

ERIC BLANC

Teacher Strikes and the Fight for the Common

To celebrate the 10th anniversary of *Praktyka Teoretyczna* journal, we have invited our long-lasting collaborators and comrades to reflect once again on the concept of the common and its possible futures by posing the following questions: a) what is the most important aspect of the current struggles for the common?; b) what are the biggest challenges for the communist politics of the future?; and c) where in the ongoing struggles do you see a potential for scaling-up and spreading organisation based on the common? In his reply, Eric Blanc draws our attention to contemporary teachers strikes as a movement with radical potentialities that greatly exceed merely reversing the privatization process of education.

Słowa kluczowe: the common, public education, strike, privatization, decommodification

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In the United States, and across the world, the fight in defense of public education is a central aspect of the fight for the common. At a time when labor militancy continues to decline in the private sector, educators and their unions have thrust themselves to the fore of struggles against privatization and for the common good.

Perhaps nowhere is this clearer than in the United States, which has experienced an unprecedented wave of teachers' strikes since 2018, in "red" (Republican-led) states like West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona, as well as "blue" cities like Los Angeles and Chicago. Hundreds of thousands of teachers and support staff have walked out, closing schools for literally millions of students. Through grassroots organizing and militant tactics, they won more concessions from their employers in a few short months than labor unions in these states had won over the past two decades combined. In the process, educators placed themselves at the front of the fight for a society that works on behalf of the many, not the few.

Regarding the common, there are some critical differences between the current revolt and the last great round of rank-and-file radicalism in the US and Europe, the strike wave of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Whereas labor struggles four decades ago came in the wake of a postwar economic boom and the construction of welfare states, this labor upheaval has erupted in a period of virtually uninterrupted working-class defeats and neoliberal austerity. As such, the political scientist Corey Robin (2018) was right to call 2018's educator upsurge the "most profound and deepest attack on the basic assumptions of the contemporary governing order."

The stakes are high. Public education remains one of the few remaining democratically distributed public goods in the US. For that very reason, corporate politicians have done everything they can to dismantle and privatize the school system. As professor Gordon Lafer documents in his book *The One Percent Solution*, this isn't only about immediate profit-making. Big corporations, he writes, are trying "to avoid a populist backlash" against neoliberalism "by lowering everybody's expectations of what we have a right to demand as citizens":

When you think about what Americans think we have a right to, just by living here, it's really pretty little. Most people don't think you have a right to health-care or a house. You don't necessarily have a right to food and water. But people think you have a right to have your kids get a decent education (Lafer 2017).

As in the rest of the United States, spending cuts have gone hand in hand with a push for privatization (Blanc 2019). The corporate playbook

is not complicated. First, you starve public schools of money, then you insist that the only solution to the artificially created education crisis is “school choice” — i.e. privately run (but publicly funded) charters, as well as government sponsored “vouchers” for private schools. In Oklahoma, there are now twenty-eight charter school districts and fifty-eight charter schools. “Is the government purposely neglecting our public schools to give an edge to private and charter schools?” asked Tulsa teacher Mickey Miller.

This nationwide offensive to take education out of the public sphere has undoubtedly advanced furthest in Arizona (Blanc 2018). About 17 percent of Arizonan students currently attend a charter school — more than three times the national average. Many of these schools generate millions of dollars in private revenue.

Like many other parents in Arizona, Dawn Penich-Thacker questioned the state’s priorities: “If there’s so little funding for education, why should it be given to profit-making businesses?” In 2014–15, for example, BASIS charter schools made almost \$60 million for the private BASIS corporation that services its schools. “Business is business,” noted Owen Kerr, who was formerly employed at BASIS. “So I can see that though a number of charters try to do things differently, most are set up to make money.”

One of the strikers’ secrets to success was that they consistently raised political demands — for example, massively increased school funding — on behalf of the commons and the common good. The defense of student interests was consistently put front and center. At the press conference announcing their impending work stoppage, Noah Karvelis explained that “we are underfunding our students every single day — every single student in the state of Arizona is being underfunded. And by doing so we are throwing away an entire generation’s opportunity for academic success.” And in Oklahoma, the work stoppage focused almost exclusively on demands for increased school funding, since the legislature had already passed important salary concessions in a last-minute attempt to prevent educators from walking out.

