

CHAPTER 1

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From “Teacher Spring” to Teacher Insurgency

AS WINTER SWEPT ACROSS THE UNITED STATES at the outset of 2018, ushering in the bitterest and bleakest days of the year, American teachers and their unions had little to celebrate. The first eight years of the decade had exacted a heavy toll, and still more trouble was lurking on the horizon.

In 2010, a swarm of Republican state governments under the sway of the far-right Tea Party movement had come to power. Across the nation, these “red” state governments had enacted legislation designed to silence the collective voice of teachers and other public-sector workers by eviscerating their unions. Among the most prominent of these states were Scott Walker’s Wisconsin, where an epic but ultimately unsuccessful battle was waged by labor against this legislation, Rick Snyder’s Michigan, and John Kasich’s Ohio.¹

In the wake of the Great Recession, funding for public education had been slashed across the country, with particularly deep cuts in the red states, many of which were granting massive tax cuts to the wealthy and corporations that reduced state revenues. A growing portion of the funds that remained were diverted from public schools to voucher programs for private schools and to charter schools.

Nationally, teachers had been severely disappointed by a Democratic administration that had turned over its education policy to “reformers” who laid the problems of America’s public schools at the feet of teachers and their unions. From the helm of the US Department of Education,

this technocratic leadership had promoted a business model of education centered on high-stakes standardized exams, advocating their use to determine whether students would be promoted and graduated, whether teachers were evaluated as unsatisfactory and dismissed, and whether schools would be closed. At the same time, it supported a significant growth in the numbers of charter schools.

Following the calamitous results of the 2016 election, matters in the nation's capital went from bad to worse, and hit rock bottom with the appointment of a billionaire secretary of education who was an open and implacable foe of public schools and unions.

At the beginning of 2017, the Supreme Court had scheduled the oral hearings in *Janus v. AFSCME* for late February. *Janus* had been crafted by anti-union organizations to financially cripple public-sector unions and had been litigated with the financial backing of the Koch brothers, the DeVos family, the Bradley Foundation, and others on the far right.² It was widely expected that the five-person conservative majority on the court would rule against the unions, overturning forty years of the court's own precedents. Teacher unions had been preparing for such an eventuality since early 2016 with programs of intensive membership engagement.

For American teachers, the 2010s had been a long, dark night. And at the start of 2018, there had been very few signs that it would end. But, in the words of the old Irish peasant saying, it is always darkest before the dawn.

THE WEST VIRGINIA STRIKE OF 2018

In those early months of 2018, West Virginia teachers, education workers, and their unions found themselves grappling with one of the state governments that had acquired a deep red political hue over the decade. Both houses of the state legislature had solid Republican majorities, with a powerful Tea Party presence. The billionaire governor, whose stake in coal mining had made him the wealthiest person in the state, was a nouveau Republican; he had abandoned the Democratic party soon after he was elected to that office as its candidate. For nearly nine decades, dating back to the beginning of the New Deal, West Virginia had been a Democratic stronghold, a status attributable in no small

part to the political clout of its labor movement. But the decline of the state’s mining industry and the waning of the once-mighty United Mine Workers had sapped that union strength, and in 2014, the Republicans had swept to power. In 2016, the Republican state government adopted an anti-union “right-to-work” law; only a few years prior, such a measure would have been unthinkable in a state that had been the site of a number of the fiercest battles in American labor history.

As 2018 began, the salaries of West Virginia teachers were near the bottom nationally, and lagged well behind the surrounding states of Kentucky, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Virginia.³ The salaries, health insurance, and pensions of West Virginia teachers and education workers were decided by the state, and for a number of years the government had been shifting the costs of health insurance onto teachers and other public workers through increased co-pays and premiums. These changes cut into real income as the increased health insurance costs ate away at stagnant salaries. In early 2018, the governor had proposed a token 1 percent raise in teacher salaries in his State of the State address, and another round of cost shifting in health care threatened to further plunder teachers’ take-home pay.

