



Combustible Convergence: Bargaining for the Common Good and the #RedforEd Uprisings of 2018

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Abstract

This article examines both the Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG) contract campaigns that have emerged among teachers unions in the years since the Great Recession and the #RedforEd strikes and mobilizations of 2018. It finds that although these efforts emerged in very different contexts and with quite different levels of planning and organization, they nonetheless evolved in similar directions. Both BCG campaigns and the #RedforEd mobilizations framed their efforts in broad terms as defenses of the common good; both were grounded in and dependent upon strong community alliances; and both achieved a significant increase in teacher militancy in large part because of these factors. Taken together, the BCG campaigns and #RedforEd mobilizations help illustrate our need to rethink collective bargaining in ways that allow us to confront the structural inequalities that are steadily undermining both our schools and our democracy.

Keywords

teachers; public sector; collective bargaining; strikes; Common Good

The awakening of teacher militancy from coast to coast—in red states and blue states alike—has been among the most astonishing developments of recent years. One of the most remarkable features of that militancy has been the similarity in the demands

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raised by mobilized teachers, whether they came from big cities or small, high-union-density cities or right-to-work states, from carefully crafted campaigns framed over years or from sudden upsurges of discontent that occurred without months of planning. Across the board and in a wide variety of settings, teachers began demanding more than wage increases or better benefits for themselves. They consciously framed their struggles as about more than teachers' interests alone. They fought for the future of their students, their schools, their cities and states. At the same time, they challenged the existing power structures and public priorities under which they labored. They broadened their targets beyond the school boards for which they worked. They targeted the political leadership of their cities and states as well as the wealthy individuals and corporate entities to whom that political leadership was beholden. They directly challenged the austerity agenda that continues to enchain the public sector a decade after the onset of the Great Recession. As they did so, they began in large ways and small to redefine collective bargaining as it has worked in the public sector for the last several decades.

This paper examines the convergence of two kinds of teachers movements over the last decade: the Bargaining for the Common Good (BCG) contract campaigns that emerged among teachers unions in the years since the Great Recession and the #RedforEd strikes and mobilizations of 2018. It finds that although these efforts emerged in very different contexts and with quite different levels of planning and organization, they nonetheless evolved in similar directions. Both BCG campaigns, which emerged in heavily unionized cities, and the #RedforEd mobilizations, which took place in right-to-work states, framed their efforts in broad terms as defenses of the common good; both were grounded in and dependent upon strong community alliances; and both achieved a significant increase in teacher militancy in large part because of these factors. Both the similarities between these two types of teacher activism and their successes in changing the way the much of the public sees teachers' unions are worthy of examination.

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of these recent manifestations of teacher labor power is that their demands have been broad and inclusive. Even those teachers who earned well below the national average and had poor benefits, such as the West Virginia strikers of 2018, put the focus of their demands on their students' needs, on improving classroom quality and increasing classroom resources, in their strikes as much as they did on winning improvements for themselves. In doing so, they demanded a significant investment in children and effectively countered the false narrative that teachers care more about themselves than their students.

One of the ways in which the teachers accomplished this was by focusing their energy on corporate-controlled politicians and powerful financial entities whose austerity agendas those politicians have advanced at the expense of public education. By "going up the food chain," these mass teacher mobilizations have not only avoided pitting themselves against parents, taxpayers, and members of the community who should be their natural allies. They have also helped lay the basis for a broad convergence of allies with common aims.

Both the BCG contract campaigns and the #RedforEd mobilizations thus effectively “flipped the script” that has predominated for more than a generation in our political discourse, a script in which teachers’ unions and their demands were relentlessly scapegoated for everything that ailed public education. By taking to the streets, forming picket lines, striking, or marching on their state capitals, teachers demonstrated that there is no force more capable of freeing our schools from the strangling grip of austerity politics than organized teachers standing shoulder to shoulder with their allies.