Fighting for students, and framing their struggles as a defense of essential services for the public, went a long ways towards undercutting the Right’s constant harping that striking teachers were hurting children. Educators made a compelling case that they weren’t walking out *from* the students, but *for* them. As one West Virginia teacher explained in a March 1 letter to her students: “I love you and that’s why I’m doing this.” Posts from Arizonan strikers conveyed a similar message:

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I educated my students the best way I know how, and that's by taking that stand and showing them that they're worth that time and effort. If we can get them to believe they're worth us walking out then maybe they can be our loudest advocates.

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In Oklahoma, Edmond Memorial High senior Gabrielle Davis similarly initiated a thousand-strong student rally in less than thirty-six hours. For her, this action was about students standing up for themselves:

I want to be heard, but Oklahoman students haven't been heard. We've finally reached a breaking point because our education needs to be funded. We have real power to influence policy, to influence public opinion. The protests have taught me and my classmates how to stand up for what we believe.

One of the major upshots of the 2018 strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona was that opposition to privatization has spread widely. To quote Kerr, "this grassroots movement could very well be the first step towards reversing privatization in Arizona and beyond." Penich-Thacker explained how the state's Red For Ed movement had boosted anti-voucher sentiment in the state:

Red for Ed has more people paying attention to education than ever before. Even last year, a lot of people hadn't heard of the funding crisis, let alone vouchers. Now you can't go anywhere in Arizona without talking about this. Red for Ed is an incredible "force multiplier" for efforts to put a stop to increased privatization: it makes all of our tools more powerful. Now every conversation we have about vouchers and charters is amplified across the state.

Though the initial pay and funding demands of these education movements may seem relatively modest, each walkout raised a question

with radical political implications: should our society's wealth and resources be used for human needs or corporate profits?

A small, but not insignificant, number of strikers concluded that systematic solutions will be needed to resolve our society's underlying crisis of priorities. When asked about her favorite moment of the strike, Morgantown teacher Anna Simmons recounted the following anecdote from the day West Virginian educators turned their strike "wildcat" (i.e. by disobeying orders from union leadership to return to work):

At a mostly unoccupied mall in Morgantown we met to discuss our options. Ultimately, in a nearly singular voice, we stated that we were not willing to accept the same empty promises our politicians have given their constituents for decades. It was a spontaneously planned meeting with short notice, but our school employees showed up in huge numbers.

I realized that night that I wasn't the only one feeling as passionately as I was feeling about what the work stoppage meant. It was the moment I realized that it was about more than just insurance premiums and salaries. It was the continuation of a movement that started with Bernie Sanders and is going to result in a power shift from the elite wealthy to the working people.

Though the initial demands in these education battles remain relatively modest, the movement has radical potentialities. If working people across the US are able to reverse the privatization of education, there's little reason to assume that they'll stop there. Key sectors of our economy — from health care to transportation to energy production — are ripe for decommodification.

At its heart, the school strikes are not just about the fate of public education. They are strikes for the common and for democracy — against the plans of a tiny clique of capitalists to unilaterally impose their vision for the world upon the working-class majority.

In this way, teachers have posed the central question of our time: Who should determine governmental policy — the workers or the rich? The billionaires are right to be worried.

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ERIC BLANC – author of the books *Revolutionary Social Democracy: Working-Class Politics Across the Russian Empire, 1882-1917* (Brill 2021) and *Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strike Wave and Working-Class Politics* (Verso 2019), Eric Blanc is a doctoral candidate at NYU Sociology. He has appeared on Democracy Now, Rising, and writes for Jacobin, The Nation and The Guardian. During the West Virginia, Oklahoma, Arizona, Denver, Oakland, Los Angeles, and Chicago public education strikes, Blanc was Jacobin's on-the-ground correspondent.

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Tytuł: Strajki nauczycieli i walka o to, co wspólne

Abstrakt: Z okazji 10 urodzin *Praktyki Teoretycznej* zaprosiliśmy naszych wieloletnich współpracowników i towarzyszy do wspólnego rozważenia przyszłości tego, co wspólne. Poprosiliśmy ich o zmierzenie się z następującymi pytaniami: a) co jest najważniejszym aspektem współczesnych walk o to, co wspólne?; b) jakie największe wyzwania stoją w przyszłości przed polityką tego, co wspólne?; c) gdzie w ramach toczonych walk wiedziecie potencjał na rozwijanie i poszerzanie organizacji opartej na tym, co wspólne? Eric Blanc, skupiający się na przebiegu strajków nauczycieli w Stanach Zjednoczonych, zwraca naszą uwagę na radykalną potencjalność tych walk, które przyjmują postać walki o to, co wspólne.

Słowa kluczowe: to, co wspólne; edukacja publiczna, strajk, prywatyzacja, dekomodifikacja