The four southernmost counties of West Virginia—Logan, McDowell, Mingo, and Wyoming—had been the center of its coal mining industry and the heartland of the United Mine Workers. It was in these counties, where teachers were often the children and grandchildren of coal miners who had lived and breathed union, that the first rumblings of resistance to the state government’s plans were heard.⁴ In January, teachers and education workers from these counties organized meetings to discuss what was happening in the state capital—the inadequate salary proposal, the detrimental changes in health insurance, and the underfunding of public education—and what to do in response. In keeping with their rich labor heritage, they made plans for one-day county walkouts in defiance of the law. On February 2, they conducted a one-day strike and held a protest at the state capitol. For the first time in West Virginia history, this action brought together members of the three statewide education unions—AFT West Virginia, affiliated with the American Federation of Teachers (AFT); the West Virginia Education Association, affiliated with the National Education Association (NEA); and the independent West Virginia Service Personnel

Association, a union of school-related support workers such as custodians, bus drivers, and cafeteria workers.

The February 2 walkouts were reported by state and national media outlets. They quickly became the talk of West Virginia teachers in their schools and on social media, and they provided inspiration to teachers from other parts of the state.⁵ A Facebook group of West Virginian teachers that was the center of much of the social media discussion grew to over twenty-thousand members in the first months of 2018.⁶ In short order, teachers and education workers in additional counties, including Wayne, Cabell and Lincoln, were organizing their own one-day walkouts. A movement was rapidly taking shape and spreading across the state.

Coming as it did in the doldrums of a decade when American teachers and their unions had been under sustained attack and were expecting more of the same, the dramatic appearance of these walkouts on the political stage center was unexpected. No one—not the state government, not the state unions, not even the teachers who organized the first walkouts—had anticipated that this movement would emerge, much less how quickly it would proliferate. But as soon as the walkouts began, the three state unions began to mobilize, with their national affiliates providing key organizational support. Local leaders were asked to assess the potential support for a statewide strike action, and state leaders organized tele-town halls and took to social media to take the pulse of members around the state. Meetings were organized that brought together the members of all three unions in each of the state's fifty-five counties, and a vote was taken on whether to call for a statewide walkout, with an overwhelming “yes” response. On February 22, four days before the Supreme Court would hear *Janus v. AFSCME*, the entire education workforce of West Virginia was on strike and demonstrating at the state capitol. Their slogan was “55 Strong,” a statement of the solidarity that had been built among teachers and education workers from every county in the state.

West Virginia teachers were still on strike when the Supreme Court conducted the oral hearings for *Janus v. AFSCME*. They remained on strike for nearly two weeks, faithfully walking the picket lines in the dead of winter. Five days into the strike, the governor announced his support for a 5 percent raise for teachers, education workers, and other

public-sector workers, and union leaders recommended its acceptance and a conclusion to the strike. But teachers were profoundly distrustful that the state government would deliver on the governor’s promise: the Republican president of the state Senate, an outspoken opponent of the strike, had declared his unwillingness to pass the deal advocated by the governor and was doing his best to sow discord between teachers and other public-sector workers and between public-sector employees and the community. Consequently, teachers refused to end the strike and demanded actual legislation. It was only after the full salary increase was signed into law on March 6 that teachers and education workers ended their strike. They had won their major demand, and they returned to their classrooms the next day.

TEACHER SPRING OF 2018

The sheer audacity of the West Virginia strike captured the imagination of teachers across the United States. Erupting in a deep red state in the midst of the Supreme Court’s deliberations over *Janus v. AFSCME*, the strike was a powerful statement that teachers and other public-sector workers were not prepared to go quietly into the night. The Court’s right-wing majority could rule against public-sector workers and their unions, as it would do at the end of June, but it did not have the final word. That belonged to the rank-and-file members of the unions.

The West Virginia strike provided a spark, and in the months that followed, it lit a prairie fire of teacher strikes across the United States. On April 2, Oklahoma teachers and education workers began what would become a ten-day statewide strike for improved salaries and increased funding of public schools. On the same day, teachers in several Kentucky counties held one-day walkouts over the governor’s efforts to gut their pensions. On April 26, Arizona teachers and education workers launched a weeklong statewide strike, also for improved salaries and increased school funding. And on May 16, North Carolina teachers and education workers held a one-day statewide strike demanding improved compensation and increased funding for public schools. These strikes, which I collectively call “Teacher Spring,” were signs of the dawn of a new day for American teachers, their unions, and America’s public schools.

