers who were local union activists were often leaders, they were part of the movement, not its masters. The many activists with whom I communicated in the course of the “education Spring” all concurred that if the unions had been doing what they should have, the Facebook-based movements wouldn’t have been needed. Though participants were understandably uncomfortable expressing their dissatisfaction with the unions in public during the walkouts, in private conversations teachers were quite explicit that their unions were “irrelevant,” “out of touch,” and “useless.” Teachers in Oklahoma and Kentucky told me they had never been approached to join a union until the Professional Organization of Educators signed them

up. They learned once the agitation for the walkouts began and this “union” responded to the calls for action with the same arguments as the far Right teacher-bashers that this was a front group for the billionaires who controlled the state legislature.

Coverage in liberal media and some Left publications tried to make these walkouts fit the mold of “bread and butter” labor struggles. While accounts were accurate in noting that reduced state funding was the immediate root of low teacher pay, a unifying demand in the walkouts, the stories ignored other, equally important sources of teachers’ frustration and anger, profound changes in schools and teaching because of bipartisan reforms in the past ten years and the unions’ acquiescence to them. The walkouts have brought to the surface widespread frustration and anger about policies that teachers see making their jobs and fulfillment of the reasons they chose to teach almost impossible.

Despite the flood of stories in popular and Left publications, most analysis has missed key lessons of these walkouts, including how gender and race influenced the movement, why these walkouts exemplified workers’ self-organization, and how collective bargaining both restrains and protects class struggle, issues I discuss in more detail elsewhere. [2] When these elements are included, the walkouts suggest a new grammar for labor struggle that can challenge the Right’s legal and political attacks on unions everywhere, the South included.

Teacher self-organization replaces unions missing in action

West Virginia began the wave of state-wide walkouts, inspiring similar campaigns in Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona. Teachers in Denver closed schools in Jefferson County for a day to mass in their state capitol, and North Carolina teachers held a one-day protest in which 25,000 people participated. While there were major similarities, the movements also differed in significant ways because of geography, history, demographics, and the state’s balance of political forces.

My knowledge of the walkouts is drawn from published reports as well as my on-going involvement with activists as an adviser and supporter, on the Facebook pages, in phone calls with organizers, and video conferences with protestors. The movements followed the same pattern: A handful of teachers and other school employees, including some union activists, frustrated about their unions (in)action, created a Facebook group limited to people who were teachers and school employees in the state. Often an auxiliary group or page was established to provide information and support, but decisions about strategy in votes conducted in surveys were restricted to the closed Facebook pages, to those risking their jobs in taking action. Participants shared information, strategy, and voted.

No distinction was made on the Facebook page between those who were or were not union members, although many joined the unions in the course of the walkouts. Discussions became more political by the hour; remorseful, angry posts by people who had voted for the governors who subsequently ridiculed and insulted them were common. A post questioning where the money would come from to fund salary increases might be answered with a suggestion to use the lottery, followed shortly by an activist knowledgeable about the Right’s control of tax policy with more information about a progressive alternative, generally in the form of a link to a website. Many participants self-identified as Republicans and as conservatives. Many identified religious faith, assumed to be Christianity, as a powerful support, and in West Virginia thousands joined in prayer each day at a designated time, asking for guidance and strength.

The reason I refer to these actions as “walkouts” is that the organizers adopted a strategy that avoided the language of striking although the protests took a form that relied on unity and solidarity no less than in a strike. Teachers

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phoned in to their schools saying they would not be present, using personal days or sick days *en masse* to force schools and districts to close, until all or much of the state's school districts announced they would be closed. Superintendents, who are almost always former teachers, were often sympathetic to the walkouts. In West Virginia, school workers other than teachers were included in the movement from the start, using what one activist called "wall to wall" organizing. Detroit teachers closed their schools in May 2016, a school system under state control, using the "sick out," which, like using personal days to close schools, avoids, at least temporarily, some of the legal problems of a walkout in a state that outlaws teachers' strikes.