Remarkably, the patterns that have marked these protests have been similar whether carried out in carefully planned contract campaigns conducted in cities with a strong union presence, such as Chicago, St. Paul, Seattle, and Los Angeles, or through explosive and often unanticipated protests that evolved into a kind of public bargaining with governors and state legislators in “red states” such as West Virginia, Arizona, and Oklahoma. Whether they were mobilized behind carefully planned bargaining campaigns whose groundwork was laid over months or years, such as the Chicago teachers’ strike of 2012 or the Los Angeles teachers’ strike of 2019, or whether they took part in comparatively spontaneous insurgencies in settings where collective bargaining for teachers is not even allowed by law, such as Arizona where teachers struck in April 2018, teachers drew on the support of community allies and advanced untraditional demands. While some, like the LA teachers, did so as part of BCG, a movement that is consciously attempting reshape public sector bargaining in response to the realities of twenty-first century capitalism, others, like the West Virginia teachers, adopted a BCG-like approach without much if any contact with the BCG network of union activists, and without requiring the months of planning that had preceded bargaining campaigns in places like Chicago and St. Paul.

The extent to which teachers in BCG settings like Seattle and St. Paul and in #RedforEd hotbeds like Logan County, West Virginia, and Logan County, Oklahoma, have begun converging around the same logic should alert us that something important is afoot. Historically, breakthroughs for worker organization have tended to occur when the conditions and calculations of otherwise disparate workers cause them to converge around broadly shared analyses, strategies, and tactics. As the historian Eric Hobsbawm wisely observed more than a half-century ago, workers’ movements tend to be “discontinuous,” and union growth is “very rarely” a “rising slope.” Union breakthroughs instead tend to happen in “explosive” fashion. Such “explosions” occur when favorable conditions are accompanied by “qualitative innovations in the movement,” he argued. Such innovations are in turn “normally . . . associated with new types of leadership, organization, or demands” which are “themselves doubtless the product of the period of economic change with which the ‘explosions’ attempted to come to terms” (Hobsbawm 1964, 149, 150, 172-73).

We believe that BCG contract campaigns and the #RedforEd mobilizations have begun to surface innovative forms of leadership, organization, and demands of the sort Hobsbawm had in mind. Indeed, the gravitation of both well-organized bargaining campaigns and relatively spontaneous uprisings alike toward more far-reaching demands and a more community-based form of struggle—demands and strategies that

have been necessitated by the transformation of capitalism in the neoliberal era—is a potentially prophetic development. The teachers’ struggles, we believe, are furnishing at least some of what Hobsbawm called the “new ideas and new methods” that will be necessary if we are to see a twenty-first century “explosion” that can revive the union movement, reverse the growth of racialized inequality, and rescue our imperiled democracy (Hobsbawm 1964, 172).

The Origins and Development of BCG

In some ways, the sweeping demands teachers have raised in recent years are a throwback to the origins of teacher unionism in Chicago in the early twentieth century. Margaret Haley, who turned the Chicago Teachers Federation into the first real teachers’ union in the United States, espoused a vision that would rival in its breadth that of any recent union visionary. Her union fought to stop the leasing of school property to profit-making businesses, exposed Chicago’s leading tax cheats, and campaigned for municipal ownership of public transit (Haley 1982; Murphy 1981). “The significant thing in the tax crusade of the Chicago teachers was not the disclosing of these humiliating facts, nor the forcing of the corporations to return to the public treasury some of their stolen millions,” Haley explained in a famous speech to the National Education Association, it was that “the organized effort of the teachers” was what “brought these conditions to the attention of the public and showed how to apply the remedy” (Haley 1904, 148).

The breadth of vision that characterized Haley’s activism was no longer much in evidence in the early twenty-first century. For the most part, teacher unions were on the defensive as Republicans and Democrats alike touted the charter school movement. That defensive posture continued into the Obama administration, as charter school champion Arne Duncan was named secretary of education and inaugurated the Race to the Top initiative, the documentary *Waiting for Superman* cast teachers’ unions in a negative light, and the Great Recession brought sharp cutbacks in education funding across the states (Murphy 1990, 252-73; Ravitch 2014, 14-18; Shelton 2017; Weber, 2010).

Yet it was in the depth of the Great Recession that the first glimmers of a renewed teachers’ movement emerged. On June 11, 2010, even as the Tea Party movement was gaining ground in preparation for the devastating 2010 midterm elections that would cut short the promise of Obama administration, reformer Karen Lewis led a slate of Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) to power in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). The union immediately began laying plans for militant and innovative bargaining backed up with a credible strike threat when the union’s contract expired in 2012. In preparation, the union cut officers’ salaries and used the savings to expand outreach efforts with community allies. The CTU’s leaders were determined to break free of the confines of traditional collective bargaining, and challenge “austeritarians” like Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel.¹

