

## Beyond Defeat Understanding Educators' Experiences in the 2018 Oklahoma Walkouts

Erin Dyke, Heather Anderson, Autumn Brown, Jinan El Sabbagh, Hannah Fernandez, Stacey Goodwin, Mark Hickey, Jennie Lowther, Stephanie Price, Megan Ruby, Kristy Self, Debbie Williams, Jennifer Williams and Angel Worth

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## *Beyond Defeat*

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Erin Dyke, Heather Anderson, Autumn Brown, Jinan El Sabbagh, Hannah Fernandez, Stacey Goodwin, Mark Hickey, Jennie Lowther, Stephanie Price, Megan Ruby, Kristy Self, Debbie Williams, Jennifer Williams, Angel Worth

*Oklahoma State University*

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#### **Abstract**

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## Introduction

It was a cold April day in Oklahoma. The wind was sharp and the sky was a mellow gray. Megan and her fellow teachers had all crammed onto a yellow school bus outside of Nathan Hale High School like a group of excited students headed out on their first-ever field trip. The excitement was animated by a strong determination to make a difference. On the bus, Megan heard and participated in conversations about which congresspeople they would approach and teachers' hopes that this time away from their classrooms would do the thing teachers wanted most: to secure the resources they needed to improve their working conditions and their students' learning conditions. Megan, a working-class elementary educator, worked nights as a clerk at a local hotel and drove Uber whenever she could to make ends meet. A quick search on the internet uncovers countless stories of teachers, like Megan, working multiple jobs to provide for themselves and to buy curriculum resources for their students, many of whose history books still had George W. Bush listed as the current president (Levenson & Williams, 2018).

Alongside Megan and her colleagues, Oklahoma educators shut down school districts across the state for two weeks in early April 2018, demanding increased wages and public education funding after decades of intensifying austerity and deteriorating conditions. The week prior to the planned action, the state legislature passed some concessions for increased wages and funding in hopes of avoiding the strike. However, these were significantly short of what the NEA-affiliate state union, the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA), demanded. Unlike other similar statewide education strikes around the same time in West Virginia, Kentucky, and Arizona (Givan & Lang, 2020), the Oklahoma educator strike did not achieve any additional gains on their demands than what was passed prior to the action. Many educators felt a sense of immense defeat when the OEA, in concert with district superintendents, called off the strike after two long weeks with seemingly nothing to show for it. Among the emerging scholarship on the resurgence of education strikes and social movement unionism, Oklahoma has received less scholarly attention and analysis than other states (e.g., Givan & Lang, 2020). When it has received attention, the statewide action is often cast as unsuccessful in relation to other "red state" strikes (e.g., Blanc, 2019). In popular media, the most prominent voices of the Oklahoma education walkouts have been state union leadership or two teachers, both men, who created massively popular Facebook pages agitating for the strike, diminishing the widespread and distributed local efforts that converged to make the strike happen.

As a research team, we collected 50 oral history interviews with predominantly women teachers and support professionals across the state who meaningfully participated in the walkouts. The teachers and staff we interviewed are voices not previously cited in local or national news or would be identified readily as prominent or powerful leaders in the strike – they are everyday folks, like many of the co-authors, whose vision and critical labor made the walkout happen. Our collective analysis illuminates the limits in framing the event narrowly in terms of win-lose or as an anomalous event that began overnight with a statewide Facebook group in March and ended April 16th, when all schools reopened. Instead, we draw from our interviews to suggest a framing that centers a constructively critical and in-depth understanding of what educators, students, and their communities collectively began and continue to *learn* and *create* in preparation for, during, and in the afterlife of the strike. At the same time, we work to understand in our analysis when and how such collective grassroots work was stalled or challenged. Further, we suggest analyses of the historic event should be more discerning of who speaks for the state's educators and, alternatively, whose voices and perspectives exist only at the margins of the public record, if at all.

In the following, we provide further background context that continues to illuminate our call to re-frame the discussion of the 2018 strike's impact on Oklahoma, detail our community-based oral history methods of data collection and analysis, and discuss three major themes. First, we draw from our interviews to illuminate the ways many educators were learning critical organizing skills and studying how and what it means to confront power and demand change. Next, we describe the transformational impacts of the walkouts on many educators' identities as advocates, activists, or organizers. Finally, we examine the intense emotionality experienced by participants in the walkouts, both in their joyful collective rebellion and in their anger and frustration at district administrators and state union leaders' hierarchical directives to end the strike without additional gains. The contrasting emotionalities suggest the dire need for democratizing state and local unions.

During the first week of the 2018 strike, masses of Oklahoma educators surrounded the capitol building chanting together, "We are still here! We are not leaving!" Our study here aims to honor the reverberating echo of this chant that we all still feel and hear in our classrooms and hallways. It aims to produce insights that may be useful to teachers in Oklahoma and elsewhere who refuse to accept a return to business as usual, who are still here, who are not leaving, and who, perhaps, are interested in rekindling and sustaining the joy of solidarity and collective action for a public education our communities deserve.

