

“For Our Kids, For Our State”:  
History, Identity, and Narrative in the West Virginia Teacher Strikes of 2018 and 2019

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*For my teachers*

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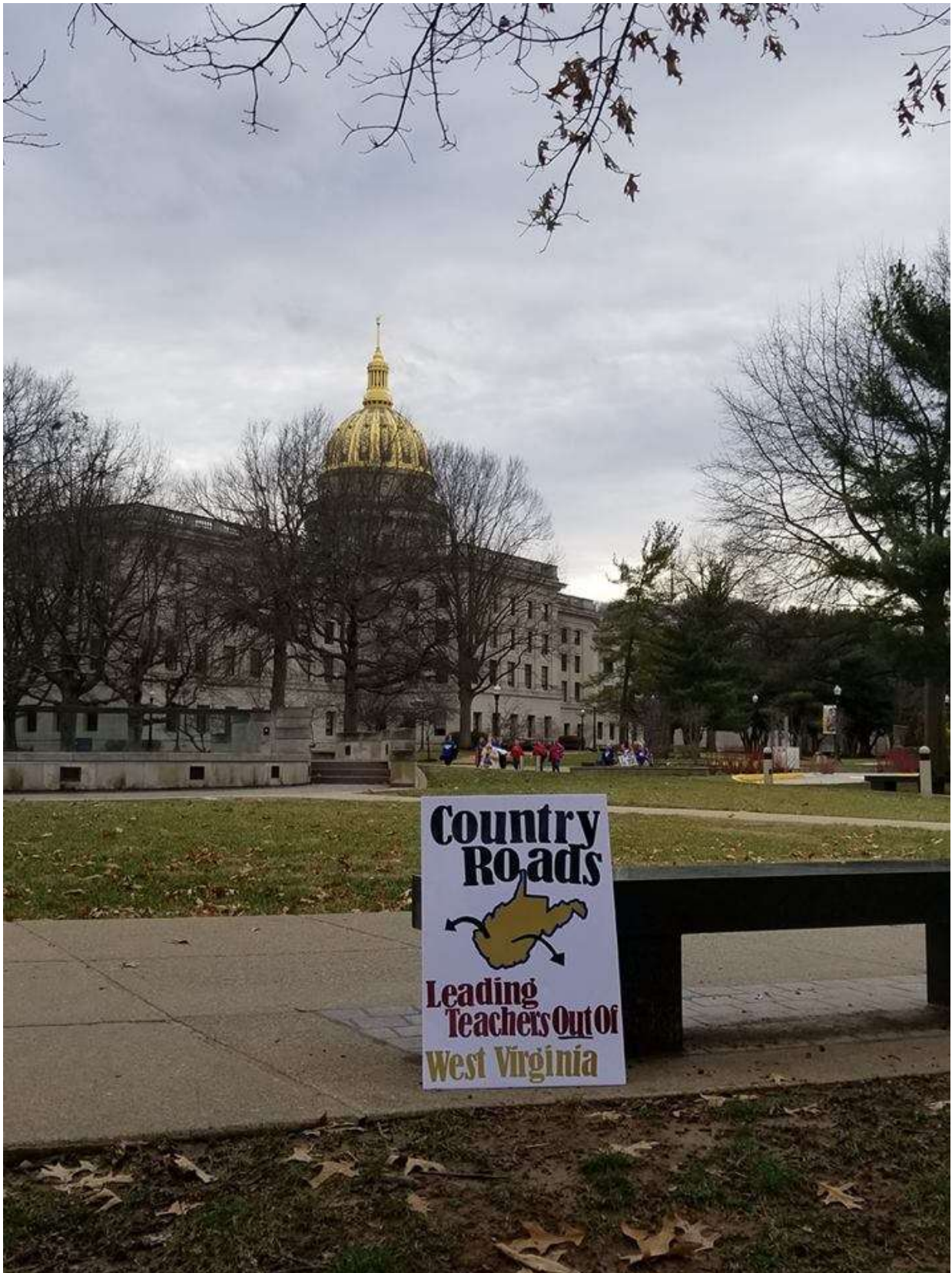
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**Figure 1.** Photo courtesy of West Virginia Public Employees UNITED.

## Introduction

### People Who Strike

“Culture becomes not a haven of ideas or a fixed state of experience but a social imaginary erupting out of a storied cultural real.” (Stewart 1996, 63-4)

I remember the day when my father, a West Virginia University professor, accompanied some of his students to Charleston for Undergraduate Research Day at the Capitol in February



Figure 2. Photo by Kevin Gooding.