The CTU’s planners drew encouragement from other experiments that sprang up in the wake of the 2010 midterm elections. In January 2011, the executive board of

the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) approved an ambitious campaign called the Fight for a Fair Economy, which saw SEIU commit tens of millions of dollars to organizing projects among low-wage workers in multiple cities. That effort would spawn local campaigns such as Minnesotans for a Fair Economy (MFE) and ultimately lead to the Fight for \$15 and a Union, a national movement to gain a living wage for fast food workers. In July 2011, Jobs With Justice, the national network of unions and community allies, joined with the National Domestic Workers Alliance to create the Caring Across Generations campaign, a national initiative to transform the long-term care system and empower care workers that would in time unite over 200 organizations. In September 2011, the Occupy Wall Street movement erupted, seeding new and unexpected alliances among unions and their allies in many cities and spurring a discussion of inequality and the predatory nature of financialized capitalism that resonated well beyond the participants in its encampments (Greenhouse 2019, 232-34; Jaffe 2016, 35-43; Poo 2015, 1-10). And, in 2011, the St. Paul Federation of Teachers (SPFT) took a stand for transparency and pushed to open its contract negotiation to parents and members of the community. In the first session, only eight people not on the negotiating teams attended the bargaining; but within months, more a hundred parents and teachers attended each session (Greenhouse 2019, 297-298; Ricker 2015, 74).

From the outset CTU focused on developing strong alliances with community groups and parents as it crafted its bargaining demands. The CTU's campaign involved groups such as Stand Up! Chicago, a union-sponsored coalition of community and labor organizations that specialized in direct action protests; the Grassroots Collaborative, a network of eleven membership organizations; Parents 4 Teachers; and other community groups interested in defending the integrity of Chicago schools. In February 2012, the CTU published a report called *The Schools Chicago's Students Deserve*, which laid out demands for smaller class sizes, improved facilities, and a host of other items that went beyond the confines of wages, hours, and other narrowly defined work issues about which the union was legally permitted to bargain. The report also documented the costs of the school district's poor financial administration. It showed how tax-increment funding that could have helped schools was being squandered on private entities such as the Chicago Mercantile Exchange. The CTU also questioned risky interest-rate swap deals, in which Chicago's school system paid investment banks a fixed rate that was supposed to smooth out variable rate payments on its bonds, but which ended up bringing a windfall to the banks and costing the school district more than \$100 million. By making the financial industry's exploitation of the school district an issue, the CTU earned added public support for its demands for adequate school funding. Further bolstering community support, the CTU centered the issue of race in its analysis by showing how the financing of the school system short-changed communities of color (Ashby and Bruno 2016, 105-50; CTU, 2012).

By the time Chicago teachers struck for ten days in September 2012, they had rallied a broad community behind them. Attacking Mayor Emanuel as "Mayor One Percent," they pushed him and the school district to abandon many of the austerity demands they had been insisting on at the bargaining table. In the end the union won

an average 17.6 percent pay increase over four years, a commitment that laid off teachers would have preference to be rehired by the district, and an agreement that Emanuel would drop his demand that teacher pay be tied to merit. Perhaps most importantly, the union showed that Chicago did not support the neoliberal “education reform” agenda that Emanuel and his allies had been pursuing (Ashby and Bruno 2016, 185-229; Uetrict 2014, 53-74).

The CTU’s strike attracted the attention of the nation and inspired teachers’ unions elsewhere to begin to fight back. In 2013, the SPFT built on its previous efforts to make bargaining more transparent and mounted a contract campaign that resembled the CTU’s. Like the CTU, the St. Paul teachers patiently built an alliance with parents and community groups, and with them jointly drew up twenty-nine demands, including one insisting that the school district cease doing business with banks that foreclose on their students’ families. The union did not back down when the school district refused to negotiate over many of those demands. After rallying broad community support, the St. Paul teachers won most of what they sought. “I had negotiated almost a dozen previous contracts for the SPFT,” explained the union’s president, Mary Cathryn Ricker. “But, for the first time, I felt that signing a contract was just one step in building a larger movement” (Ricker 2015, 74-77).