In important ways that I will discuss in this book, the Teacher Spring strikes of 2018 found a template in the West Virginia strike. It had been focused not simply on the needs of teachers and education workers, as important as they were, but also on the chronic underfunding of the public schools and the fiscal policies that provided tax cuts to corporations and the wealthy while starving schools and other public services. Against efforts to divide the strikers from other public workers and the community, it put forward a broad solidaristic vision that fought for all public-sector employees and for the schools that their communities needed and deserved. In one especially telling illustration, West Virginia teachers organized to make sure that students who relied on public schools for the meals were fed during the strike. As a consequence, it enjoyed an unprecedented level of public support, as did the subsequent strikes of Teacher Spring.

The strikes of Teacher Spring were all the more powerful for having taken place mostly in states where they were prohibited by law, making them acts of civil disobedience. Moreover, they had mostly occurred in deep red states with extremely conservative Republican state governments. In four of the five Teacher Spring states—West Virginia, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona—teacher salaries, health insurance, and pensions were set centrally by the state government, with only a minimal role for local school districts. This system, which is employed by relatively few states, meant that the Teacher Spring strikes were of necessity mostly statewide, a largely unprecedented development in both teacher union history and in American labor history. That statewide strikes were organized is all the more remarkable when one understands that in these deep red states, teacher union membership was less dense and teacher union organizational infrastructure less developed than in most parts of the country. The one exception to this rule was West Virginia, where union density is approximately 75 percent, taking into account all three statewide unions.⁷ It is telling that the West Virginia strike had the greatest success in winning its demands.

TEACHER INSURGENCY

In 2019, the wave continued to gather momentum, with four particularly noteworthy strikes. In Los Angeles, the second-largest school

district in the US, teachers struck for eight days in January. Teachers in Denver walked out for three days, and teachers in Oakland struck for eight days during February. In Chicago, the third-largest school district in the nation, teachers and education workers walked out for eleven days in the middle of October. These four strikes were by no means the only ones in that year; many smaller districts also experienced walkouts. And on February 19, a few short days before the anniversary of the 2018 strike, West Virginia teachers and education workers struck for one day to stop a bill tying their salary increases to the introduction of school vouchers, the opening of charter schools, and the gutting of teacher seniority. This bill was an unsuccessful maneuver by Republicans in the state legislature, who were smarting from the triumph of the 2018 strike and the November 2018 election defeat of a number of the strike foes who had been opposed by the unions.

The Teacher Insurgency strikes had much in common with the Teacher Spring strikes, but they also broke important new ground. Unlike the 2018 strikes, many of the 2019 strikes occurred in deep “blue” states where the governments were controlled by Democrats. (Even the Denver strike in “purple” Colorado took place after the Democrats had taken control of state government in the 2018 election.) Given the greater likelihood of blue states’ public employees having the right to strike, these strikes often took place in the states (only one-quarter of all states) where they were legal.

The spread of the teacher strikes to the blue states indicated that while the issues that generated them may have found their most extreme manifestations in deep red states, they were being experienced across the country. It also demonstrated that the strikes had become a national movement. “What it says is that West Virginia and Oklahoma wasn’t sui generis; it wasn’t an isolated moment,” American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Randi Weingarten told the *New York Times* after Chicago teachers successfully ended their strike. “This is now a strategy.”⁸

The Chicago strike was also notable in that it coordinated the teachers’ strike against the school district with a strike by education support workers in Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 73, and by Passages Academy, a charter school where teachers were also represented by the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). This coordination followed on a series of successful strikes against Chicago charter schools

during late 2018 and the spring of 2019, including the first strikes against entire charter chains in the United States. (The 2019 Los Angeles strike also was coordinated with a strike by the Accelerated Charter School, organized with the United Teachers of Los Angeles.) Together with the issues raised by the CTU, this coordination marked the full emergence of what might be called a solidaristic strike and negotiation strategy, in which the power of the CTU was joined with other workers inside the Chicago school district and other teachers in Chicago to strengthen the bargaining position of all and to take on issues of the students and communities they educated and served.