### **Oklahoma in Context**

In the spring of 2018, a wave of education walkouts occurred across a number of red-leaning states where striking is against state law, including West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona. Demands aimed beyond only wage issues and targeted the reversal of decades of severe disinvestment in public schools. The strike wave ended with wage increases for teachers and staff (and, in some states, all public employees), improved healthcare benefits, and tens of millions of dollars in increased school funding (Yan, 2019). With widespread media coverage, the strikes spurred a serious and far-reaching public conversation about the concerning state of U.S. public education (Wickendon, 2018; Reilly, 2018) and introduced hundreds of thousands of teachers, staff, and students to collective action. The effects continue to reverberate across districts nationally, with strikes and/or strike votes in Colorado, Washington, and California, among others. Alex Caputo-Pearl, head of United Teachers Los Angeles (UTLA), the union serving the nation's second largest school district, cited the spring strike wave as a breaking point that inspired UTLA members to authorize a strike in fall of 2018 after more than a year of contract mediation (Quinlan, 2018). Building on this momentum, Chicago's Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators-led Chicago Teachers Union struck for 11 days in the fall of 2019 for such common good demands as affordable housing for students, guaranteed naps for pre-K students, and a district-wide sanctuary policy and resources for all undocumented students and families, and firm class size limits (Jaffe, 2019).

West Virginia, as the first state to strike in February 2018, certainly served as a catalyst for Oklahoma educators. However, talks of a walkout had been under discussion for months, and in some local buildings and districts, for more than a year leading up to the walkout. These talks were primarily led by active local union members and ad hoc educator groups outside their unions. In the longer and more immediate lead-up to the strike, teachers and staff organized meetings inside classrooms after school to air and collectively study their grievances, schemed in local union halls, whispered news to one another in the hallway, and created hyper-local secret social media groups to share information and make plans. Prior to West Virginia's strike, some educators and students

in Tulsa, Oklahoma undertook rolling sickouts in a few buildings in an effort to kickstart a statewide action (Mummolo, 2018). One superintendent, Chuck McCauley, at the encouraging of a local public education advocacy organization led by teachers and parents in the northeast town of Bartlesville, initiated conversations with regional and state superintendent organizations to lend support to a statewide walkout as early as a year prior to the strike (Blanc, 2019, p. 146). At first, state union leaders were hesitant to call for a walkout. Eventually, the OEA set a date for May in hopes of having more time to prepare. However, many educators felt the later date so close to summer break and after state testing held little leverage. On social media and among educator organizers, the call to push the date forward became quite loud. On the successful pressure to change the start date to April 2<sup>nd</sup>, OEA staffer, Amanda Ewing stated, “It’s going to happen with or without us, so we need to help” (Blanc, 2019, p. 153).

In the local and national reporting during the spring and summer following the 2018 Oklahoma education walkouts, the action was tentatively cast as a short-term win and/or a largely symbolic show of might in which the real wins and losses would be witnessed in the November elections (see, for a good example, Goldstein & Dias, 2018). A year later, analyses of what the strike accomplished were much less optimistic, acknowledging that only a fraction of educators’ demands were met (Halter, 2019) while the introduction of (what many understood as) retaliatory legislation against rebellious teachers created further sense of defeat among the state’s public education communities. Such legislation included a (failed) bill that would revoke teachers’ certification if they participated in subsequent walkouts (Yan, 2019) and attempts to continue to expand Oklahoma’s school vouchers programs (OSSBA, 2020). While the state legislature now has more educators in elected seats than ever before, many teachers felt frustration at the undemocratic way the state union leadership and district superintendents ended the walkouts. Union membership across the state dipped in the aftermath (Felder, 2018).

### **Mobilizing a Social Movements Framework**

Within education scholarship, studies of social movements in and targeting education are few relative to the area’s broad body of research. This literature on the periphery of educational research suggests the significance of attending to the, often, gendered and less visible relational and pedagogical work that social movements entail. Educator union and movement scholarship have illuminated the complex ways in which unionists and activists have undertaken such relational work to make sense of historically and geographically specific issues and politics shaping their local places (Lipman, 2011; Buras, 2014; Benson, 2018). For example, Buras (2014) recounts the efforts of a coalition of community-based and educator unionist organizations to respond to the corporate takeover of New Orleans schools. Through their grassroots efforts, participants studied and made sense of the interconnections between real estate development interests, historical structures of racial dispossession, and plans for school closure and privatization in their city. These studies and examples highlight the significance of relationships and pedagogy in educator activism (Inwood, 2017). In research on educator organizing, scholars have noted the significance of formal pedagogical spaces (i.e., book and study groups) for educator-activists or educator-unionists to study and learn together as part of their movement efforts (Picower, 2012; Stark & Maton, 2019; Morrison, 2018). Agitation, organizing and campaign practices require, as these studies suggest, long-term relational efforts (Niesz, 2021).

This marginalized area of scholarship has also illuminated the significance of closeness to and/or active involvement in these spaces for capturing the nuance and networked complexity of

educator organizing. For example, Stark's (2019) engagement of years of militant ethnographic study across the U.S. to understand the rise and proliferation of social justice caucuses within the United Caucuses of Rank and File Educators (UCORE) illuminates the kind of descriptive scholarly inquiry necessary to deeply understand the heterogeneity and facets of work involved in such organizing, including longstanding tensions between caucus efforts and the centralized, hierarchical structures of formal teachers unions operating under what Weiner (2012) describes as a business or service union model.

