

Introduction. Understanding the 2018 Statewide Walkouts Contemporary Educator Movements: Transforming Unions, Schools and Society in North America (Part 2) Understanding the 2018 Statewide Walkouts

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

This is the second of four issues in the special series investigating Contemporary Educator Movements: Transforming Unions, Schools, and Society in North America. This issue focuses on the “red” statewide K12 education strikes in the United States in the spring of 2018, contributing substantive analyses of the relatively understudied contexts of the walkouts for scholars and organizers. Together, the pieces in this issue suggest the importance of attending to the unique and deeply contested political geographies of the nation’s more rural regions and the significance of these regions to contemporary educator struggles.

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Introduction

*Understanding the 2018 Statewide Walkouts
Contemporary Educator Movements: Transforming
Unions, Schools and Society in North America (Part 2)*

Understanding the 2018 Statewide Walkouts

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This issue of *Critical Education* is the second part in a four-part series, Contemporary Educator Movements: Transforming Unions, Schools, and Society in North America. The series aims to bring together scholars and educator organizers to offer empirical and narrative accounts of the terrain of recent educator labor activism and its (inter)relation with contemporary social movements. In the first issue (Vol. 12, Issue 7), the empirical scholarship of Niescz (2021), Morrison (2021), and Riley (2021) alongside Shiller's (2021) interview with Baltimore social justice caucus organizer and para-educator, Keysha Goodwin, offer important accounts of the ways in which educator unionists engage in political education. Importantly, the authors illustrate the ways this is shaped in and through social movements and articulate how this learning impacts, sustains, and grows their organizing efforts. In the forthcoming third and fourth issues, we highlight (anti)racism, democracy and social justice unionism and education labor movements across the Americas, respectively.

Here, in Part Two, we zoom in on the “red” statewide K12 education strikes in the spring of 2018. While the 2012 Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators-led Chicago Teachers Union strike served as an influential predecessor to the recent resurgence in educator militancy, the statewide strikes six years later in Republican-governed states with among the lowest educator wages kickstarted a wave of educator walkouts and protests unprecedented since the 1970s (Shelton, 2017). In 2018-2019, more than 645,000 educators participated in a work stoppage in the U.S. (BLS, 2020). In these states, including West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, and Arizona, education unions had long been weakened by anti-union ‘right-to-work’ legislation, limiting unions’ ability to collect dues (open vs. closed shop) and the scope and possibility for collective bargaining. Protesting stagnant wages, increasing healthcare insurance precarity, and ever-decreasing public education funding, rank-and-file educators organized on the periphery, and sometimes altogether beyond, their formal unions (Dyke & Muckian-Bates, 2019).

Since the statewide walkouts, analyses have sought to understand how and why such widespread action occurred in these places and their successes and challenges (e.g., Blanc, 2018; Catte et al., 2018; Krutka et al., 2018; Dyke & Muckian-Bates, 2019; Karvelis, 2019; Edison & Rovira, 2020; Garelli, 2020; McCormick, 2020). Prior to 2018, the vast majority of scholarship and analysis of educator union struggles has privileged the stronger union contexts of northern and coastal contexts (Hale, 2019). As Stark (2019) notes, the political geographical compositions of the “blue” cities or states where major work stoppages subsequently occurred in the 2018-2019 school year (e.g., Oakland, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Oregon) were quite different from the “red” state contexts of spring 2018: “Indeed, one of the striking differences between organizers’ demands in the upsurge of 2018 and 2019 is their relative focus on economic and racial justice. While educators in both conservative and progressive regions developed demands that emphasized economic justice, only strikes in urban, left-leaning locals ... emphasized racial justice demands” (p. 140).

Stark (2019) notes that these urban locals, often shaped by social justice caucus and reform organizing within their unions, were significantly shaped by educators’ participation in local social movements. Karvelis’ review (this issue) of Eric Blanc’s (2019) book, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers’ Strikes and Working Class Politics*, suggests the impact of local social movements on educator organizing in the “red” state strikes has been largely underappreciated, e.g., Latinx-led movements for intersecting issues of immigrant and educational justice. Further, Karvelis highlights the importance of Blanc’s (2019) account, yet complicates the author’s militant minority thesis. As an organizer and co-founder of Arizona Educators United (AEU), through which tens

of thousands of educators across the state networked and coordinated together, Karvelis offers important insight into the widespread distribution of leadership and effort that comprised the state's education strike and ongoing organizing. Also in this issue, his interview with fellow co-founding AEU member and rural elementary teacher, Vanessa Arrendondo, discusses their experiences during and following the strike, including the (often undervalued, less visible) relational and collective administrative labor that educator movements require. Karvelis' book review and interview, together, also suggest the significance and challenges of democratizing educator movement organizations.

The empirical studies included in this issue expand on discussions of organizational democracy and the significance of widespread participation in rank-and-file educator organizing in the "red" state strikes. As (mostly PK-12) public educators in Oklahoma, Dyke, Anderson, Brown, El Sabbagh, Fernandez, Goodwin, Hickey, Lowther, Price, Ruby, Self, Williams, Williams, and Worth undertook more than 50 oral history interviews with educators in their state's 2018 walkout. In the relatively few existing analyses of the "red" state strikes, Oklahoma is less visible, in part, because its educator strike is often understood as less successful than those in West Virginia and Arizona. The authors aim to reframe a stultifying narrative of defeat, illuminating and re-valuing the seemingly ordinary yet extraordinary ways everyday, predominantly women educators drew on existing relationships and networks to coordinate and organize their colleagues and communities. Further, they describe the longer impacts on educators' identities as activists and organizers following 2018.

Howell-Beck's and Schwitzer's qualitative study examines the overt and covert functions of social media in a secret West Virginia Facebook group, which played a key role in the state's 2018 strike. Utilizing poststructural and social justice unionist frameworks, they explore the ways in which educators' social media participation created (covert) spaces for educators to critique and expand, often, normatively gendered definitions of the "good" teacher subjectivity. For Howell-Beck and Schwitzer, the pedagogical functions of social media enabled educators to collectivize their struggles and develop their critical analyses of the conditions and policies surrounding teachers' work. The authors suggest the importance of making this and other covert functions *overt* in social media spaces toward social justice unionism.

Overall, this issue aims to contribute substantive analyses of the relatively understudied contexts of the 2018 statewide walkouts for scholars and organizers. Together, the pieces suggest the importance of attending to the unique and deeply contested political geographies of the nation's more rural regions and the significance of these regions to contemporary educator struggles.

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