2018. He texted me a grainy photo of teachers in red shirts standing inside the building, in a room made entirely of marble, in front of a student’s research poster. In the front of the crowd, one teacher’s face is hidden behind their sign reading “I’m so ANGRY I could vote!” Behind, another teacher holds a sign that calls on the West Virginia Legislature to “Fix PEIA - A freeze is not a fix!” spelled in cut-out letters. Underneath this phrase, the word “united,” and – the first place I ever saw the words which would anchor the ensuing teacher strikes – “55 Strong.”

This rally, which coincided with Undergraduate Research Day, was a precursor to

what would become a collective statewide strike just over a week later. Surrounded by the research posters of the best and brightest of West Virginia’s undergraduate students as they presented their work to lawmakers and public officials, some of West Virginia’s public school teachers presented to those same officials their grievances. The sign reading “Fix PEIA – A freeze is not a fix!” raises the primary issue of the 2018 strike, the poor funding of the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA). Standing in the Capitol, this space in which the work of government is done, teachers took their concerns directly to their legislators.

Through the juxtaposition of the protesting teachers and the research poster behind them, this photo sends a strong message: the work of students – their research and contributions to scientific, social, and cultural knowledge; their preparation as the future leaders of the state of West Virginia – depends upon their teachers. Many of the students attending Undergraduate Research Day likely received their primary and secondary educations at West Virginia public schools. The convergence of these two groups, teachers and students, each in their own way offering presentations to their state government, highlights what would become a central and enduring question in West Virginia’s political conversation: what is the role of teachers in this state where public education is underfunded?

My goal in this thesis is to address this question and several others through explorations of ethnographic encounters with teachers as they move forward from the 2018 strike and continue the work of fighting for public education in West Virginia. I came to this research hoping to understand how a labor movement such as the 2018 teacher strike might fit into or challenge a national narrative of West Virginia as “Trump Country,” in which President Trump won the state by nearly seventy percent of the vote (“Presidential Election” 2016). What I found

throughout my research, however, were emergent questions of narrative, history, and identity. How do teachers engage in a discursive process of forming an overarching narrative of the strike, and how does that narrative accommodate or exclude the experiences of individuals? How do teachers interact with the state's labor history and use it to shape their own narratives and identities as state employees? How do teachers use their physical environments to draw attention to their cause and assert their right to democratic representation? Throughout this thesis, I will frame these questions with anthropological theory to gain greater understanding of the interconnected dynamics of history, identity, and narrative in the 2018 and 2019 teacher strikes.

Before delving into these questions, however, we must first have a basic knowledge of what occurred during the 2018 strike in order to understand how these issues played out over the nine days of the strike and beyond. Jacob Staggers, a teacher at South Middle School in Monongalia County, once told me that “if you’d asked me in December, ‘what do you think’s gonna happen in the spring term this year?’ a teacher strike would not have been something that I would’ve predicted. I don’t think anybody would’ve.” The strike came out of a suite of long-term problems, including PEIA’s annually increasing premiums. Additionally, teachers raised concerns about small annual raises which did not even cover the cost of living for most people, and the more recent Go365 policy aimed at promoting fitness among public employees, which was regarded by many as highly intrusive. However, the action was precipitated by the introduction of new legislation which teachers widely saw as damaging to themselves and to public education. Among the proposals were measures to decrease teacher qualification standards, eliminate seniority benefits, and divert funds into private education. Mr. Staggers estimated that there had been around 70 different bills introduced during the session that specifically targeted education, “and almost none of it was positive.”



Action started on the local level first: individual schools held color days, when teachers wore the same color to show their solidarity; and teachers held walk-ins at their schools and informational pickets around their towns. As tensions escalated, four counties in southern West Virginia – McDowell, Wyoming, Mingo, and Logan – held walkouts, and teachers went to the state capitol in Charleston. At that time, West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) President Dale Lee said, “we knew as organizations that we had to get in front of this, so we started going around to the locals, the different counties, advise them of the different aspects, and asking for an authorization vote.” By February 17, the unions – WVEA, American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV), and the West Virginia School Service Personnel Association (WVSSPA) – had held their authorization votes, in which members voted to give union leaders the authority to call a work action if necessary. It was both a bargaining chip that allowed union leaders to show the willingness of their members to strike and a pact of trust between union members and their leaders. At a rally on the steps of the Capitol that day, Lee, along with then AFT-WV President Christine Campbell and WVSSPA executive director Joe White, called a two-day work stoppage for the following Thursday and Friday, February 22-23.