National media, including a labor reporter who represents himself as a savvy insider, consistently assumed that state union officials spoke for the movements, missing a dynamic that made the "education Spring" so special in U.S. labor: those whom union officials say they represent were actually in control much of the time, reversing the typical hierarchy of union officials telling members/workers what to do. In West Virginia union officials tried – and failed – to broker a deal with the government without checking in with the Facebook organization. The movement was sufficiently well-organized and unified that it held strong in rejecting the settlement, forcing union officials to back down after they announced – and the New York Times reported – the walkout had been ended.

In Oklahoma and Kentucky the movements were more fragmented, less well-organized, and the teachers and school workers leading the Facebook groups less politically experienced. Officers of the Oklahoma and Kentucky NEA affiliates made backroom deals to end the walkouts, claiming to have polled members. But as the postings on the Facebook pages showed, the vast majority of walkout participants had no opportunity to weigh-in on the settlement, either on the Facebook page or in the union poll. The reaction to the substance of the settlements was, at best, very mixed. However the anger at union officials' usurpation of what was almost unanimously agreed was protestors' right to decide how and when to return to work was expressed quite strongly. Those who were the most active felt the most blindsided and betrayed by the unions' actions. Though deeply disappointed with the settlements, which relied on regressive taxes and provided relatively little new money, Oklahoma and Kentucky teachers lacked sufficient organization, even in the cities where they were strongest, to continue the walkouts without union help. "How could we have missed that the union would do this?" one anguished Oklahoma activist asked me.

In Arizona activists developed a collaborative relationship with the NEA affiliate, which "played nice," as one leader told me. A small AFT local, on the other hand, played a "rogue" role, calling for walkouts separate from the unified "Red for Ed" movement so as to claim leadership of the movement. Activists in all the states mentored one another, and in Arizona leaders referred to what had occurred in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) 2012 strike. They developed a consensus that the walkout was the first round in building a movement that had initiated what would be an on-going struggle that involved political education, electoral action, and building a stronger, responsive union by recruiting and engaging teachers who had lost their fear of standing up and being heard. Unlike in the other states, in North Carolina the May 16 state-wide protest in the capitol planned well beforehand in a process initiated by Organize 2020, a state-wide reform caucus in the NEA affiliate.

One tension in all the states was balancing direct action with the hope that electoral activity would bring solutions. As teachers massed in the state capitols in the tens of thousands, their protests suggested a possibility of a re-enactment of what had occurred in Madison, Wisconsin. In Madison teachers and other public employees occupied the state legislature in response to the legislation that revoked the right of public employees to bargain collectively. Their occupation ended when union officials persuaded them to leave the building, to adopt what proved to be an unsuccessful electoral strategy, recall of the governor, Scott Walker.

In Kentucky one contingent of teachers and education activists were alert to the possibility of an occupation and packed bags with clean underwear. This possibility of a "Madison – with a different ending," the shorthand I used in my discussions with walkout leaders, explains why national media clung to the myth that union officials spoke for teachers and the corollary, that workers can't achieve their goals through direct action but must instead rely on the ballot box. In her press conference announcing that the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA) had agreed to

support legislation (which the movement had previously rejected), the OEA president said the union “had achieved all it could with a walkout” and would “shift their efforts to supporting candidates in the fall elections who favor increased education spending.” Yet the biggest pieces of legislation passed before the walkout, not during it, so the movement’s strength had not yet been tested. No press questioned how or why the electoral strategy would succeed in Oklahoma or Kentucky when the traditionally liberal and labor-friendly state of Wisconsin had failed to recall Walker, allowing the GOP to destroy collective bargaining for public employees. [3]

The walkouts enjoyed huge popular support, from conservative Republicans to socialists. A new generation radicalized by the Sanders campaign, especially members of Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), made their presence felt by organizing support. Progressive watchdog groups were also important allies in identifying legislation that needed to be stopped – or should be passed – in each state. Save Our Schools Kentucky, an education advocacy group that has strong connections with progressive and “good-government” organizations in the state, did much of the planning that the NEA affiliate did not, serving as an auxiliary to the Facebook group of teachers and other school employees, led by a charismatic school worker.