In more popular accounts of the 2018 Oklahoma educator strike, the absence of everyday educator voices is apparent in representations that suggest the walkout leaders were, primarily, two men who each started separate popular Facebook groups (cf. Blanc, 2019). As Krutka et al. (2018) suggest (and our interviews support), the use of social media in the Oklahoma walkouts is more complex and distributed, and the appearance of cause and effect via following these large social media groups from the periphery may not be truth or reality (Mochaidean, 2020). Snow, Soule, & Kriesi (2004) argue that social movements are ways in which "collectivities give voice to their grievances and concerns about the rights, welfare, and well-being of themselves and others" (p. 3). The most visible, attention-grabbing moments of such movements play out in large protests in the streets or boycotts demanding such grievances or concerns be rectified. Yet, "such local movement activity probably occurs much more frequently than the large scale protest events that are more likely to capture the media's attention" (p. 4). As such, it has been important for us to approach the study of Oklahoma's strike empirically and with a close eye to the less visible, less publicly accessible spaces of organizing activity that cumulatively instigated and shaped the strike.

Further, very little attention has been paid to the fact that the wave of educator strikes were organized and led by, mainly, women or to the ways in which the feminization of educational work has and continues to shape its labor struggles (Bhattacharya, 2018). Within feminist social movement scholarship, and Black feminist scholarship in particular, scholars have long illuminated the invisibilization of women's efforts in relation to the featured and "official" leaders of prominent movements. For example, Black women's organizing labor and leadership were vital to the national Civil Rights Movement even as men and White people took up more public positions as movement leaders (Nance, 1996; McGuire, 2010). Within educator and education justice movements, Black women and women of Color have been underappreciated and under-recognized in their critical leadership and organizing (Todd-Breland, 2018; Golin, 2002). Our interviews, similarly, illuminate that the 2018 Oklahoma education strike was made possible by women's labor, and that the histories of Oklahoma educators' struggles for justice are rooted in the critical leadership and organizing efforts of BIPOC women. For example, numerous nationally recognized Oklahoma Black women educators, like Clara Luper and Nancy Randolph Davis, led local movements for an end to Jim Crow laws and segregation in their schools and communities and for improved educational access and resources that have had lasting impacts on educator and community organizing (Pollard, 2012).

### **Our Community-Based Oral History Methodology**

Community-based participatory action research (CPAR) is a methodological tradition that aims to impact social policy from the ground up. Key theorists and foundational practitioners of CPAR in educational research, Sandwick et al. (2018) write that CPAR is "guided by the belief that to develop more genuinely 'public' policies, research must be shaped by the perspectives and critical participation of the public" (p. 475). Critical participation is defined as the participation

“of those most affected by social policy but typically excluded from its formation” (p. 478). Through critical participation and collaborative analysis, CPAR enhances the credibility of theoretical constructs (p. 479; Caraballo et al., 2017), and increases the potential impact of the scholarship on the issues under study (Sandwick et al., 2018, p. 481). Similarly, practitioners of grassroots oral history suggest storytelling can inform and support the creativity and power of social justice movements (Clark, 2002).

Erin, a teacher educator, had an initial general idea for the project and its community-based oral history approach, which grew out of a previous interview study with dozens of organizers in four statewide education strikes during the spring of 2018 that she co-conducted with a West Virginia teacher activist. Their interviews suggested the complexities and depth of organizing that took place in each state and the significant ways in which the political, geographical, and cultural histories of each state impacted their organizing. With a feeling that there was much detail missing from public understandings of what happened in Oklahoma, she reached out to now-co-researchers and current or former K12 educators Heather, Jinan, Hannah, Stacey, Mark, Jennie, Stephanie, Megan, Debbie, Jennifer, and Angel to co-envision creating a public oral history archive that anyone could access for a more nuanced, grassroots perspective of the 2018 state-wide strike. Autumn, a community activist on issues of education and racial justice, and education scholar, joined the project later, bringing expertise in oral history methods. Coupled with the support of the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program (OOHRP) at Oklahoma State University, which provided significant logistical and methodological direction for framing our activities, the research team collectively envisioned the scope and direction of the interview archive and continues to grapple with how to disseminate our analyses in local and broader ways that are movement-relevant (Bevington & Dixon, 2005). Many of us are active in various ways in local education justice movements.

We are a diverse group that live and work in three general regions of Oklahoma: Tulsa (northeast OK) and its surrounding suburbs and towns; Oklahoma City (central OK) and its surrounding suburbs and towns; and Stillwater (northcentral OK) and its surrounding rural communities. The majority of us have been directly impacted by the walkout and played a significant role in our schools and districts in the lead-up to and during the event. For this project, we first met in regional teams to build our skills in oral history interviewing methods and ethics, with the training support of the OOHRP. We quickly agreed that our archive should feature teachers and education support professionals whose voices were not necessarily heard during the walkouts but who had an important story to share or who helped to make something happen (e.g., a local protest or march).

Each individual researcher identified a list of potential people who fit these criteria. We compiled our potential interviewees onto a spreadsheet that enabled us to visualize the positional and geographic diversity of our interview set. We then prioritized interviews that would contribute to both the geographic/positional diversity and the richness of narrative experience of the walkouts. Each researcher set up individual meetings to complete the interviews. During these interviews, the researchers asked the participants open questions based on pre-identified general topics that allowed the narrators to share their individual experience. While we had shared topics, we tailored our questions to the specific narrators we interviewed, ensuring they had opportunities to elaborate their specific relationship to and activities during the walkouts.

