

“Reclaiming Our Schools” Interviews with Black Lives Matter at School Organizers Tamara Anderson and Jesse Hagopian

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“Reclaiming Our Schools”

*Interviews with Black Lives Matter at School Organizers
Tamara Anderson and Jesse Hagopian*

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Abstract

This article weaves together excerpts from interviews with two key leaders of the Black Lives Matter at School movement, which were conducted as part of a broader ethnographic study of educator movements. In their respective interviews, Anderson and Hagopian discuss their roles in the Black Lives Matter at School movement, suggesting some of the ways that this movement has grown from 2016 to 2020.



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It is tempting to see the educator strike wave of the past three years as a new, distinctive social movement. These strikes build on a tradition of social justice unionist organizing in teachers unions that began in the 1990s and includes the historic 2012 Chicago teachers strike, however (Stark, 2019). Likewise, both new and experienced organizers within these strikes have taken on longstanding inequalities that they understand to be relevant to their contexts, ranging from school funding to police brutality in schools. We can therefore better understand this strike wave as the continuation of multiple, intersecting movements, many of which stretch back years or even decades into the past.

In many cases, these movements have been led by social justice caucuses: groups of educators committed to advancing justice in their schools, unions, and communities from the ground up. One of the most significant of these movements began in 2016, sixteen months before the historic West Virginia teacher walkout. Building on the social justice caucus model as well as frameworks from the Black Lives Matter movement, the Black Lives Matter at School movement highlights the potential for educators to use the power of their unions to advance racial justice within schools.

In this piece, I weave together excerpts from interviews that I conducted with two key leaders of the Black Lives Matter at School movement. These interviews were conducted as part of my ethnographic research on educator movements, which included organizing alongside the leaders featured in this interview as a member of a social justice caucus. Additional excerpts from these interviews will be included in a future volume, and both interviews were edited for clarity, with excerpts from both interviews interwoven to illustrate how this movement developed from 2016 to 2020.

In the first interview, conducted on May 9, 2019, I spoke with Seattle ethnic studies educator and *Rethinking Schools* editor Jesse Hagopian. As a member of the Social Equity Educators (SEE) caucus, Hagopian organized the first citywide Black Lives Matter at School Day of Action in October of 2016. In the second interview, conducted on June 3, 2019, I spoke with Philadelphia educator and professional actor Tamara Anderson. As a member of the Caucus of Working Educators (WE), Anderson expanded on Seattle's Day of Action, integrating frameworks from the Black Lives Matter movement to develop the first Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action.

Alongside other members of their caucuses and educators across the country, Anderson and Hagopian have gone on to organize the national Black Lives Matter Week of Action and Year of Purpose, advancing demands for racial justice within schools and communities across the United States. They have also published influential public scholarship on this movement, including articles in *Labor Notes* (Anderson & Cohen, 2017) and *Rethinking Schools* (Au & Hagopian, 2017) as well as the vital volume *Teaching for Black Lives* (Watson, Hagopian, & Au, 2018).

Jesse Hagopian: It started at John Muir Elementary School, where they had been doing racial equity [work] for some time, and they decided they wanted that work to culminate with a celebration of Black students at the beginning of the 2016 school year. And the educators at the school partnered with Black Men United to Change the Narrative, and they had a wonderful plan for bringing Black families and community groups, and educators, all out in front of the school on a September day.

They were going to high-five the kids as they came into the school, and to hold a Black History celebration in assembly. And you had the art teacher Julie Trout design the beautiful t-shirt that said *Black Lives Matter We Stand Together John Muir Elementary* with picture of a tree with the many branches coming down into one trunk. And when the media found out, the story hit the news, and some really hateful people started bombarding the school with letters against this action. And then a particularly hateful person made a bomb threat on John Muir Elementary.

They had the audacity to publicly declare that their Black students' lives have value. So the morning of the event there were actually bomb sniffing dogs that had to go through the school. And the school district officially canceled the event, and that was really heartbreaking to me. To the great credit of the educators and community members of John Muir, they went through with the event anyway, wearing the Black Lives Matter t-shirts and high-fiving the students as they came in. But it was smaller than it would have been, had the school district not officially canceled it.

