

## A Red State Counternarrative: Review of Eric Blanc's Red State Revolt

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## *A Red State Counternarrative*

### *Review of Eric Blanc's Red State Revolt*

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Book reviewed: Blanc, E. (2019). *Red state revolt: The teachers' strike wave and working-class politics*. Verso.

Eric Blanc's (2019) book, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strikes and Working-Class Politics*, is an important work concerning the recent teacher strikes in the United States. The book merges Blanc's experience as a participant-observer in the wave of teacher activism during the spring of 2018, often identified as the Red for Ed movement, with interviews from various organizers in order to understand what drove the recent explosion in teacher activism. Further, Blanc mobilizes the activism of teachers in order to suggest lessons for social struggles beyond the landscape of education.

Ultimately, the book argues that recent "red state" teacher movements were more successful in states such as Arizona and West Virginia due to the leadership of a Bernie Sanders-inspired, politically-minded "militant minority." For Blanc, this militant minority was able to guide the movement through direct confrontation with the state. His work reads as an on-the-ground interpretation of the Red for Ed movement as he and several teachers experienced it. The analysis orients largely around implications of the militant minority theory, such as the importance of the Sanders campaign and Democratic Socialists of America members.

In this review, I do not dispute any of the facts he presents. I believe his book to be a largely accurate portrayal of the events. I appreciate Blanc's emphasis on the important relationship between the political left and labor movements in the United States, his incorporation of teacher voices, his diligence in releasing the text immediately following the strikes, and his continual effort to center the work of education-activists throughout the text.

Instead, I call for a consideration of what lies beyond Blanc's analysis. This review is concerned less with what is actually in Blanc's book and more so with what is left outside of it. As his book is increasingly read and seemingly becomes viewed as the fundamental text concerning the Red for Ed movement, it is important to engage with Blanc's work in ways that draw attention to the analyses that he does not embrace with the intent of both broadening and

deepening understandings of the movement. I suggest that through Blanc's focus upon the militant minority and use of a methodology centered upon interviewing a very small amount of movement participants, many important elements of the movement such as the role of gender and the history of activism in states such as Arizona are elided.

It is my hope that I can draw from my experience as a teacher, a Red for Ed organizer and the co-founder of the organization which helped lead the Arizona teacher movement, Arizona Educators United (AEU), in order to contribute to the work of making these elements of the movement visible. Doing so, I hope to develop further understandings of Red for Ed and Blanc's book and to do so with the deliberate intention of engaging in a continued, informed struggle against the oppressive conditions that many teachers and students face.

### **The Militant Minority and the Transformative Majority**

Blanc's book details many of the actions and developments of the movement in a clear, linear fashion. Central to the book is the concept of the "militant minority," or, as Blanc (2019) writes, a group of "militant teacher-organizers – most of them young radicals inspired by the 2016 Bernie Sanders presidential campaign – [who] initiated these illegal rank-and-file rebellions and guided them to victory in alliance with their trade unions" (p.3). For Blanc, these select few teachers were able to guide the movements to success in states such as Arizona and West Virginia. Meanwhile Blanc claims that other states, such as Oklahoma, lacked such a minority and were consequently less successful.

Blanc's theory is not without merit. It is true that there were teachers with more control over the movement's direction. For example, the teachers who ran Red for Ed Facebook pages for their state were often regarded as statewide movement leaders. Further, as someone who is included in Blanc's militant minority and was inspired in many ways by Bernie Sanders, I believe that there is likely much truth in his claims surrounding the significance of the 2016 Sanders campaign. However, what concerns me are the implications of this theory for the tens of thousands of people in the Red for Ed movement who are not part of Blanc's militant minority. What does a focus on a very small minority mean for the incredibly vast majority of this movement?

Although Blanc positioned me as a militant minority, I have come to see Red for Ed in very different terms. I do not view Arizona's movement as something that I or the other co-founders of AEU built independently. And, from discussions with many other leaders in AEU, I believe that they view the movement in a similar way. In my understanding, it was not something that we alone created but, instead, something that all of us, every single teacher involved, built together in a largely organic way. When we began organizing and founded AEU, we had little idea of what we were actually organizing toward. We created our movement together, piece by piece, with thousands of other teachers.

Consequently, I argue that the Red for Ed movement in Arizona emerged less from the politics of a militant minority and more so through the tremendous efforts of over 60,000 people communicating and working through a Facebook group which created a statewide network of activists – a transformative *majority*. As fellow AEU organizer, Vanessa Arredondo, told me, "It wasn't about us or Bernie. It was something else. It was about *everybody* coming together to do this" (personal communication, November 9, 2019). And, importantly, this work took place in contexts largely marginalized in *Red State Revolt*, such as wider, relatively nebulous leadership

structures, historical memories of prior social movements, and deeply gendered conditions surrounding schooling.

While Blanc's book offers many important insights, I believe that it underemphasizes these elements of Red for Ed. Through a focus upon the militant minority and the broad engagement with Blanc's text as the definitive analysis of Red for Ed, I fear that the realities of a transformative majority, the various influences beyond Bernie Sanders, and a collaborative, politically diverse grassroots movement are becoming overlooked.

### **A Red State Counternarrative**

With the focus placed on a militant minority, Blanc's book places comparatively little focus on several elements of Red for Ed. First of all, leadership was much more widespread beyond the militant minority. For example, in Arizona, the contributions of teachers such as Kelley Fisher, who was a central presence in almost all of the movement's decisions, and Vanessa Arredondo, who created the entire communications structure for a 60,000-member movement, are discussed relatively little. While Blanc does mention both of these leaders, he places significantly more focus on the leaders who supported Bernie Sanders' 2016 presidential campaign as he forwards the militant minority theory. Through emphasizing this minority's importance, the vital contributions of a larger, unified leadership team and teacher-activists such as Fisher and Arredondo are offered significantly less focus.