After each interview was completed, co-researchers wrote paragraph summaries and research memos identifying three key aspects of each interview they conducted for the team’s

immediate review. The audio files were transcribed and co-researchers had the opportunity to review their own and one another's interview transcripts. During this review process the researchers worked to identify and collect an encompassing list of themes, highlighting themes that were evidently woven throughout our set of interviews. We further collectivized, focused, and refined our thematic analyses via two large-group video conference meetings where we worked in small and large groups to prioritize and make sense of our themes as a team. These meetings have further enabled us to identify gaps in our archive that we desired to fill and additional potential oral history narrators. For example, we realized that support staff experiences were similar in many ways across the board, but that the specific district and geographic (urban/rural/suburban) context mattered. Thus, we identified further potential support professional narrators in places where we did not previously have them.

In the following sections, we draw heavily on narrators' own words to illuminate the pedagogical and relational efforts that took place in the lead up to, during, and in the aftermath of the 2018 strike. Narrators' stories illuminate what they were learning in the process of participating in and organizing the strike, how this experience transformed their identities and understandings of themselves as educators, and, finally, the embodied emotional impacts of undemocratic educator organization and decision-making to end the strike while many felt they were just beginning to understand how to get organized and how power and politics worked in this context.

Throughout the paper, we use first names for authors. As the data draws from a public archive of educator oral histories, we use full names for many oral history narrators. Sometimes, when we believe information shared may be sensitive, we refer to the narrator as "educator" and use location descriptors instead of place names, or we simply use their first name. A final note on author names: the article is co-written by 13 authors on the research team, some of whom conducted oral histories with one another that are included as data in this piece.

### **Stepping Up, Learning to Get Organized**

Searcy Crow, a veteran ninth grade language arts teacher in a small town in north-central Oklahoma, recalled her experiences accompanying her mother to a picket during the 1990 statewide teachers strike in Oklahoma:

I do remember that one day she let my sister and I come with her and we stood in front of the high school and walked back and forth right there at the intersection of Boomer [Avenue] and we, you know, held signs and chanted with everybody. And I remember her talking a lot about her hope for [House Bill] 1017 was just smaller class sizes. She had several hopes about 1017 of course, but the biggest one was class sizes. And I know there was kind of this sense of, with 1017, of "how will we know for sure that they won't go back on this?"

Searcy was influenced by her mother, a lifelong teacher and active unionist in her local and the state union. While the majority of our interviewees were unfamiliar with the contexts or organization of the 1990 strike, a few, like Searcy, either recalled their parents' involvement or remembered, like Claudia Swisher and Carla Cale, participating as young teachers.

Claudia, Carla, and Searcy's recollections suggest teachers had quite similar experiences. Carla, a first-year teacher at the time and now the president of the United Sapulpa Educators Association, remembers being berated by a community member in a school board meeting:



I remember a local community member, a very active community member, speaking up and wanting us all terminated at that board meeting. And not understanding the difference between a walkout and a strike – and not understanding the fact that when teachers don't – when school's not in session, teachers don't get paid. So, they have to make up those days if they want to get paid.

As a fourth-generation educator in 1990, Claudia remembered the intensity of political discussions happening between teachers and administrators at the time, as well as what it felt like during the strike to demand legislators reckon with educators:

Several of us from Norman kind of surrounded our representative at the time. [...] And he was saying, you know, real defensive cause he said, we've worked for nine months on this bill, nine months we've been working. And I looked at him and I said, that's a school year. So y'all have wasted a school year of my kids' lives. And he started staring me down. And I always say, just to prove I have a filter, I did not say, "Sir, I teach ninth graders. Do you think you're going to stare me down?" I did not say that, but that was probably the first time I spoke truth to power. And it's a good feeling.

For those who remember experiencing or their family members experiencing the 1990 strike, memories of embodied feelings of speaking "truth to power," of occupying contentious, sometimes vilified, public positions, and of standing in solidarity with fellow educators carried with them more than 30 years later.

As Claudia described, this experience emboldened her continued outspokenness and public education advocacy in the years that followed, inspiring and mentoring others along the way, including some of the authors. Yet, for newer teachers without access to these earlier experiences, our interviews illuminated a lack of collective memory of the kinds of feelings, stances, and efforts that took place to make that 1990 action happen. Many expected that their (under-resourced) local or state unions held the expertise to tell them what they needed to do to be successful. Out of necessity, many educators co-mentored and coordinated with one another and stepped up to become co-leaders in their schools and districts. For example, Angel, in consultation with a fellow teacher, engaged a performative protest at her district's school board meeting, wearing her grocery store uniform from her second job to make public comments. All over, educators and community members coordinated with one another to figure out how to feed and care for their communities' students during the walkouts, how to build public support, and to plan what they should be doing while in the capitol building and pressuring their representatives.

Like Claudia's experience in 1990, Angel discovered through experience, alongside fellow educators, that meetings in representatives' offices engaged particular strategies of deflection and power performances:

But, my experience during the walkout, what I anticipated happening was – I don't know, talking more about policy and talking more about votes and – I guess maybe that's just how I am as a person. I'm driven by information.

