

Afterword Reflections on Contemporary Educator Movements

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Article abstract

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Afterword

Reflections on Contemporary Educator Movements

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Abstract

In this afterword, the editors of the special series Contemporary Educator Movements: Transforming Unions, Schools, and Society in North America reflect on the purpose and contributions the series. After reviewing relevant research, they discuss the focus of each of the four issues in the special series as well as themes that appear across the series. Finally, they highlight some of the contributions this series makes to research on social justice unionism and educator organizing.



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Educators have led some of the most significant labor struggles in recent years, including record-breaking work stoppages in the U.S. education sector in 2018 and 2019 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2019; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Through their leadership in movements including Red for Ed, educators have organized alongside students, parents, and community members to demand equitable, well-funded public schools, in many cases withholding their labor to secure “the schools our students deserve.” While the COVID-19 pandemic brought a slowdown in worker strikes in all sectors of the U.S. economy in 2020 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021), educator organizing continued throughout this period, with significant actions such as walkouts and sickouts excluded from work stoppage data (Poydock, McNicholas, & Shierholz, 2021). Throughout the pandemic, educators have used both bottom-up organizing and collective bargaining to advocate for public health measures that protect educators, students, and communities, ranging from smaller class sizes to testing to remote learning in the midst of outbreaks (Bradbury, 2020; Jaffe, 2020; Jones, 2021). They have also continued to lead equity-oriented and antiracist struggles including the Black Lives Matter at School movement, which expanded its national organizing to a Year of Purpose in 2020 (Black Lives Matter at School, 2020; Jones & Hagopian, 2020).

Background on Contemporary Educator Movements

Social Justice Unionism and Educator Organizing

By engaging in these struggles, rank-and-file educators have contributed to a growing tradition that they often discuss as social justice unionism: a form of unionism through which unionists democratically organize alongside parents, students, and other community members for social justice both in schools and in society as a whole (Behrent, 2015; National Coalition of Education Activists, 1994; Peterson, 1999; Rottmann, 2013). Frequently referred to as social movement unionism in the labor studies literature (Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008; Moody, 1997; Weiner, 2012), this model emphasizes democratic and, at times, horizontalist labor organizing for common good and anti-oppression policies. In following this model, educators advance equitable policies and practices alongside traditional “bread and butter” issues such as pay and benefits, which have historically been prioritized under the model of “business style unionism.”

While social justice unionists frequently lead mobilizing efforts to address immediate challenges, they also engage in ongoing “deep organizing” to address longstanding inequalities at the local, national, and international levels (McAlevy, 2016). Through this organizing alongside parents, students, and community allies, educators take part in what we term contemporary educator movements: social movements that aim to transform teachers unions, schools, and society (Stark, 2019). These movements are characterized by organizers’ use of democratic processes to advance justice from the ground up, frequently centering multiple forms of justice and supporting or organizing alongside other movements. In this way, they connect with what social movement scholars term the “movement of movements” (Sen, 2017) of the past three decades, which use a “contemporary logic of resistance” (Wolfson et al., 2017, p. 397) that emphasizes democratic processes, networks, and new technologies to advance multiple forms of justice (Juris, 2008).

Historical Background

While they build on the legacies of progressive movements reaching back decades (Stern, Brown, & Hussain, 2016), we can most directly trace contemporary educator movements back to

the mid 1990s (Stark, 2019). In the face of increasing standardization in public schools, educators in the National Coalition of Education Activists (1994) developed and put forward a definition of social justice unionism that prioritizes democracy and social justice. Organizers in this coalition put these principles into practice in reform campaigns in labor organizations across the country, including the first organizations that might be called social justice caucuses: groups of educator unionists committed to rank-and-file organizing alongside parents, students, and community members for justice in schools and society. The most influential of these caucuses, the Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE), was formed in Chicago in 2008, drawing on lessons from educators in British Columbia and Los Angeles. Educators in this caucus went on to win the top elected positions in their union, leading the pivotal Chicago teachers strike in 2012 (Uetricht, 2014). Inspired in large part by CORE, social justice caucuses developed across the United States throughout the 2010s, with organizers coming together to form the (inter)national United Caucuses of Rank-and-File Educators (UCORE) network in 2014. Through this network, educators in nearly thirty local and statewide caucuses share strategies from each other's work, fostering the development of contemporary educator movements throughout the United States and beyond.

Research on Contemporary Educator Movements

As these movements have blossomed over the course of the past decade, scholar activists have used engaged methodologies to both document and support educator struggles, in some cases publishing research in collaboration with practitioner scholars (Asselin, 2019; Bocking, 2017; Brogan, 2014; Dani & Asselin, 2020; Dyke & Muckian-Bates, 2019; Maton, 2018; Maton & Stark, 2021; Owens, 2020; Riley, 2015; Shiller & BMORE caucus, 2019; Stark, 2019). Likewise, practitioners have offered illuminating public scholarship on these movements, sharing insights from their experiences with fellow organizers, scholars, and the general public (Anderson & Cohen, 2017; Charney, Hagopian, & Peterson, 2021; Friedman & McCormick, 2020; Griego, 2015; Hagopian, 2015/2016; Karvelis, 2018/2019). Few volumes have brought together both practitioner scholars and scholar activists to explore organizing processes within these movements, however. With this goal in mind, this special series includes articles and interviews featuring the analyses of practitioner scholars and scholar activists who are engaged in this work, centering “movement relevant” (Bevington & Dixon, 2005) perspectives on key struggles within the United States and across the Americas.