And so I was moved by the courage of the educators to go forward with it and my friend Wayne Au's son goes to that school, and he put me in touch with the teachers there, including Julie Trout, and Mr. Jackson, and some of the leaders there. And I met with a few other leaders and we brought them to the SEE meeting, and we asked, "How can we support you?" And we came up with the idea of passing a resolution in the union to endorse the action that John Muir had taken. But then we decided if we are really going to support them, we have to actually wear the shirts ourselves.

Sarah Arvey put the resolution forward at a Seattle Education Association meeting, and I was very nervous because if it didn't pass, what kind of message would that send our Black students? But there were a couple of really moving speeches by Black educators about their experience with racism, as students, as educators that I think won the room, and it was unanimous vote. And then I was nervous. Okay, well, we supported this, but if there's only a few people that actually go to school wearing the shirts, then what kind of message would that send?

So then I helped to organize press conferences, and a coalition with the NAACP, and we got the PTA [Parent Teacher Association] of Seattle's endorsement, and then the t-shirt orders started coming in via the dozens and then the hundreds. And on October 19, Black Lives Matter at School Day in Seattle, we had called for 3,000 teachers wearing shirts that said Black Lives Matter, and many of them teaching lessons about institutional racism or the Black Lives Matter Movement, or intersectional Black identities that day.

And it got captured on the news, and in fact ABC News and national outlets broadcasted around the country, and then teachers in Rochester, New York, saw what we had done, and they organized their own Black Lives Matter at School Day. And then teachers in Philadelphia took it to the next level because they took it from the Day of Action and expanded it to a full Week of Action, and they broke down the 13 principles of the Black Lives Matter Global Network in the teaching points for each day of the week. And that was really amazing.

Tamara Anderson: So in 2016, Charlie [a fellow caucus member] sent us an email. The group email was like, "Did you see what happened in Seattle?" And we were like, "Oh yeah." And he was like, "So we should do something like it. We should do a day."

And I was like, "A day?" Their response was to a specific incident. We have tons of racist shit that happens here in Philly all the time. And I said, "What about the 13 Guiding Principles that Alicia

Garza came up with shortly after Ferguson?” They were like, “13 what? What guiding principles?” I said, “There’s 13 Guiding Principles there if you read them. They are like a blueprint to a better – how we could do better.”

So maybe the goal was to have the week and make curriculum, connect to these 13 Guiding Principles, maybe create ideas that people [would] have something to think about. People are percolating and bam, we do a week in 2017 with no union support, no school board support, and somehow got over 100 teachers to participate, several organizations. And then within a year, now we are part of a national steering committee that includes Seattle, where we meet once or twice a year to figure out what to do for the next year.

Jesse Hagopian: So we got in touch with them and the following year, we coordinated it as a national Week of Action that had these demands: ending zero tolerance discipline, replacing restorative justice, mandating ethnic studies and Black history, and hiring more Black teachers. And then the following year, this school year, we added fund counselors, not cops.

And it’s really been an amazing example of grassroots educational transformation from educators, students, and parents across the country, who are reclaiming our schools, and fighting against corporate education reform and institutional racism. And that over 30 cities participated this year with many thousands of teachers and tens of thousands of students getting lessons about intersectional Black identities and Black social movements against racism, and just so many things that are left out of the master narrative corporate education text books.

Tamara Anderson: Now it’s a resolution with the NEA [National Education Association]. And then that worked, then we have demands, and so then the goal was these demands should be – we should make these demands happen. So we started having meetings with the district about the hiring of more Black teachers, trying to talk with the school board about that.

This year we got a soft support from the school board. But this year, we actually got a unanimous resolution for Black Lives Matter back in Philly from City Council, still without PFT [Philadelphia Federation of Teachers] support.

Jesse Hagopian: So it’s really been an inspiring movement and I think a testament to building social justice caucuses in unions, and then connecting the power of those caucuses with social movements in the streets, and I see great things to come with this movement.

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