She went on to describe that, as educators began to realize and understand legislators' strategies of deflection, they became more confrontational:

And so, it went from real feel-good, like [legislators saying], "I'm here for education," to, "When are you going to leave?" Like, it almost feels like when

you're invited over to somebody's house, and you can tell that they don't want you there anymore. [...] That's where I think people started to try to be a little bit more informed and started asking about income tax brackets and solar wind and the death tax. What was it called? Capital gains and things like that. People started actually asking questions, and that's where that tension really compounded because then the legislators had to actually answer questions about policy and that's when they'll have a meeting. "Oh, there's some lobbyist here that I have to talk to." "Oh, I have a phone call." And it was very dismissing, the tone was very dismissive.

Similarly, Tulsa area educator, Nikki Rice, described how she and her colleagues relied heavily on information filtering down from her local union to better understand what they needed to do, where they needed to be, and when. Her local provided transportation, but for Nikki, she and her colleagues were largely unsure of what they were supposed to do while at the capitol and described her and her colleagues' experiences as mainly "wandering around" and trying to get a lay of the land. At the same time, Nikki described developing closer relationships with her colleagues and their developing feelings of solidarity and understanding of how things really work from the perspective of power as one of the most important things about the strike. She said, "You know I think a lot of us really learned how the House and the Senate operate and, you know, who has the right to do what in our government and that type of thing. So, it really helped. A lot of people don't really understand that, and so that really helped people understand what's going on."

Others, like Tulsa area educators active in their local union, Heather Cody and Kate Baker, described their experiences organizing a 110-mile protest march from Tulsa to the capitol in Oklahoma City. In the process of coordinating food, housing, and supplies for march participants of the multi-day walk, they recounted in their interviews moments when they realized they actually knew quite a lot of people and had the power to coordinate the necessary resources to make the highly publicized, impactful event a reality. Heather recounted learning to field media requests from international news agencies, dealing with a man that, one day, tried to overtake the march, and learning to lead in community with fellow marchers: "I think every night we spoke to the marchers and had a community meeting. And hearing, you know, the pros and cons, how can we make this better? What did you get out of today? How are you feeling?"

Educators in Stillwater, a north central town, and another in a suburb of Oklahoma City both recalled having conversations about the possibility of a walkout months, if not a year, prior to the strike. In these places, educators described holding informal "vent sessions" in response to new policies that narrowed their autonomy or limited their access to resources. In the north central town, the local union was largely inactive, activating mainly to negotiate contracts as needed. Their "vent sessions" built from educators in one building hanging out in a classroom after school to a local park and church as more from the district joined and they needed additional space. As the walkouts approached and local union leaders took up stronger positions of leadership in response, these meetings served as an important space that centered educators' voices and enabled their mobilization locally and at the capitol.

Edwards and McCarthy (2004) point out that in social movements "human time and effort along with money are the most widely appreciated kinds of resources" (p. 116). In our interviews, educators described many ways and forms of labor they and their fellow educators took up in order to build momentum for the walkout, coordinated resources and information-sharing, ensured their school boards voted and built community support in the lead up, and began figuring out how power and politics at the capitol worked, in reality.

## **Impacts on Educator Identities as Advocates, Activists, and Organizers**

Overlapping the previous theme, our interviews illuminated that educators who participated in the strike were simultaneously doing the work of educator organizing while learning what that work entailed as they went. In doing so, educators grappled with what it meant for their own identities and orientations to their work. Some describe the ways in which the activities of the walkouts inspired them to take up activist identities, while others refused the label yet stepped up into roles of active leadership. For example, suburban Tulsa food services professional, Jon, knew that when schools shut down for the walkout, many children and families in his community would lose important access to regular meals. As contracted staff employed by a food services company, he organized to ensure that his district would continue to provide breakfast and lunch, to ensure other food service professionals would be paid, and made arrangements for complex logistics. To do so, he recruited allies to support his efforts and navigated the bureaucracies of both his company and the district administration. Jon faced repercussions for his efforts: “I got questioned a lot on should I have opened? I received quite a bunch of grief of, ‘did we do the right thing financially of bringing the staff in and bringing the meals in,’ ‘cause we didn’t make money. I served my community and took a cost for it.”

For Jon, a major motivating factor in stepping up to do this work during the walkout was his mother, a teacher and union leader in their town:

With mom being really active in the [local] – she was president a couple times, and she was also – when [our town] failed to pay teachers during the summer, mom was part of the team that – I think it was a technicality, but they filed a lawsuit against the school board to get pay, and so my family has been very active in [our town’s] education, and so I know a lot of the teachers. I know a lot of the principals, and so it just – you start hearing the word-of-mouth of, “This is about to happen,” and so then it was just that. It was the slow murmur. Then it became a talk, and then it became a scream. It just very slowly built, but I – in food service, we know more within our buildings than people realize, because we’re feeding people, and so we knew about it probably from the ground up.

As Jon describes, support professionals held a unique position that provided them access to information at an early stage in the walkout effort. His access to information, his generational experience and relationships, and his knowledge as a food service worker of the lives and everyday struggles of students in his town, all motivated and enabled his leadership. When asked about whether and how this shaped his understanding of himself, he said:

Jon: I’m not an activist.

Stacey: You’re not now?

Jon: I am not an activist.

Stacey: Okay. How would you describe yourself?

Jon: I just wanted to feed hungry kids. That’s it.