Overview of this Special Series

The issues in this special series have been organized thematically. In the first issue of the series (Vol. 12, No. 7), we bring together articles exploring learning and knowledge production in contemporary educator movements. In the second issue of this series (Vol. 13, No. 2), we turn our attention to the 2018 statewide walkouts. In the third issue of the series (Vol. 13, No. 3), we explore (anti)racism, democracy, and social justice unionism in contemporary educator movements. In the fourth and final issue of the series (Vol. 13, No. 4), we expand our scope to educator organizing across the Americas, focusing particularly on teachers unions and recent struggles in Canada and Chile.

Counternarratives

The articles in these issues deepen our understanding of contemporary educator movements in a range of ways. Together, they offer counternarratives that complicate popular accounts of educator organizing and are built from authors' engaged research with and for contemporary educator movements. In many cases, these counternarratives draw on direct experiences of organizing within contemporary educator movements. Composing a research team of K12 and teacher educators, Erin Dyke, Heather Anderson, Autumn Brown, Jinan El Sabbagh, Hannah Fernandez, Stacey Goodwin, Mark Hickey, Stephanie Price, Megan Ruby, Kristy Self, Jennifer Williams, and Angel Worth conducted an oral history study of the 2018 Oklahoma statewide strike. Analyzing more than 50 narratives, their piece illuminates ways the struggle grew educators' political understandings, local union participation, and activism in the strike's aftermath. Likewise, in his review of Eric Blanc's *Red State Revolt* (2019), Noah Karvelis draws on his lived experience of organizing in the 2018 Arizona statewide walkouts to shed light on elements of the Red for Ed movement that were not discussed in the text, including the leadership of women of color and the ways that this organizing built on previous movements. Moreover, in her qualitative study featuring educators in the Caucus of Working Educators (WE) in Philadelphia, Dana Morrison explores the influence of previous movements on these educator organizers and their work, revealing the deep roots of recent labor struggles. Furthermore, in their conceptual analysis of the organizational structures of teachers unions, Nina Bascia and Sachin Maharaj draw on case studies of labor organizations in Canada and Chile to showcase the importance of internal organizing structures to advancing external social movement goals.

Micro-Level Analyses

By centering first-hand accounts of educator organizing, many of the articles in this series offer micro-level analyses of organizing processes within contemporary educator movements, sharing insights into both fruitful and counterproductive organizing practices. For example, in his autoethnographic narrative of anti-austerity educator organizing in Ontario, Canada, Paul Bocking offers detailed descriptions and analyses of this struggle, sharing insights relevant for both rank-and-file educators and elected union leaders. Likewise, in her qualitative study of a summer reading series hosted by WE in Philadelphia, Kathleen Riley explores how and why educator unionists use book groups for political education. Similarly, in an interview conducted by Rhiannon Maton, Ontario Education Workers United (OEWU) member and organizer Deborah Buchanan-Walford discusses how educators within her new, cross-union organization have used grassroots organizing strategies to advance justice within Ontario schools. Moreover, in her critical autoethnographic analysis of organizing for democracy and against racism in Newark, New Jersey, Leah Owens shares rich vignettes from her experiences as an educator organizer and leader, highlighting the need for anti-racist practices within caucus organizing.

Cultural Processes of Contemporary Educator Movements

Centering Ethical Principles

The articles and interviews in this series also investigate the cultural processes that characterize contemporary educator movements, including centering ethical principles, using new technologies, and organizing within and across networks. Several pieces emphasize the centrality

of ethical principles to educator organizing, focusing particularly on racial justice, economic justice, and democracy. Chloe Asselin explores how educator organizers in New York and Philadelphia challenge racism through democratic organizing, for example. Likewise, in an interview conducted by Jessica Shiller, Baltimore Teachers Union and Baltimore Movement of Rank-and-File Educators organizer Keysha Godwin highlights the importance of representation as well as grassroots organizing to the caucus and union's work.

Using New Technologies

Other articles and interviews elucidate how organizers use new technologies to expand traditional organizing practices, such as political education or site-based organizing. In their qualitative study of organizing within the Red for Ed movement(s), for example, Crystal Howell Beck and Caleb Schmitzer analyze how West Virginia educators used online organizing strategies to develop a statewide struggle. Similarly, in an interview conducted by Noah Karveles, Arizona Red for Ed leader Vanessa Arrendono-Aguirre discusses how rural, urban, and statewide organizers used technologies such as Action Network and Excel to develop a strong statewide network and struggle.

Engaging in Networks

The articles and interviews in this series also explore the centrality of networks to organizing within and across contemporary educator movements. In her exploration of knowledge production among activist educators, Tricia Niesz discusses how educators create and use networks to share knowledge. Likewise, in an interview conducted by Lauren Ware Stark, Black Lives Matter at School leaders Tamara Anderson and Jesse Hagopian discuss how the movement spread from a single local Day of Action to a national Week of Action and Year of Purpose through a range of educator-led networks.

Conclusion

Together, the articles and interviews in this series deepen our knowledge of contemporary educator movements, offering engaged studies and narratives of educator organizing in the United States and across the Americas. By bringing together the analyses of scholar activists and practitioner scholars, this series contributes to both practical and academic knowledge around these movements. In this way, it provides tools for future scholar activists and practitioners to both understand and engage in these movements, using frameworks such as social justice unionism to transform educators' schools, unions, and broader communities.

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