Campaigns like those in Chicago and St. Paul in turn inspired other public sector workers to begin to push back against the austerity regime with creative bargaining campaigns. In Oregon, SEIU Local 503, which represents homecare, childcare, and university and state workers, inaugurated a campaign called “In It Together” prior to their 2013 contract negotiations. Their demands extended well beyond pay and benefits as they called for a broad investigation into the ways in which banks were ripping off Oregonians, and demanded a state lawsuit against banks to recoup millions that were lost from retirement funds due to the secret manipulation of the LIBOR (London Interbank Offered Rate) rate. In Los Angeles public sector unions joined with community groups and faith-based organizations to launch the Fix LA campaign in the spring of 2014. They documented that Los Angeles spent more taxpayer money paying fees to the Wall Street firms that marketed its municipal bonds than it did on maintaining that auto-dependent city’s streets and blamed the financial industry for the austerity that LA had endured since the Great Recession. They demanded that city leaders free LA from exploitative relationships with Wall Street firms, hold the financial industry accountable for the ways in which it had weakened the city’s finances, and restore vital city programs and services (Sneiderman and McCartin 2018).

Strategists and allies from each of these campaigns convened at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., in May 2014 to share what they had learned with unionists and community organization leaders from other cities who were hoping to engage in similar efforts. It was at this conference that practitioners of this new approach adopted a name for their initiative: Bargaining for the Common Good. That term, which had not been commonly employed before 2014, thereafter was used to describe the approach to bargaining that St. Paul and Chicago teachers had helped pioneer (McCartin 2016).

BCG emerged from the experience of unions and their community allies in response to the dynamics of capitalism in the neoliberal era. When collective bargaining first came to the public sector in the 1960s and early 1970s, the economy and economic policy looked starkly different from the conditions in the aftermath of the Great Recession. In 1970, the federal government taxed income in the top earnings bracket at 72 percent and capital gains at 32.3 percent. Nearly 28 percent of workers were unionized; the word “privatization”—let alone its practice—was yet unknown.² The transformation of the economy in the years since 1970 had gradually undermined the liberating potential that collective bargaining had once held for teachers and other public workers, even as austerity politics began to starve public institutions. Pursuing collective bargaining as if nothing had changed was not feasible in a world in which private sector workers had seen their wages stagnate and their benefits erode for decades, even as corporations and the wealthy shifted more of the tax burden onto their shoulders. Traditional collective bargaining that focused on winning better wages and working conditions for teachers and other public employees threatened to play into the hands of anti-unionists like Indiana’s Republican governor, Mitch Daniels, who by 2010 were calling public employees the “new privileged class in America,” because they had won pensions and health insurance that many private sector workers lacked (Smith and Haberman 2010).

BCG efforts sought to break out of the mold of traditional collective bargaining by rethinking the *participants*, *processes*, and *purposes* of bargaining (Sneiderman and Fascione 2018). While the collective bargaining that emerged in twentieth-century America was generally binary and involved only employers and unions, BCG advocates attempted to broaden participation to give the community or other stakeholders a place at the bargaining table. In some cases that place at the table was symbolic as teachers carried into bargaining demands that their community allies helped to craft. In other cases, such as St. Paul teachers’ fight, the union demanded that community representatives get to sit at the table during bargaining. While traditional collective bargaining was generally conducted behind closed doors by seasoned professionals who haggled over details, BCG infused bargaining with greater militancy, opened it up to greater transparency, and employed direct action protests as a bargaining tool.

Perhaps most importantly, BCG efforts have attempted to redefine the aims of collective bargaining, recognizing the degree to which financialization, the slashing of taxes on the rich, privatization, and deepening inequality threaten both public services and the health of the communities that depend on them. BCG campaigns have recognized that the real power to determine the public agenda is not held by the school boards or mayoral offices they have traditionally negotiated with, but rather by the financial interests that consistently dictate the priorities of those who hold these offices (Bhatti and Lerner 2016). While traditional collective bargaining was focused on winning a contract that would signal a demobilization of the union’s membership, BCG advocates framed their campaigns as steps in a long-term strategy that would challenge the power structures that dominated their communities. They sought to build enduring alignments between unions and their allies that would share a common vision and narrative and seek to build lasting worker power.