Throughout the nine-day strike, teachers reported to the Capitol to be close to the legislative action and continued their informational picket efforts around the state. Jake Zuckerman, a reporter for the Charleston Gazette-Mail, described the scene in the Capitol as loud, “kind of a steady, dull roar... there were no nooks and crannies that weren’t filled with teachers in red shirts. It was pandemonium. Anywhere you wanted to get from point A to point B, you’d pass hundreds and hundreds of angry people.” Days were long and filled with chanting and an occasional appearance from a union leader, met with cheers, or a legislator, met with cheers or boos depending on who and what party they were.

Daniel Summers, from University High School in Morgantown, painted a very different picture of the local pickets, saying,

“myself and a few others, we were there the whole time, sometimes 14 hour days in the cold. It was very bearable though, because we had an unlimited supply of coffee and hot chocolate and donuts.... Yeah, we were provided for by the community. They brought tons of things.”

Picket locations were assigned by school and were strategically located at busy intersections and public places, where passersby would honk or wave in support, or express their disapproval.

People played music and danced as they held their signs calling for a fix to PEIA. Jacob Staggers said, “some days the local picketing almost felt like a tailgate.” Unlike the experience of those gathered at the Capitol facing lawmakers directly, the local picket lines around the state centered the feelings of solidarity built between teachers on the line and the community members whom they encountered.

The Monday after the strike began, February 26, there was a big rally held at the Capitol, where national union leaders spoke to a crowd of thousands of teachers. The next day, Dale Lee and Christine Campbell made a deal with Governor Jim Justice: teachers would receive five percent raises and other state employees would receive three percent raises, and a committee would be formed to explore options to fix PEIA. When they announced the deal to the teachers gathered in Charleston, they were met with displeasure; many teachers thought it wasn't enough, a promise from the governor doesn't guarantee a pay raise and a committee doesn't guarantee a fix. Schools remained closed the next day as a “cool-down” day, but that evening, every county independently decided not to go back to school the following day.

The strike continued on Thursday, despite the unions' call to return to work. After a few days of avoiding confrontation with their members, the union presidents started releasing daily video updates and largely regained their members' favor. The strike continued through the

weekend, as a pay raise bill passed between the House of Delegates and the Senate. Senate President Mitch Carmichael briefly stalled the bill, and there was confusion about whether or not the correct bill had been passed from one chamber to the other. Finally, on the following Tuesday, March 6th, Jim Justice signed the five percent pay raise bill. The unions called for an end to the strike, and on March 7, schools reopened across West Virginia after being closed for nine days.

The following February, teachers went on strike again for two days over a bill was seen by many teachers as retaliatory against their actions of the previous year. Again, teachers returned to their picket locations and to the Capitol, reviving old signs and t-shirts or making new ones. Throughout this thesis, I will refer to the two strikes side-by-side, as two parts of a whole event. Although they occurred a year apart and were catalyzed by different legislative actions, neither can be said to exist independently of the other. Insofar as they involve generally the same people, actions, sites of encounter, and underlying concerns, they can only be understood in their entirety by considering how they interact with one another. Therefore, I will refer to them together throughout my writing, sometimes referring to both of them as simply “the strike,” but will indicate specific incidents where necessary.

My original intention for this project was to conduct the majority of my fieldwork during the summer of 2018. I would shadow teachers or get involved with local union chapters, but it soon became obvious that I could not approach this work with a traditional ethnographic tool-kit, if for no other reason than that most public school teachers are also not in school during the summer months. As a result, union activity was also down during that time, as union leadership planned their next steps. Instead, I spent my summer attending a few meetings, including a PEIA

public hearing in Morgantown, a regional WVEA meeting, and a PEIA Task Force meeting in which the members were meant to produce their recommendations, but instead spent an hour arguing amongst themselves about the purpose of the Task Force. In addition to this somewhat inauspicious start to my fieldwork, I conducted a number of ethnographic interviews with teachers and school administrators, as well as local and state union leaders, reporters, and lawmakers, with the goal of understanding the strike from the points of view of these various stakeholders.