In addition, there is also a decreased emphasis upon the broader, statewide participation in the movement. While Blanc does acknowledge networks such as the liaisons in Arizona (essentially movement site leaders) much of the emphasis is placed on the network's relationship to members of the militant minority such as Dylan Wegela. Yet, the liaison network was central to the functioning of the movement. For example, this network of over 2,000 liaisons were tasked with organizing their work sites, hosting meetings, engaging with the local community and organizing actions. They routinely organized independent, local events and forged strong connections with their local communities. It was their organizing across the state that made the movement work and develop. Further, beyond this network of liaisons, tens of thousands of teachers and parents across the state played key roles in the organizing efforts of the movement and routinely organized and participated in actions across the state, as well as on social media. Within Blanc's text, there is little focus upon the many powerful, continual efforts from this massive network of engaged grassroots activists across Arizona. Consequently, the focus upon the militant minority diverts attention from the tens of thousands of teachers, parents and community members who fought tirelessly for the Red for Ed movement.

Through this process, many of the gendered and racial elements of the movement are also marginalized. As lifelong Arizona resident, Phoenix Union School Board president, former Arizona Education Association government relations director, and executive director of ALL in Education in Arizona, Stephanie Parra, told me, "The power of the Red for Ed movement is the diversity in the people leading the cause, particularly Latinas and women of color coming forward to share perspectives on issues impacting the students in their communities. Their voices are held in high regard and help shape the dialogue regarding the needs of low-income communities of color" (personal communication, December 10, 2019). Yet, these elements of Red for Ed are typically not present throughout *Red State Revolt*, highlighting the important need to engage with counternarratives and feminist analyses of the strike wave such as Parra's. A further example exists

in Tithi Bhattacharya's (2018) analysis of the West Virginia movement, which centers the history of labor organizing in the state and the gendered elements of education activism in order to understand the many nuances of the movement.

Further, through the emphasis on the militant minority, I fear that Blanc downplays much of the history of Red for Ed. First, the legacy of teacher struggles before Red for Ed, such as the historic Chicago Teachers Union strike in 2012, is only briefly mentioned yet radically redefined the contemporary American teacher strike. Second, the legacy of other red state social movements is relatively absent. The history of conservatism and Republicans is centered in Blanc's work, but the histories of red state resistance are offered little consideration.

In Arizona's case, for example, the existence of Latinx social movements in the southwest such as the farmworkers' movement, the recent, successful Latinx and youth-led campaigns against Joe Arpaio, the county sheriff known for egregious anti-immigrant and racist policies, and the Tucson-based struggle over the ethnic studies program are offered no consideration. Similarly, deep labor and social movement histories exist in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Kentucky and deserve a nuanced, continued analysis. As Erin Dyke and Brendan Muckian-Bates (2019) state in their review of the book: "the recent strikes are significantly indebted to a constellation of local, national, and transnational movements" (para. 4). Along with Dyke and Muckian-Bates, I have come to understand Red for Ed as less of a spontaneous eruption of radical contention and more of a continuing story of teacher rebellions, gendered struggles, and, in Arizona, Latinx resistance.

Lastly, through Blanc's linking of the success of the movement to the militant minority and then repeatedly connecting this minority to Bernie Sanders, the book begins to conflate Sanders and Red for Ed in a way that I worry draws focus away from the politically diverse, independent movement that it was and is. This is a narrative that I feel garnered increasing focus through the 2020 primary. I personally struggled, despite my own support of Senator Sanders, with this conflation and what I view as an increasing usage of Red for Ed to forward an electoral campaign (see also Blanc, 2019) as opposed to using an electoral campaign, like I believe Sanders himself often does, to forward a movement.

While Blanc is correct that some leaders like myself supported Sanders' 2016 campaign, what becomes lost through this conflation of Sanders and Red for Ed is the fact that there were 75,000 people in the street in Arizona who marched with a different inspiration in their hearts. This was an inspiration not of a Democratic political campaign but of a radically new reality for teachers and students. As Dr. Eleni Schirmer, a scholar of teacher unionism, told me, "This is, in fact, the power of unions. They are spaces in which people can act for shared political aims even if they have different political identities" (personal communication, November 18, 2019). Blanc does recognize that, of course, not all the Red for Ed teachers were inspired by Sanders. However, through his repeated centering of Sanders and the militant minority, the political diversity of the movement – which was crucial in red states – becomes overshadowed.

### **Final Thoughts**

I appreciate many elements of Blanc's book and believe that he has offered an important contribution to studies of teacher movements, unions, and grassroots labor organizing in the United States. Yet, Blanc's analysis is only one perspective, and I believe that as his work is increasingly read, we must also engage with and create counternarratives that broaden and refine how we understand Red for Ed.

Admittedly, in my first readings of Blanc's book, as a white man deeply embedded in my own ways of thinking, I originally recognized few of the critiques that I have offered here. I feel it is important to recognize that these ways of understanding Red for Ed and Blanc's work have emerged over the last year from conversations and experiences in many different spaces – particularly with women and Latinx Arizonans, which have helped forward my own reflections on the Red for Ed movement and Blanc's analysis.

Ultimately, it is my intention that this review does not negate or refute Blanc's work, but instead calls for increased engagement with leadership beyond the "militant minority," the role of women and people of color in the movement, and the historical underpinnings of the teacher strikes. Blanc's *Red State Revolt* is an important work. Just like the Red for Ed movement itself, we must critically engage with it as we build the movements that our teachers and students deserve. Simultaneously, we must hold the spaces necessary for such work.

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