Liberalism’s Rip van Winkle slumber and partial awakening

Liberals have (mostly) been awakened from their neoliberal somnolence, discovering that reforms supported enthusiastically by both parties, masked in the rhetoric of creating educational opportunity, were aimed at destroying public education. Still, an exchange in Dissent about what was progressive in neoliberalism reveals that even socialists are not yet clear about the real aims and meaning of the neoliberal project. [4] Their confusion seems to me related to a fearfulness about confronting head-on the role of the Democratic Party and therefore aligning with popular movements, often people fighting on issues of social oppression, that are pushing for a fundamental political break from both parties and the political status quo.

There should be no doubt on the Left about the need to reject all of the bipartisan reforms that have been imposed on U.S. schools. As I explain elsewhere, the project’s key elements include privatizing the education sector; eliminating democratic oversight of schools; and making teaching a revolving door of low-paid, minimally educated teachers who will teach to tests over which students, parents, and teachers have no voice. In all of the states having walkouts, teachers were aghast that state legislators moved to allow anyone with a B.A. to teach, removing requirements for teaching credentials, because of a “teacher shortage” artificially induced by low pay and poor working conditions in schools. In fact, U.S. state legislatures have been carrying out policies the World Bank has demanded from the global South for decades, destroying teaching as a career. [5] Though teachers understood that the “shortage” could be solved by funding schools and increasing salaries, even they missed how elimination of certification requirements connects to testing and privatization, pillars of the neoliberal project.

In a lavishly funded global propaganda campaign orchestrated by powerful elites, teachers have been attacked for a huge range of social and educational problems over which they have no control. As many comments on the Facebook pages showed, frustration and anger that fueled the explosiveness of the walkouts was due in good part to policies and rhetoric that assume “teacher quality” is all that matters in student learning and can be measured accurately by students’ scores on standardized tests. Oklahoma’s “teacher of the year,” one of the fifty teachers given this award and invited to meet privately with Education Secretary Betsy DeVos, told DeVos her “choice policies,” meaning charter schools and private schools receiving vouchers, were draining traditional public schools of resources in his state. When DeVos suggested students were fleeing low-performing schools, the Oklahoma music teacher, who had voted for Trump, responded that government policies “taking all the kids that can afford to get out and leaving the kids who can’t behind” is what “created the bad schools.” The Montana and California teachers of the year expressed dismay after the meeting at DeVos’ comments opposing teacher strikes. “She basically said that

teachers should be teaching and we should be able to solve our problems not at the expense of children ... For her to say at the “expense of children” was a very profound moment and one I’ll remember forever because that is so far from what is happening.” [6]

Teacher anger at being held responsible for student learning while facing policies that undercut their ability to do their jobs is clearly not limited to the “red states.” An array of conditions, not just reduced funding, created the perfect storm for direct action that spread so quickly. Some teachers were inspired by student protests over gun violence, but for many years courageous teachers and parents have been allies in the “opt out” of testing movement to stop standardized testing. The Bad Ass Teachers (BATS), organized on social media, banded together in “red states” and “blue” to fight the attacks on teachers’ dignity as workers because teachers unions have not adequately defended the profession. Nationally, funding of teachers’ salaries mostly comes from local districts, supplemented by state revenues, but much of teachers’ work is directly controlled by state law. Although federal mandates have squeezed the states – with little resistance from Democrats - states still have leeway in deciding who can teach, what is taught and how. States generally fund teachers’ pensions and health benefits, either entirely or to a considerable extent. Therefore every state is susceptible to state-wide mobilizations by teachers, though the presence or absence of collective bargaining rights is certainly a factor in explaining the walkouts.