Even as Jon described himself as “not an activist,” his interview illuminates that he understood himself as part of a generational line of educators who step up and take action, even if there are consequences.

Tulsa area educator, Michelle Stevenson, also never considered herself an activist before the walkout. She stated:

In some ways I would have definitely described myself as an advocate. I don't know that I would have specifically said, "Oh, I'm an advocate for public education." I think I would have assumed that it was a given. Now, I'm more vocal about it. An activist – no, not really. One of my idols is Angela Davis, but I never felt like I did anything and certainly still have not done anything to her caliber, but I never saw myself in any similar light to what she was doing, and now it's like, no, I mean, yeah, I am kind of. I don't think I do as much as I would like to. I'm still working that out, but I would say more so now, but, yeah, before now, I would've said I was an advocate of kids.

After the walkouts, Michelle started advertising free rides to elections, she ran to become her school's site union representative and won, and participated in a documentary about the issues facing Oklahoma's public school system. Michelle also stated how much the walkout had opened her eyes to how Oklahoma legislators discussed and understood public education and its teachers.

She remembered an infamous video of State Representative Keven McDugle complaining about how "teachers were acting" by coming to the capital to protest and threatened to "never vote for a single teacher measure again" (KJRH News, 2018). Michelle went to speak with him and found, firsthand, his demeanor patronizing and dismissive. She said, "He tried to tell me about the property taxes and how the districts were the ones that were not spending the money correctly, despite the fact that administration costs make up one percent." After the walkouts, she became more active in spreading information about what is going on with issues in educational policy and practice with her fellow teachers and the public, in addition to working full time, recently getting married, merging households, and starting a new position at a new school. She described the stakes of her work in understanding how the quality of public education impacts "society as a whole," and she came to understand, through her experiences during the strike and in the aftermath, that educators must play an active role in pushing for change.

Others, like Kate Baker, active in her local union and protest march organizer, similarly described themselves as "advocates" prior to the walkout and "organizers" afterward.

So, before the walkout I considered myself an advocate. It was about day three maybe of the march that I started considering myself an organizer. So, it was like all of these [efforts and activities I organized during the lead up] kind of culminated and all of the sudden I looked around and I was like, oh, like I'm an organizer. Like I'm organizing [a] group action which was really very cool. And then like organizers, it's like a badge, a name that I wear with a lot of pride.

Like Kate, Oklahoma City metro area educator, Angel, also learned to become an organizer by doing – co-coordinating a local social media site for information-sharing and organizing protest marches in her district, developing relationships with other educator organizers, and leveraging these relationships to advocate for supportive policies and practices at the state level and in her school and district. Moore educator Stephanie's experiences during the walkouts led her to become more active in her local union, winning the seat of vice president, and becoming active in national educator organizing networks in the aftermath of the walkouts.

Not all, but many more understood the significance of providing access to information and resources for their students as they returned to their classrooms. Many described debriefing sessions to field earnest questions from students, engaging students in studying the issues and activities that took place. Some, like Stillwater educator Jody Webber and Oklahoma City area educator, Shari Gately, even invited educators who ran or won state representative offices to their classes. Jody described the significance of this for her and her students:

(State representative) John Talley shows up to my classroom unannounced often. And, sometimes, I have to remind him of things he can and can't say in the classroom. But my kids feel, now, my students feel like they can ask him anything, "Hey, I heard this on the news. What's going on with that?" A great resource, (state representative) Trish Ranson came, and just talked to the kids about something that was curriculum-related, but then she opened up, okay, now tell me – ask me this question since you've been wanting to ask. It's okay. She had had lots of the kids as a teacher. And they have some pretty good questions, and she was really honest with them. And she's a mom of students here. She taught here. She is incredible. And she – it was really, really – I cried at the end of that, too. I'm a crier.

Upon their return to their classrooms and schools, many interviewees described students as hungry to discuss the events of the walkouts, seeking answers to questions about what happened and why they were back without having won anything further.

As our interviews illuminate, educators made sense of their experiences in ways that informed and transformed their own understandings of themselves as educators and as advocates, activists, and organizers. While the spectacle of the walkout has subsided, for now, our interviews suggest that organizing, activist, and advocacy efforts continue to take place in different ways in different local contexts. Further, our interviews suggest that the walkouts were initiated via the efforts of educators both within, on the periphery of, and even outside their local and state unions, and educators' organizing and activist identities and ongoing development were, largely, not supported substantively by their formal unions, which we take up further in the following theme.

### **Joy in Collective Struggle, Pain in the Aftermath: The Emotionality of the Walkouts**

Across our interviews, educators described feelings of intense joy, excitement, anxiety, and possibility as the walkouts emerged from a slow murmur in the hallways to reality. In moments where educators rallied with parents and community members at intersections in their local towns during the lead up, when educators autonomously organized protest marches in their communities all over the state or solidarity pickets outside their individual schools, listening to the supportive honks of passerby, interviewees expressed a range of, sometimes overwhelming, embodied emotions of solidarity. In organizing a multi-day march from Tulsa to the capitol with her local, Kate Baker described it this way:

And the community, everywhere we went the communities would pour out. And honestly for me, like that was one of the most transformative things about the entire thing because, you know, after the penny sales tax got voted down, after kind of growing up in Oklahoma with a mom who's a teacher, after being a teacher myself, like I really had gotten to a point where I was like, Oklahoma and Oklahomans just hate teachers. They hate us. And everywhere we went, people would roll out. They

would bring snacks. They would bring band aids, they would bring, we had the stupidest amount of water that you could ever imagine. Oh, pizza everywhere, so much pizza. But I mean, there was just, there was just this outpouring from the community and like, you know, in very poor areas, you know, where you know that they don't have a lot and they're coming out bringing truckfuls of water and snacks for us.