However, the majority of my fieldwork did not take place in “the field,” in the traditional sense. At this point in my research, my primary field site was online, on a Facebook group entitled “West Virginia Public Employees UNITED” (to which I will refer interchangeably as “Public Employees UNITED” or “the Facebook group”). The group, which now has a membership of nearly twenty-three thousand, became a forum for teachers from across the state to communicate with one another before, during, and after the strike, to share updates from their schools and counties, quickly disseminate information and news, debate issues related to education, commiserate, and display their solidarity with one another and teachers in other states.

Although there is precedent for the use of social media as the site of ethnographic work, it is a relatively novel approach within the field of anthropology. Bonilla and Rosa (2015), in their study of what they term “hashtag activism,” raise the question, “what kind of field site does a platform like Twitter represent?” and debate whether social media platforms constitute “non-place[s],” defined as “transient site[s] of fleeting engagement,” or rather “virtual worlds” complete with their own social rules and structures (5). However, my encounters with the Public Employees UNITED Facebook group suggest that it does not fit either of these categories.

Certainly this location is not a “non-place” as defined by Marc Augé (1995): group members begin to recognize one another over time, building rapport within the group through their posts. Group administrators’ and frequent posters’ names are marked by Facebook’s algorithms with symbols to identify them as such: a shield with a star and the word “Admin” under one poster’s name, and a coffee cup with the phrase “Conversation Starter” under another’s. People react and comment and refer to previous posts. Anonymity is possible, but limited by the extent to which individuals chose to participate with the group. Those who merely watch the activity but do not respond remain anonymous, but many of those who engage more actively become recognized.

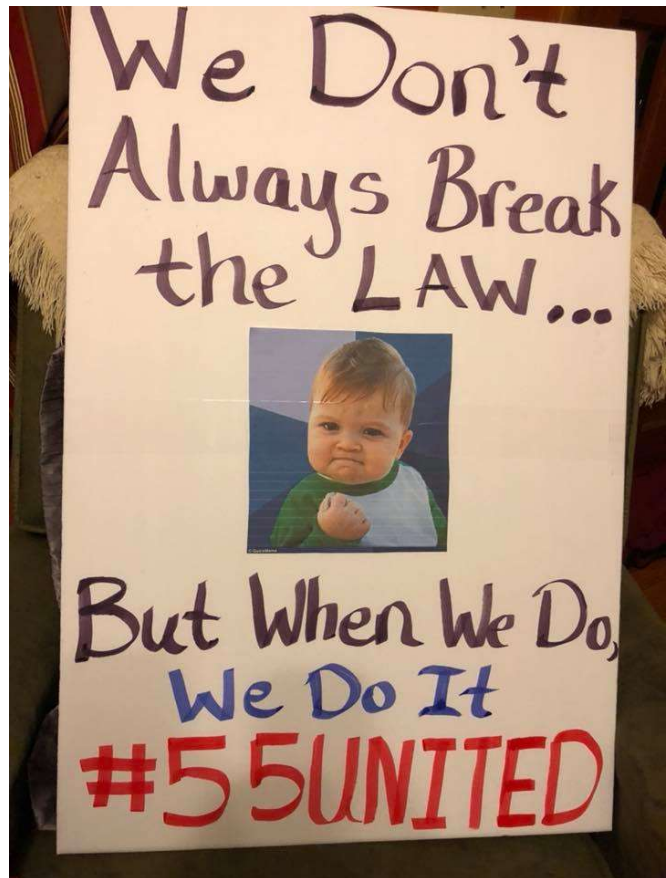
Conversely, the Facebook group does not constitute a world unto itself, independent of the world off-line. Indeed, Wilson and Peterson (2002) caution ethnographers of online field sites against an understanding of online communities as bounded and isolated, asserting instead that as with any other community, fluidity exists between them, exerting external influences upon them (455). Breaking down the online-offline dichotomy, as these authors suggest, allows the ethnographer to see how the Facebook group forms a cyclical chain of action and reaction with life offline.

This relationship between the online and offline were highlighted in a brief inventory of the top several posts on the Facebook group in January 2019. I found several news updates about the teacher strike which was occurring in Los Angeles at the time, a post about a little-known one-day walkout which had occurred in 1980, a question about where to take continuing education classes, a number of photos of school staff wearing red, and one meme. What this informal assessment reveals is that one of the primary roles of the Facebook group is to spread and respond to education-related news. By sharing news updates from Los Angeles, photos taken

at school, and questions about continuing education, group members bring the offline world into the online space of engagement. In part, the Facebook group therefore serves a functional purpose: information can be spread across a broader geographical area faster online than off, and in this way, the group has been and continues to be a key organizing tool. However, it also serves as a mode of identity formation: through sharing photos of themselves and their coworkers wearing red, group members display solidarity with one another and teachers around the country.