Collective bargaining legislation that was passed in the 1960s and 1970s is a mixed bag. It gave teachers unions stability and the strength to negotiate improved wages and benefits for members, but the legal framework also created a highly circumscribed scope of bargaining, ceding to school boards and administration the right to decide most issues that affect teachers’ work and students’ learning. Even under the best of circumstances, when they have public support for increased school funding, with the best unions, teachers have a very difficult time using collective bargaining to make significant changes in their work. Improving schools is complex, as even elements of the far Right that want a fully privatized public school system now acknowledge, because privatization has failed to boost students’ test scores. Teacher unions generally focus on what officials see as most winnable “bread and butter” for reasons both political and practical. In places the unions have collective bargaining, the narrowed scope of bargaining has been worsened by the business union model, which has encouraged member indifference and inactivity when not deepening frustration. Thus business unionism has simultaneously weakened the unions’ capacity to protect teachers’ interests and intensified the constraint of struggle.

The walkouts and teacher unionism’s transformation

The assumption that the state teachers unions in the “red states” spoke for the movement obscured an extremely important political aspect of the walkouts: They were round two in the struggle to transform teacher unionism. Whether knowingly or not, these grassroots movements challenged the premises on which teachers unions have operated for four decades, a fact missing in most reportage and analysis. Even stories correctly noting links between the walkouts’ and the CTU’s path-breaking 2012 strike omitted reference to how the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) won CTU leadership by mobilizing union members to fight for a different kind of union, altering the CTU’s priorities, narrative, and operation and in so doing presenting a challenge to the business unionism of both AFT and NEA. [7]

CORE’s successful struggle launched a wave of reform caucuses, which is challenging leadership in urban locals and state-wide, supported by a network associated with Labor Notes. In Los Angeles and Boston (AFT locals), as well as the state of Massachusetts (the NEA affiliate), union activists who identify with CORE’s “social justice” orientation and organizing model have been elected union presidents. In other cities, reform caucuses sometimes share leadership with the older guard. Key “red state” activists have now joined this reform network. They are a new, vibrant ally for the CTU and like-minded reformers, in a group that is supported by Labor Notes. [8]

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Gender wasn't discussed much but it should be because the walkouts showed its powerful potential to reinvigorate and democratize teachers unions. While CORE was able to win the votes of teachers in elementary schools, has organized in their schools, and has had a remarkable program of political education, as is true in most teachers unions, its leadership and base were mostly white and male, high school teachers, with some crucial exceptions, the most powerful being Karen Lewis, CTU's beloved African American president. What has been game-changing in the "red state" walkouts is the participation and politicization of women, especially female elementary school teachers. The movement's power was "women power."

Though female teachers didn't discuss gender on the Facebook pages, with the exception of a few postings about paternalistic (my word, not theirs) male principals, and most answered gender wasn't a factor in their participation when the question was first posed, after some reflection they identified a range of gender-related issues, from who did housework and shopping for the family while they were protesting in the state capitol, to the ways their work and intelligence were devalued in the society. They were ferociously protective of "their kids" (the term elementary school teachers especially use for their students), making sure they had meals when schools were closed. This speaks to their view of teaching as nurturing, traditionally the mother's role. Their participation is #MeToo brought to teacher unionism, a response to the deterioration and devaluation of teachers' work. One of the best analyses of any of the walkouts, which captured the union's attempt to "domesticate" the struggle, explained how gender configured the West Virginia protest. "If the vast majority of women strikers did not regard themselves to be feminists, feminism, to paraphrase a revolutionary, certainly was not disregarding the strike. The strike, the conditions that led to the strike, the way the strike unfolded were all deeply gendered." [9]

Perhaps the most dangerous omission in the walkout narrative and subsequent analyses is the salience of race and racism, and teacher unionism's historic failure to engage with systemic racism in education and the society. Pyrrhic strikes in 1960s and 70s that pitted teachers against civil rights activists, perhaps most violently in Newark, NJ and New York City, accelerated the unions' demise as democratic, militant organizations capable of winning substantial victories for members. [10] That pattern was interrupted when CORE, which had organized against school closings in the Black community, foregrounded the gross inequities the city perpetuated against students of color in its 2012 strike, with its program for the schools "Chicago children deserve."