Moore educator, Stephanie, similar described her attendance at the rallies at the capitol as transformative:

It was a lot. I mean it was overwhelming. I think that every day I was there I cried, and laughed, and was furious, like simultaneously, and it was just a very overwhelming, emotional, maddening experience in many ways. It was also radicalizing in the sense that I went from being disengaged, to vice president, to chair of my [union's] committee [on racial and ethnic minorities], to an active participant in my union. I mean, like, I wanna know what's happening.

Interviewees described many scenes at marches, in board meetings, and at the capitol rallies where they felt and internalized the collective energy of resistance and solidarity. Searcy Crow described it as a feeling of hope: “And for the first time in a long time it felt like, okay, we can do something about it. And there's this sense of hope for the first time.”

Nearly every one of our interviewees described a transition moment as the walkouts quite suddenly deflated. In closed doors talks between larger local and state union leadership, many district administrators, and legislators, the walkouts were called off before any real gains had been made. A teacher in one of the large districts whose superintendent was first to call teachers back to work, even before OEA ended the walkouts, described what it felt like to teachers as these closed-door meetings took place:

So, our union president went into [our state representative's] office and shut the door, and he was in there with a couple of other union people, which I understand them wanting their privacy, *but it did feel like there was literally a barrier in division and communication* [emphasis added]. This has happened. You have all these teachers out here in this room. You all are in there. We don't know what to do next. And then they opened the door, and then they left, and they didn't talk to us or anything. So, then I think they just didn't anticipate – [teachers] were blindsided.

Educators in other districts also described a feeling of being blindsided. Tessie Curran recalled her feelings on the day OEA halted the walkout:

Angry. I was so mad because it was at that point where I felt like we were getting somewhere. [...] And that day in the capitol I went home and I told [my partner] it felt positive. It felt very positive. I felt like something was happening but I just didn't know that it was ending, and I didn't know how quickly everything was just gonna go back to normal. I couldn't deal with that. It was very difficult. I was very angry.

Educators experienced a range of emotions, from relief to grief to acceptance. As Tessie described, “They were all very – some people were like good, I'm glad to be going back to my classroom. Some of them were absolutely not, no, this is not happening. Some were ‘I'm mad that this is

happening, this is stupid, but I understand it.’ We were all at varying levels of, probably, grief and acceptance. Some of us were like, no. No.”

Heather, a long-time educator from a north central town described sentiments that were commonly felt among our participants and ourselves: “I feel like I personally was very disheartened, and just, I felt like all of it was for naught because really nothing had been done. [...] The Monday after OEA had said, ‘Alright; the walkout has ended,’ a lot of junior high teachers said, ‘No. You don’t dictate when it ends, the teachers do.’ I mean *it’s not the union that speaks for all of us* [emphasis added].” Like Heather and Angel, many described the ways they felt most educators were not meaningfully included in their union’s decisions to end the walkouts, that they were ready and willing to continue the strike to achieve what they came for. Heather went on to describe the ways in which the tacit support for the walkout by district administration was quickly retracted after the announcement from OEA:

And so a lot of us were gone on that day to go back to the Capitol. And we had gotten this email from our superintendent that says, “You know the walkout is over. You are not to leave the classroom for reasons like going to the capitol. You know we’ll try to get a delegation together soon but for now, you need to go back to the classroom.” And it felt very – I don’t want to say threatening, but it kind of felt threatening like you need to be in the classroom or else, that kind of situation.

Heather’s superintendent’s response was not dissimilar to many others’ experiences, though some described the ways in which their school administration supported them to continue to take shifts at the capitol, arranging for substitute teachers. By that time, the momentum had dissipated.

In our analysis of the emotionality educators experienced throughout the walkouts, educators’ feelings of joy, excitement and hope as they took action with their colleagues and communities existed in stark juxtaposition with their anger, frustration, and disbelief at being “blindsided” by the abrupt ending. Jody Webber said, “It chokes me up every time because [*begins to cry*] I was so hurt. I felt such, that failure, that sense of we just did this, and we gave it our all, two weeks of our kids’ learning in a block schedule, and we got nothing.”

As our interviews demonstrate, the push for and organization of the statewide walkout required a widespread, distributed effort of educators within and beyond their unions. Many educators were ready to continue the strike until meaningful gains were made, yet were largely excluded from participating in decisions around when to end the action. As a Right to Work state, Oklahoma educators were not required to vote to authorize the start or end of the technically illegal strike. The walkout relied heavily on the tacit support of superintendents and local school boards to choose to close or reopen schools. As this support waned toward the end of the second week, state union leaders erred on the side of maintaining relationships with superintendents and legislators to the detriment of members’ democratic participation.