In expanding the vision of collective bargaining, BCG advocates also sought to center race in their analysis and strategy. In March 2017, over a hundred union activists convened with groups like Black Youth Project 100 (BYP100) and Youth United for Change in a conference on Bargaining for the Common Good for Racial Justice, co-sponsored by the Action Center on Race and the Economy (ACRE). Conferees talked about actions teachers' unions could take to increase racial equity and disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, and they exchanged sample demands that teachers' unions in many locations had included in their bargaining. St. Paul teachers, for example, have demanded the creation of racial justice equity teams in the schools and that educational assistants be given paid time to attend racial equity trainings that would prepare them to participate actively in the teams. They also called for the piloting of "disciplinary practices that serve as alternatives to strictly punitive measures, including restorative justice methods." Other unions have demanded that the schools reflect the diversity of the students they serve. The Seattle Education Association demanded that their district "hire and assign staff proportionately in terms of racial minorities to total employees in every department, school and at every level of operation within Seattle Public Schools." The Oakland Education Association demanded that the school district work to "recruit, employ, and promote individuals who are inadequately represented along the school district's workforce."

Perhaps the most fully articulated BCG campaign yet undertaken culminated in Los Angeles in January 2019. It was a campaign long in the making. Alex Caputo-Pearl and the Union Power Caucus won election to the leadership of the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) in April 2014 promising a new direction for the union (Janofsky 2018). The following month he and his team attended first Bargaining for the Common Good conference in Washington and immediately began laying plans for a groundbreaking campaign that would culminate almost five years later. Like the CTU years earlier, UTLA began revamping internal union organizing and stepping up its outreach to the community. Together with community allies it carefully crafted a set of bargaining demands that went beyond the conventional. They included the following: a cap on the spread of charter schools, legal assistance for the families of students facing immigration issues, more green space in the schools, a curtailment of stop-and-frisk practices on school grounds, and the hiring of nurses and librarians. UTLA began bargaining in April 2017 and worked without a contract for almost a year, as it prepared its membership and deepened its community support. The internal organizing was deeply successful. Months after the Supreme Court's *Janus* which allowed public employees to opt out of supporting the unions that bargained for them, the UTLA boasted its highest density yet: 96 percent. And in August 2018, when it took a strike vote, 98 percent of members authorized a job action if the school district did not meet its demands (Lichtenstein 2019).

In January 2019, the union staged that job action. It conducted a weeklong strike against the LA Unified School District (LAUSD) and its superintendent, Austin Beutner, a former investment banker and close ally of Eli Broad the billionaire philanthropist and charter school advocate. The union stayed out and conducted mass picketing in the rain not to win a greater salary increase—it settled for 6 percent, which the

LAUSD had offered at the outset—but rather the demands that were most important to its community members. These included smaller class sizes, nurses in every school, a legal helpline for immigrant families, and an end to random searches (Kohli 2019; UTLA 2019). Caputo-Pearl later explained that the UTLA “used the ‘bargaining for the common good’ approach” to advance many demands that were not “typical contract issue[s]” and that this had been a key to its success (McAlevy 2019).

The #RedforEd Teachers’ Uprisings of 2018

While the BCG movement emerged and grew in blue states where unions were already fairly well established, right-to-work laws were absent, and collective bargaining was permitted, the #RedforEd teachers’ uprisings that began in January 2018 occurred in entirely different settings. The states that saw the biggest upheavals, West Virginia, Arizona, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and North Carolina, are all “right-to-work” states. Among these, North Carolina bans public sector collective bargaining entirely, while Arizona lacks a statute providing collective bargaining rights (Sanes and Schmitt 2014). Each of these is also a red state that went to Donald Trump in 2016, which gave added meaning to the teachers’ adoption of the color red as a symbol of their solidarity—a symbol that they borrowed from unions that have long promoted the wearing of red on special days meant to send a message of union loyalty.³ Yet from these challenging settings a powerful teachers’ movement emerged that in many ways mirrored the direction taken by BCG teachers’ campaigns.

The flashpoint that ignited that movement occurred in West Virginia. After learning that Governor Jim Justice was renegeing on a promise to increase their salaries and calling for a hike in health insurance premiums, teachers in Mingo, Wyoming, McDowell, and Logan counties began organizing, ultimately holding a secret ballot to make February 2, 2018, a one-day walkout called “Fed Up Friday,” a protest that saw more than one thousand of them descend on Charleston, the state capital, in the midst of a snowstorm to express their outrage. Their protest was livestreamed to teachers around the state, which jump-started further organizing, much of which spread through Facebook. Three weeks later, all 55 school districts in the state were shut down for nine days (Catte, Hilliard and Salfia 2018, 24-31).

Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the West Virginia strike is the evolution of its demands. The West Virginia teachers could not have closed schools across an entire state for as long as they did unless they marshaled broad support; building that support required broadening their demands. Agitation first emerged against the state’s plan to shift more of the costs of health insurance onto the shoulders of teachers. Over time, teachers not only pushed back against this cost shifting, they demanded higher wages, more investment in their schools, and, before the strike was concluded, a wage increase for other beleaguered public employees. Teachers and their supporters “united around a shared set of grievances” that brought people together “with little concern for party affiliation,” as Kanawha County strike leader Emily Comer put it (Catte, Hilliard and Salfia 2018, 102). They took issue not only with the policies of Republic governor Jim Justice but with his predecessor Democrat Joe Manchin who had cut the net corporate

tax rate from 9.7 to 6 percent in 2007, leaving the state with a \$200-million budget hole deepened by the Great Recession. Their critique gained broad support: in a state without a law recognizing teachers' right to bargain collectively, they won 5-percent wage increase for themselves and other public workers (Greenhouse 2019, 305-11).

From West Virginia, militancy quickly spread to Colorado and four states that were spending less per pupil in inflation-adjusted dollars than they had spent in 2008, before the Great Recession struck: Arizona, Oklahoma, North Carolina, and Kentucky.⁴ Oklahoma and Kentucky erupted weeks after the West Virginia uprising. In both states, governors tried to undercut the movement using traditional divide-and-conquer strategies. When Oklahoma teachers walked out, Governor Mary Fallin compared them to "a teenage kid that wants a better car," in an effort to turn taxpayers against them. Kentucky's governor Matt Bevin took a harder edge, accusing striking teachers of "cavalierly" and "flippantly" disregarding what was good for children, even leaving them vulnerable to sexual assault by closing schools with a walkout. In both cases, these tactics backfired. The Republican-led Kentucky House felt compelled to condemn Bevin's remarks, then override his veto of an appropriations bill that sought to boost per pupil spending (Warner 2018).

In both Kentucky and Oklahoma, teachers fended off opponents' attacks by focusing relentlessly on the fact that they were fighting not only for themselves, but for the children they educated and the communities they served. "Why are we walking?" asked Alicia Priest, president of the Oklahoma Education Association. "There are 700,000 reasons why: our students. And they deserve better . . . They see broken chairs in class, outdated textbooks that are duct taped together, and class sizes that have ballooned" (Miller 2018). Nema Brewer, a coalminer's daughter who emerged as a militant spokeswoman for the Kentucky strikers, made clear that education workers were standing with other public workers and fighting not only to stop legislation that would convert their pensions to 401(k)s, but for all state workers and the communities they served. "They're refusing to raise any new revenue, for example by closing tax loopholes," Brewer protested. "They're cutting university funding, pre-K funding, library funding, and funding for family resource centers. They're trying to squeeze blood out of a turnip" (Blanc 2019b).

In Oklahoma, teachers attacked the financial priorities of their state governments in much the same way as BCG advocates had done in cities such as Chicago and Los Angeles. Oklahoma teachers were outraged that the gross production tax (GPT) on oil and gas drilling in their state was a mere 2 percent (compared to 13 percent in South Dakota and Louisiana, and 8 percent in Texas). "It's almost like the oil and gas people have more say than the people that actually voted [lawmakers] in," explained Stillwater, Oklahoma, middle school teacher Alberto Morejon. "Every time they cut the Gross Production Tax, it's almost like they're saying oil is more important than our kids" (Weir 2018). Not only were oil and gas taxes cut; income taxes on the wealthiest Oklahomans were cut four times since the 1990s, costing schools an estimated \$350 million annually (Chang 2018b). Inspired by what he saw happening in West Virginia, Morejon started a Facebook group that gained 70,000 members in three weeks. When Oklahoma legislators increased the GPT to 5 percent and dedicated revenue to raising

teachers' salaries, the teachers judged it not enough and struck anyway, staying out for nine days. In the end, the teachers won a \$400-million increase in school funding (Greenhouse 2019, 319).