Likewise, the online world is taken offline in ways that are especially obvious through the signs that teachers made for the strike. The photo on below is an excellent example of the integration of the online and offline realms.

In it, a sign which exists as a physical object in the offline world is shown to draw upon memes and hashtags, key elements of internet culture. Alone, this sign would be sufficient to prove my point about the blending of on- and offline experiences, but it again makes the transformation into the virtual realm when it is photographed and the photo is posted on the Facebook group as part of an online interaction. Thus, the virtual and the real exist in a circuit of forming and informing one another, thereby negating the possibility of Facebook as a “virtual world” unto itself.



**Figure 3.** This photo, posted on West Virginia Public Employees UNITED by Michelle Jones, depicts a sign which features several aspects of internet culture. It includes a hashtag along with the convergence of two different meme formats: the determined baby and the Most Interesting Man in the World.

Rather, I suggest that Public Employees UNITED, used as a field site, represents a third category that is not as fleeting as a “non-place,” nor as fully independent as its own virtual world. Instead, I draw on the concept of “free spaces” introduced by Evans and Boyte (1986) to understand the role that the Facebook group plays in the experiences of its members. In this understanding, Facebook can be used as Bonilla and Rosa (2015) advocate, as an “entry [point] into larger and more complex worlds” (7), a sort of virtual facilitator of the real by enabling communication across not only geographical distance but social network as well. Free spaces, defined as “settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence, and vision” (Evans and Boyte 1986, 17), connect individuals in such a way as to foster democratic potential through their separation from the control of otherwise ruling elites (Couto 1993). West Virginia Public Employees UNITED, created and controlled by and for employees of the state of West Virginia, provides just such a space, wherein people from disparate communities across the state have engaged with one another to deliberate over the common issues that they face. In so doing, many have found common ground and forged political alliances which propelled the strike last spring and continuing political action.

We must therefore bring social media into the foreground of our understanding of teacher activism, and view their political action as multi-dimensional, existing at the intersection of the virtual and the physical. To that end, we must situate social media within our understanding of what constitutes social interaction, not as a barrier to, but rather an extension of the cultural frames in which we already operate. Just as we cannot classify West Virginia Public Employees UNITED as a non-place, Julia Katherine Haines (2017) urges us to consider online platforms such as Facebook as experiential spaces, integrated into daily lives which move fluidly between

the online and offline. As such, to broaden the ethnographic lens to include the multiple field sites of both the online and offline experiences is not to muddy the anthropological waters, but rather to bring into sharper focus the fluidity of motion between discontinuous sites of social interaction and meaning-making (Marcus 1995).

Online ethnography is not without its challenges, however, One of the primary difficulties of using social media as a field site lies in navigating the bounds of informed consent. Due as much to the fact that I have studied an online community of nearly twenty-three thousand people as to their geographic distribution, it is impossible to receive a written consent form from everyone who posts, reacts, or comments on the Facebook group. I must therefore ask myself to what extent does Public Employees UNITED constitute a public space wherein privacy can no longer be reasonably expected, and what responsibility do I have as the ethnographer to protect the privacy of group members? To answer these questions, I turn to Wilson and Peterson's (2002) considerations of the ethical responsibilities involved in internet research. They suggest that while some researchers regard online forums such as the Facebook group as public domain, others suggest that use of online content constitutes "a form of electronic eavesdropping" (461). Instead, I place West Virginia Public Employees UNITED somewhere in between these two extremes: although it cannot be said to be truly "public," as the group itself is classified within Facebook's settings as a "secret" group which requires an invitation from another member to join, its membership is of a size and makeup that anyone posting on the page cannot possibly know who exactly will see their post.

As such, the Facebook group is something of a semi-public forum in which it is possible that information shared could be of a sensitive nature, but privacy is not guaranteed. Therefore,



moving forward I will protect the privacy of Facebook group members in the following ways: where included, screenshots of online interactions will be edited to hide the names and profile photos of Facebook users unless I have received explicit consent from the individual; I will, of course, respect the wishes of users if they request that specific information remain private; if I judge that information is sensitive or identifying, I will not divulge that information here.