Finally, the strikes of 2019 were innovative in their demands. Not content to simply raise traditional union demands on compensation and work conditions, and even moving beyond educational issues such as class size that teacher unions had always bargained, the 2019 strikes took up issues such as the impact of excessive testing on education, the need for social and health services for students living in poverty, supports for homeless students to ensure the continuity of their education, the impact of the unregulated expansion of charter schools on public district schools, and protections for undocumented students from Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) raids.

THE SCOPE AND SEQUENCE OF THIS BOOK

In this book, I will employ the term *Teacher Insurgency* to describe the entire movement of strikes in 2018, 2019, and beyond. By reserving the term *Teacher Spring* to describe only the strikes in the spring of 2018, I will be able to distinguish its distinctive features, while also including it in the larger movement of the Teacher Insurgency.

Social movements and protest movements—including the labor movement—are by their nature dynamic and changing, not permanent and fixed. Movements wax and wane: they are born in bursts of activism, and they wither into periods of inertia and even inactivity. On occasion, they completely expire. But these trajectories are life cycles, so a movement can be renewed and reinvigorated, even reborn. And the life of a movement can be long or transitory, productive or barren. A movement can be on the order of the unionism of the 1930s, which remained a dominant political force for decades and dramatically reduced income

inequality in the United States, or it can end up like the nuclear freeze movement of the early 1980s, which organized the largest peace rally in American history and then quickly faded, with no meaningful impact on American foreign policy. It can be like the civil rights movement, vanquishing de jure Jim Crow segregation and begetting landmark civil rights and voting rights legislation, or it can be like Occupy Wall Street, which for all the attention it brought to the growth of extreme income inequality, rapidly disappeared without any discernible impact on American economic policy.

In no small measure, these different trajectories are shaped by what the participants and leaders of a movement do. Their actions directly impact how long a movement thrives and what it accomplishes in the way of social, political, and economic changes while it is still vibrant and dynamic. When a movement is young and in the ascendant, as the Teacher Insurgency now is, the interventions of participants and leaders are particularly important in shaping its trajectory and life path. Simply put, there is no law of history, politics, or economics that guarantees that the Teacher Insurgency will continue to advance and impact American education in progressive ways: it will happen because teachers and unionists employ sound strategic and organizing approaches, or it will not be.

As teachers and union activists, our strategic approach must be based on a thorough understanding of the relations of power in education politics and American politics more generally, with the knowledge of how to craft interventions on that political terrain to positive effect; our organizing must be rooted not only in the issues that are important to teachers, but in a deep understanding of *why* they are important to teachers and how they shape a collective “teacher” identity. This book was written to address precisely these questions of strategy and organizing. Its audience is first and foremost teachers and teacher union activists and leaders, but what it has to say about strategy and organizing will have a broader applicability for the larger labor, progressive, and democratic left movements and for those fighting to save American democracy in a moment of great crisis.

This book has three main sections. In the first, “The Origins of the Teacher Insurgency,” I start with an analysis, in chapter 2, of the issues that motivated the teacher strikes of 2018 and 2019. These issues fall

into two general categories, those that ensue from the underfunding of public education and those that involve the deprofessionalization and deskilling of teaching. Both sets of issues are the product of discrete government policies. In some instances, these policies were long-standing, such as austerity plans that date as far back as the mid-1970s; in other cases they are of a more recent origin, such as the deprofessionalization caused by the expanding role and importance of standardized exams. But all of these policies developed a particularly aggressive intensity in the decade of the 2010s, creating the basis for the Teacher Insurgency.

Issues can provide only a partial explanation for the emergence of a social movement. Equally important are the underlying dynamics that shape the political ground on which they are contested. In chapter 3, I argue that there are three crucial developments that created a ground favorable to the emergence of the Teacher Insurgency: the growing gap between what teachers expect when they enter teaching and what their actual experience is; the emergence of mass protest movements in the US after a period of relative quiescence; and the changing terrain of American educational politics. Through an analysis of both the issues that motivated the strikes and the underlying dynamics that created the favorable conditions for their emergence, I will answer the question of why the Teacher Insurgency has emerged at this point in the history of American education and teacher unionism. The logic of the Teacher Insurgency is fundamentally a political one, with government choices and policies—and resistance to them—being the driving forces.