When teacher unrest spread from Oklahoma to Arizona by late April 2018, teachers again focused on the mistaken priorities of their state government. Repeated corporate tax cuts had left Arizona in an increasingly tenuous financial position; while the state took in \$986 million in corporate tax revenue in 2007, by 2017 that figure had fallen to \$368 million. Teachers and their schools had borne the brunt of these losses, as teachers saw their real earnings drop by nearly 10 percent over this period (Chang 2018a; Greenhouse 2019, 314-16). As in Oklahoma, the state government attempted to head off a strike by proposing a salary increase. Governor Ducey promised to raise teachers' salaries by 20 percent by the end of 2020. But as in Oklahoma, this gesture was insufficient. The Arizonans launched a historic six-day walkout that closed more than one thousand schools and affected 850,000 students (Cano 2018).

The North Carolina Education Association led a one-day walkout on May 16, 2018, protesting not only poor teacher pay, but the fact that their state ranked 39th in per pupil spending, about \$2,313 less per student than the national average of \$11,642. "The lackluster rankings come at the same time that the North Carolina General Assembly has passed massive tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy," the educators' association charged. They called for expanding Medicaid to improve community health, and an increase in the number of counselors, social workers, school nurses, and other support personnel (Hanna et al., 2018).

From West Virginia to North Carolina, the evolution of the #RedforEd walkouts and protests mirrored three key aspects of BCG campaigns. Like BCG campaigns, these protests framed the teachers' struggles as a defense of public education against the forces that seemed determined to undermine it. Like BCG campaigns, they were not aimed primarily against school boards or departments of education, but at top political leaders and the financial interests that held sway over public policy. And, like BCG campaigns, they tended to promote greater teacher militancy. "I don't have any ill will towards our union, but I think something has to change," said Nema Brewer, the activist who emerged as a leader of the Kentucky protests. "I think our education association saw itself as more of a lobbying group. We were saying the time for talk is over" (Warner 2018). What is more, by engaging in militant actions with broad support, teachers have helped revive support for public sector strikes. An April 2018 poll by Ipsos and National Public Radio found that three-quarters of the public agreed that teachers have the right to strike, including two-thirds of Republicans, three-quarters of independents, and nearly 9 in 10 Democrats (Jackson 2018).

To be sure, there were differences of emphasis between some of the BCG campaigns and the #RedforEd teachers' uprisings. Whereas the BCG campaigns gained traction in diverse cities where they have highlighted how communities of color have been victimized by the defunding of the public sector, race figured less prominently in #RedforEd militancy. This owes much to the fact that states like Kentucky and West Virginia are overwhelmingly white (Kentucky ranks 45th and West Virginia 50th among the nation's most racially diverse states) (McCann 2018). Some teacher

activists did raise issues of racial disparity: in the most diverse state to take part in the 2018 protests, Arizona, teachers spread the walkout to reservations under the slogan “Rez for Ed” (Blanc 2019a, 68). Yet in other places, such as Tulsa and Oklahoma City, critical observer Lois Weiner found that the local unions failed to “articulate demands that would speak directly to the aspirations and apprehensions of Black residents, parents, and students, who are educated in intensely segregated neighborhoods and schools” (Weiner 2018).

What most stands out in a comparison of BCG campaigns with #RedforEd protests, however, are not their differences but their similarities. In their rhetoric, in their devotion to alliance-building, and in the efforts to use the strike as a form of political leverage to demand things that are not on the table in traditional collective bargaining, these struggles shared much in common. That commonality, we believe, signals the arrival of an important moment for the labor movement.

Before the Chalk Dust Settles

BCG campaigns emerged in cities with strong union presence where progressive caucuses came to power in local teachers unions and carefully planned their bargaining campaigns, while #RedforEd strikes happened in states where unions were weak but where key groups of teacher activists were able to touch off big mobilizations to protest the underfunding of education. Because of their location, BCG campaigns tended to center demands for racial justice more than did the 2018 #RedforEd movements, which generally occurred in less racially diverse settings. Yet despite their differences in origin and initial orientation, both the BCG campaigns and the #RedforEd strikes adopted similar analyses and conclusions. They came to see the crisis in public education as symptomatic of deep distortions in our economy and political priorities. They grasped that the plight of teachers and their schools is inextricably tied to the fate of the communities they serve. And they came to see that teachers needed to fight on behalf of those communities as much as for themselves. That’s what Chicago teachers did in demanding “Schools Chicago’s Children Deserve,” what West Virginia teachers did in refusing to end their walkout until all state employees received the same raise they had won for themselves, and what Oklahoma teachers did when they demanded levies on the state’s enormously wealthy and notoriously tax-dodging oil and gas industry.