Such tensions are not unique to places with restrictive union laws. Scholars of social movement unionism have documented a resurgence in rank-and-file educators organizing for union democratization within the hierarchical tendencies of local, state, and national union organizations across the U.S. (Stark, 2019; Asselin, 2019; Shiller, 2021). Analysis of the emotionality of the walkouts suggest that educators understood their power in refusing to work, that educators did not anticipate and were not prepared to respond to state union leaders’ directive to end the walkout, and that the feelings of failure, deflation, and fear of reprisal impacted the possibilities for union democratization efforts that characterized the aftermath of other “red state”

walkouts, i.e., the formation of the social justice caucus, West Virginia United or the rank-and-file organization, Arizona Educators United (see Givan & Lang, 2020).

## Discussion

In our interviews, there were many different ways educators understood they could or would make change. As Tessie described above, these ways of understanding were still forming and evolving for many during the walkouts. Our analysis of our interviews illuminates a few important implications for educator organizing in Oklahoma and beyond. First, all interviewees who were union members, even if passive members, described a desire for a more democratic approach to decision-making and union participation. Local and state unions were often narrated as service providers or facilitators of the walkout, and only a few we interviewed felt they had sway or influence in shaping the activities of their local. This is not an uncommon experience among educators. Lois Weiner (2012) writes that the history and ongoing politics of teachers unions and labor laws in the U.S. illuminate the predominance of undemocratic business or service union models (also see Dyke & Muckian-Bates, 2019). In many other places that also experienced strikes that spring of 2018, educators formed social justice caucuses, or groups within unions that work to steer their priorities (e.g., West Virginia United) or educator-led para-union organizations (e.g., Arizona Educators United). In places like Oklahoma, attempts at such efforts did not succeed in creating lasting organization in the two years following the walkouts, for many reasons.

Second, our experiences during the strike and our interviews illuminated widespread systematic analyses held by educators. In particular, these were evidenced in the vehement calls for increased taxes on the extractive industries (e.g., oil and gas) that hold the most power and sway over state decision-making and a general understanding that these industries' profits were directly connected to and privileged over funding public education. Yet, our interviews illuminated differences in ways of understanding the root issues of educational inequity, and many narrators, depending on their location, race/ethnicity, class position, and position within the education system, differed in their understandings around the state's extreme rate of incarceration and its impacts on and relationship to schooling (Landry, 2014), the stark differences in educational conditions facing Native, Black, Latinx, immigrant, LGBTQ+, and undocumented communities, and the different political-economic landscapes and issues facing urban, rural, and suburban school district communities.

In Oklahoma, like many places elsewhere, educators are majority White women. While our interviews illuminate the tensions between teachers and working-class and more racially diverse support professionals, working-class BIPOC students have been underappreciated as influential organizers that both helped to agitate for the walkouts and have been on the frontlines of holding schools accountable to support their undocumented communities (Martinez-Keel, 2019). For example, two young Black women students at a Tulsa high school organized a student walkout prior to the statewide action to protest school conditions (Hardiman, 2018). Alia Wong (2018) has illuminated how differences in composition of educator race, ethnicity, and language, among other differences, has significantly shaped their demands. For example, in Los Angeles, a slight majority of educators are BIPOC, with the majority of all educators Latinx or Chicana. Wong argues that these educators are often more connected to intersecting struggles (e.g., for immigrant justice) that impact their students' everyday lives, shaping demands seeking more resources and support for undocumented families.



Finally, a majority of interviewees described the context of the interview as the first or one of the few times they had thought in-depth about their experience in the lead up, during, and in the immediate aftermath of the strike. We all had moments in our interviews with tearful narrators as they felt an upsurge of uncontrollable emotion. In context, all our interviews took place one-and-a-half to two years after the walkouts occurred. Our interviews suggest that Oklahoma educators (like all educators) need space to process, make sense of, and act on their experiences during the historic action in 2018 (cf. Maton, 2018). Further, a significant number of educators we interviewed who stepped up to take on positions and activities of leadership came from multigenerational teaching families whose family members (often, mothers) were active unionists and educational leaders. This suggests that collective memory of educator struggles are learned through these generational relationships, and helps us to consider how, perhaps via structured spaces of study and action, collective memories and knowledge learned from the 2018 strike could extend further beyond familial ties.

## Conclusion

Our work here aimed to illuminate the complexity and widespread distribution of (gendered) labor and activity that composed the 2018 Oklahoma education strike. We aimed to problematize simplistic narratives that suggest the event was led by one, two, or a few leaders. And, we also aimed to challenge feelings of stultification in the aftermath of the strike by illuminating the ongoing impacts and tendrils of change shaping educators' identities and activities long after. We hope to suggest here that we are merely scratching the surface with the stories our fifty narrators have graciously shared with us, and that we, the research team, have shared with each other. Our interviews illuminate Oklahoma educators' wealth of experience, relationships, commitment, and capacity. Kate Baker powerfully articulates, "You know, it can't just be a one-time action. This has to be a continual movement toward better education for our kids. And, just, the work's not done."

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Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*  
Steven Singer, *The College of New Jersey*  
Kostas Skordoulis, *University of Athens*  
John Smyth, *Federation University Australia*  
Beth Sondel, *University of Pittsburgh*  
Hannah Spector, *Penn State University*  
Marc Spooner, *University of Regina*  
Mark Stern, *Colgate University*  
Peter Trifonas, *University of Toronto*  
Paolo Vittoria, *University of Naples Federico II*  
Linda Ware, *SUNY Geneseo*