In the second section, “The Strategic Challenges in Perspective,” I take up four key strategic questions that the Teacher Insurgency is confronting. Here I break with the common practice of viewing the Teacher Insurgency and movements of working people only through the particular lens of the labor movement; instead, I locate the labor movement in a wider universe of protest movements and social movements, such as the civil rights movement, that have faced similar strategic issues. This broader lens brings a richer and more diverse set of experiences and resources to bear on the question of how to mount successful collective action by teachers.

In chapter 4, I analyze the first of the strategic challenges—the different roles of mobilization and organization in protest movements—with a particular focus on how the use of social media has transformed

contemporary protest movements. While social media can be a powerful tool for mobilization, I argue that it cannot replace but instead must complement face-to-face organizing. Chapter 5 examines the second of the challenges—the relationship between protest and politics; that is, between various forms of direct action, such as strikes and demonstrations on the one hand and electoral politics on the other. Against those views that advocate one pole of this opposition to the exclusion of the other, such as those that promote strikes as an alternative to electoral politics, I contend that there is a productive tension between the two forms of action. Protest and politics each bring distinct capacities and unique strengths to a social change project, and a strategic approach that employs both in their appropriate context is most likely to be successful. Chapter 6 considers the history of teacher union strikes, the third challenge, distinguishing between the conditions and approaches that have resulted in successful strikes and those that have ended in setbacks and defeats. The continued use of the strike as a vital direct-action tactic in the Teacher Insurgency requires a solid understanding of what leads to success, if it is to be replicated. And in addressing the last of the strategic challenges in chapter 7, I assess an important approach to bargaining and contract negotiations that has been highlighted in the Teacher Insurgency—bargaining for the common good—which relies on strong partnerships with community. One of the key threads that will appear in this section is a vision of teacher unionism that is rooted in the republican and communitarian conceptions of unionism that were prevalent in the founding of American unionism.

In the third section, “Organizing Teachers, Teachers Organizing,” I move from particular strategic issues posed by the Teacher Insurgency to more general questions of how to organize teachers for collective action. While these questions are certainly central to the 2018 and 2019 strikes, they also have a much broader pertinence for the work of teacher unions. I start in chapter 8 by laying out a vision of organizing as an educational process in which those who are organizing learn about their collective voice and power—how to build and strengthen it and how to use it in ways that fulfill their common purposes. Good organizing, I argue, is akin to progressive education in the Deweyan mold, in which those who are learning are active participants in the learning and organizing process.

I then delve into a little theorized and discussed, but very important, component of organizing—the construction of a collective identity, the *we* of an organizing process. Here I analyze the four main discourses that provide the basis for the collective identity *teacher*—the discourse of teaching as nurturance (chapter 9), the discourse of teaching as professionalism (chapter 10), the discourse of teaching as labor and craft (chapter 11), and the discourse of teaching as democratic intellectual work (chapter 12). I demonstrate that these discourses are not simply ways of thinking and communicating but are materially grounded in social practices and institutions; as a consequence, they have within them implicit programmatic directions and policies that must be teased out and expressly articulated. Moreover, each of these discourses is contested, with different practices and conceptions that are often opposed to each other seeking to define what it means to be a teacher. The point of organizing, I maintain, is to intervene in these ongoing contests and to suture these discourses together, as it is in combination that the best elements of each discourse—the most democratic and solidaristic visions of what it means to be a teacher—are reinforced in a coherent collective teacher identity.

The purpose of this book, therefore, is not to provide one more narrative of the Teacher Insurgency, or even to locate it within larger histories of teacher collective action and the labor movement. While my analysis will certainly be informed by historical antecedents of the Teacher Insurgency, its focus will be on identifying the strategic and organizing approaches that will best situate us to build and sustain collective power—power that is capable not only of defending public education and teaching from those who seek to dismantle and diminish them, but of realizing their rich democratic promise. With the right strategic and organizing approaches, a new day is possible.