The strategic and moral importance of teacher unions fusing a commitment to anti-racism work with their narratives about what's wrong with public education can't be overstated. Tulsa and Oklahoma City were strongholds of the walkouts in Oklahoma, yet in both places the local union was unwilling or unable to articulate demands that would speak directly to the aspirations and apprehensions of Black residents, parents, and students, who are educated in intensely segregated neighborhoods and schools. In Kentucky, the deal the state union brokered allowed the governor to move to take over the Louisville schools. In being "race blind" the movements failed to connect with one of their most powerful potential allies. As a co-thinker involved in supporting the Kentucky teachers astutely observed in our conversation about racism's invisibility even among socialists, we have a chance "to get race right this time, and if we don't, it's over."

The movements created in the "education Spring" face the challenge of how to discuss and act on systemic racism, reflected in every aspect of school life I can think of, while maintaining unity among teachers. Almost one-quarter of AFT members nationally voted for Trump; one-third did so in the NEA. The national statistics about teacher union members voting for Trump don't even reflect how teachers in the South, not members of unions, voted. A color-blindness that obscures racism is not only a problem for teachers and teachers unions, but for the Left, including socialists, as shown by omission of analysis of race in reports about the walkouts and an article about the "progressive potential" of the Scholastic Aptitude Tests (SATs) that ignored the origins of standardized testing in Eugenics. [11]

Stating the need for "quality education for all" as do the unions – at their best – avoids confronting the legacy of labor's and the education establishment's complicity in accepting government policies that have created and

sustained racial segregation in housing, schools, and the labor market. [12] Expecting support in economic struggles without giving it to communities of color and immigrants on social battles is a dangerous illusion for teachers unions. When workers mobilize and see the need to have allies, they become open to topics that are otherwise not welcomed. In conversations with teachers in Oklahoma and Kentucky, I asked if they had support among parents. The White teachers all thought their locals (in large cities) had done a solid job in getting support, but when I asked the African American teachers to comment, they dissented, saying they had heard community and other teachers express ambivalence about supporting the walkout because the local hadn't been there for the community. For teachers' organizations with collective bargaining or without it, winning the trust of parents who feel estranged from schools and often teachers personally, especially White teachers of students of color, requires being physically present in community struggles against racist policies, fighting school closures but also police brutality and deportations.

Organize 2020 is an important model in this and other regards. This state-wide caucus used social media and the excitement of the previous walkouts to build a one-day protest in the state capitol, and in so doing greatly expand its on-the-ground presence state-wide. Its leadership understands the caucus purpose as long-term, building a democratic union based on socially progressive ideals, including an explicit rejection of racism. It has developed alliances with community groups, and when the North Carolina Association of Educators (NCAE), the lethargic, passive state union, refuses to take action members need, the caucus steps in as best it can given its scarce resources and carries out the plan. Though the North Carolina walkout was just one day, Organize 2020 mobilized teachers on the basis of demands that were race-conscious and that addressed tax breaks for the corporations and wealthy. [13] The caucus sees a role for the state's teachers in rebuilding labor in the state. It brings CORE's ideas to its work but looks for strategies that fit its situation.

Teacher unionism in a Trump administration

Since the "excellence reforms" in education in the 1990s, when the neoliberal project in the country was begun with the warning the U.S. was a "nation at risk" of falling behind in a global economy, liberals have joined conservatives in embracing strategies to use education as "the one true path out of poverty," as Arne Duncan, Obama's Secretary of Education phrased the ideological assumption driving educational policy. Despite overwhelming evidence that poverty and unemployment are endemic to a global economy in which workers globally are forced to compete for low-wage jobs requiring relatively little education, liberals and the labor establishment have embraced an exclusively economic rationale for public education that has subverted its other social purposes. While the Left has rightly emphasized education's limited potential to ameliorate poverty and its inability to create jobs, socialists have been less willing to grapple with the complicating reality that schooling can make a difference in terms of individuals' life prospects. So while "teacher quality" is one of the many factors that affect what students learn and we should be concerned about having well-prepared teachers in our schools, good teaching cannot be accurately measured by students' standardized test scores, nor created or sustained in environments that undercut teachers' exercise of their judgement, the hallmarks of the last decade's reforms. [14]] We need only look at how wealthy elites educate their children – in schools with small classes, with teachers who are paid well and given considerable autonomy working in properly-maintained buildings and schools offering courses of study that include the arts - to see that education counts. The policies that have created "choice," that is, privatized schooling, have resonated with low-income parents and communities of color because they want their children to have the same opportunity affluent parents demand for their kids, to attend college so as to compete for the diminishing number of good jobs.