Although the future of the U.S. labor movement is in doubt, weakened and beset as it is by hostile legal, political, and economic forces, the teachers’ activism suggests that these very conditions might be pushing teachers (and other workers, public and private) toward the sort of innovations in demands and organization that have led to past labor breakthroughs. For forty years, financialization, deregulation, neoliberal globalization, privatization, and the reorganization of worker-employer relations have gradually undermined private sector collective bargaining and confined bargaining in the public sector to the narrow ground of wages and benefits, all too often pitting beleaguered taxpayers against unions. We have now reached a point where collective bargaining has become so broken that workers have no choice but

to reimagine it as a tool to address the larger forces that are promoting surging inequality, deepening racial exploitation, and accelerating the erosion of any semblance of democratic control over the forces that are governing their lives. As the events of recent years have shown, teachers have been among the public sector workers most adversely affected by this development and are also perhaps those best positioned to point the way forward.

Whether by flooding into statehouses in Frankfort, Tulsa, or Charleston to demand adequate school funding through increased corporate taxes, or by occupying the Bank of America in Chicago to demand that it renegotiate the toxic interest-rate swaps it foisted on the Chicago Public Schools, teachers have begun to reinvent bargaining in ways that correspond to kind of economy we now face. Just as developments in private sector collective bargaining in the post–World War II era provided a model for the introduction of collective bargaining into the public sector, the reinvention of collective bargaining by public sector workers in response to the crisis they have faced in recent years might serve as a model for the necessary reinvention of private sector collective bargaining to meet the challenges of this century.

No lasting breakthrough will be possible without careful planning, hard work, and, ultimately, greater coordination among teachers and their allies from state to state. A crucial piece of this work must be research and power-mapping that can help teachers and others connect the dots, to identify the common culprits who are driving the austerity agenda. In every state, teachers and their allies should ask key questions: Who are the main power players? What common targets exist across different types of campaigns? What banks or corporations are taking money out of the public budget and how do we band together to get that money back? A number of ally organizations that investigate such questions have emerged in recent years, among them Little Sis, a grassroots research wiki that consolidates information on corporate power and its influence over government; Hedge Clippers, which documents the harmful impact of hedge funds and private equity on public services; and the ACRE, which specializes in analyzing the racialized impact of financialization. Research conducted by groups like these could help provide the underpinnings for an increasingly coordinated national movement.⁵

Organized labor has never been able to predict or trigger the developments that have led to its periodic revival and reinvention over the course of two centuries. Like all movements of the less powerful, it has had to be opportunistic, acting boldly at the right time by using the best ideas, models, and language at its disposal to build new forms of power for those who lack it. But it has had to be decisive when these windows of opportunity have opened, for they have never stayed open for long. As Nema Brewer, the Kentucky activist who rose to prominence in 2018, aptly puts it, “Nobody is going to change the world for you. If you’re waiting for superman, he’s not showing. You have to be your own hero” (Blanc 2019b). Unions would be wise to heed Brewer’s words and seize the opportunities that these recent teachers’ mobilizations and the pioneering work of recent BCG campaigns have presented to them before the chalk dust settles.

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Notes

1. The most comprehensive treatment of the rise of CORE (Caucus of Rank and File Educators) and the CTU's (Chicago Teachers Union) 2012 strike is found in Steven K. Ashby and Robert Bruno (2016). Other informative treatments are Bradbury (2014), Uetricht (2014), and Jaffe (2016, 118-28).
2. Peter F. Drucker (1969, 234) introduced the term "reprivatization," in his 1969 book *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society*.
3. The symbolism has several sources, ranging from the red bandanas worn by striking coalminers during the Battle of Blair Mountain to recent union commemorations. See Shogan (2006, 169); Nittle (2018); "Why We Wear Red," CWA Local 4202, <http://cwa4202.org/mobilizing.html> (accessed January 20, 2020); and "On Wednesdays We Wear Red," United Automobile Workers, <https://uaw.org/wednesdays-wear-red/> (accessed January 20, 2020).
4. Per pupil spending declined in Arizona by 36.6 percent, in Oklahoma by 15.6, North Carolina by 12.2, and Kentucky by 5.9 percent between 2008 and 2018. See Leachman, Masterson, and Figueroa (2017).
5. Websites for these entities are, respectively, <https://littlesis.org/>; <http://hedgeclippers.org/>; and <https://www.acrecampaigns.org/>.

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