However, during the 2016 primaries and election, bipartisan consensus about education being the best way to end poverty and improve the nation's economy was shattered. Both Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, campaigning on diametrically opposed premises about capitalism, argued for economic policies to alleviate inequality. In so doing they implicitly rejected education as the "one true path out of poverty." Education reform as a jobs policy was jettisoned. Moreover, Trump's and the GOP's embrace of policies supporting White supremacy, misogyny,

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anti-immigrant sentiment, and pseudo-Darwinian ideas about “natural ability” have completely undercut the currency of the Democratic Party’s claims that education reforms it has supported are a viable way to make U.S. society more equal. The rhetoric masking privatization and “choice” as a method of increasing opportunity for racial minorities has been ditched by the GOP, stripping the Democrats of their cover for supporting privatization.

Trump and the GOP have been met with outrage and opposition in the streets, and though the “resistance” has not been able to turn protest into political victories, these movements present an opportunity for teachers unions and a dilemma for existing national leadership. Teachers unions feel pressures from social justice movements to confront the Trump administration, not “sit at the table” as they have in collaborating with previous administrations. The political tightrope NEA and AFT walk was illustrated by an episode shortly after DeVos was approved as Secretary of Education. AFT and NEA mobilized with petitions and phone calls to Congress to block her appointment, raising expectations that the unions would use their power to wage an all-out fight against the GOP and Trump. But when 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, and she invited DeVos to visit schools with her to engage in dialogue. Weingarten also met with Steve Bannon before he was ousted, an encounter reported (uncritically) in *The Intercept* with Weingarten’s stance that it was an opportunity to understand Bannon’s entreaties to support Trump. [15] So while the AFT and NEA endorse the ideas of “social justice” unionism and provide financial support for Journey for Justice, an alliance that includes well-respected community activists, Weingarten’s meeting with Bannon suggest the AFT leadership’s willingness to desert allies in communities of color should union officials find that expedient [16]. And where the AFT goes, the NEA follows shortly, regardless of policies its convention endorses.

Though most activists in the “red states” don’t see this – yet - these movements are laying the ground work for a new labor movement in the South. What they need to do now is develop a truly progressive program for tax reform and provision of public services and figure out an electoral strategy that uses mobilizations and controls the politicians it elects. In West Virginia and in Jersey City, where teachers union conducted a one-day strike, health care was a key issue. To undercut the argument that unions, especially those representing public employees, are no different from other special interest groups, out for their own good, teachers have to use their political muscle to win “single payer” healthcare. Fighting for economic demands without embedding them in a social vision for improving working people’s lives is a losing strategy that may win an occasional strike but depletes the reservoir of support that is needed to win the big battles.

One of the greatest contributions of this movement has been to redefine what it means to be a worker. Even the Left has had trouble understanding that teachers’ work, though it is “women’s work,” is real work—that teachers are real workers. In the “turn to the working class” in the 1970s, socialists abandoned their activity in public employee unions with robust reform caucuses in order to influence industrial workers, in steel, auto, communications, transportation. In doing so, they decimated the radical presence in the AFT and NEA. The walkouts have shown the Left its mistake in a turn to the working class that defined work, workers, and class in ways that ignored a huge swath, even then, of the workforce. Teachers are fighting for the dignity of their work and the right to voice about their working conditions. They are defending education as a public good and their students’ rights to have what the wealthy take for granted. 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. This movement of people who do “women’s work,” most of who are women, has confirmed – once again - Marx’s dictum “the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.”

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[New Politics](#)

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