Furthermore, I have offered everyone I interviewed the opportunity to make use of a pseudonym, and will, when referring to interviewees, use their real names unless otherwise noted. In these ways, I attempt to hold with the principles of respect for individuals and the protection of dignity which are outlined in the American Anthropological Association's Code of Ethics (2012).

My offline research unfolded somewhat differently by accessing a complex web of interpersonal relations. I started by talking to Keisha Kibler, a family friend, former classroom teacher in Preston County, and Assistant Professor of Education at Fairmont State University, who lead me to some scholars at WVU who were doing work on the strike. These scholars connected me with teachers, who were able to further connect me with local union leaders and back to Keisha. Additionally, the local union leaders directed me to state union leaders, who told me their side of the story. One local union leader, the president of AFT Monongalia, is my sister's art teacher and gave me access to a walk-in at Morgantown High School. Unlike the ready-made assemblage of teachers found on the Facebook group, offline, I tapped into a complex social network based on the personal relationships between those who are deeply invested in the strike. Through this web of teachers, union representatives, scholars, and community members, the sense of unity which I will discuss in Chapter 2 is made possible. Tensions between unions are mitigated by the personal and professional relationships lived locally.

As is likely now evident, I approach this research from the position of a native ethnographer (I will discuss this positionality further in Chapter 1. For more information, see Bunzl 2008; Narayan 1993), one with pre-existing relationships through which to enter into the realm of West Virginia's public education system. A West Virginian myself, I began my education at the Athens School in Athens, West Virginia, and graduated from Morgantown High School in Morgantown thirteen years later. Although I spent many years out-of-state, my public education began and ended in West Virginia, bookended by West Virginians committed to my education and wellbeing, teaching me the alphabet, then writing my letters of recommendation and sending me to Wellesley College.

As much as my life has been affected by West Virginia's teachers, I also find that I have direct connections to several of the issues which they hoped to address in the strike. For example, through my father who is employed by West Virginia University, I am personally enrolled in PEIA, the state medical insurance with which teachers took issue in the strike. My younger sister is a senior at Morgantown High School this year, and the quality of her education and her competitiveness for college and scholarship applications is dependent in large part on the ability of her teachers to do their jobs with the resources they are provided, and the ability of the state to attract new and talented teachers.

The relevance of these issues to my life became clear to me in October 2018, when I filled out my absentee ballot for the midterm elections. I found on my ballot the names of candidates who, like State Senator Bob Beach, have been named "champions of public education," and who have centered PEIA and education in their campaign platforms. I found myself voting on the issues which teachers had drawn to the public attention and which I had

been studying all summer. What kind of state legislature will we elect, and what will it mean for the future of public education in West Virginia?

It is for this reason that I must acknowledge and embrace my own role in several of the processes which I analyze in the coming chapters. As will soon become evident, in this thesis I am directly participating in the construction of a prevailing narrative linking past and present, utilizing the cultural interpretive frameworks I gain through my subject position to understand and create the link between the current moment and those that came before. I have access to a cultural historical narrative of union organizing and labor uprising which allowed me to see in the 2018 teacher strike the history of West Virginia brought to life. My goal is then that I might make my own situated knowledge at least partly accessible to my readers, so that they might understand the significance of the 2018 teacher strike and the ways in which it has rippled out into the current moment, a year later.

It is also through the lens of a West Virginian that I find that previous ethnographic work on the state has left something to be desired. Notably, Kathleen Stewart's (1996) *A Space by the Side of the Road: Cultural Poetics in an "Other" America* attempts to offer readers immersion into what she calls a "space on the side of the road," "the site of an opening or reopening into the story of America... it stands as a kind of balk talk to 'America's' mythic claims to realism, progress, and order" (3). She argues that West Virginia constitutes a rupture in the fabric of an American metanarrative of modernity, where the consequences of capitalism and the great American 'city upon a hill' "pile up on the landscape as the detritus of history" (4). Why Stewart maps this space "on the side of the road" is unclear, though perhaps she means that these spaces are often overlooked, sped past on the journey of progress.

Insofar as she identifies the refuse of American capitalism, Stewart is correct: the history of West Virginia, as I discuss throughout this thesis, is replete with the exploitation and abuse of the hills and their natural and human resources by external industries. However, in establishing capitalistic victimization as the defining characteristic of her field site, she has, as she is fond of saying, “always-already” undermined her attempts to condemn the process of othering by actively participating in this process which she claims to mitigate. By asserting West Virginia as the counterpoint to an essentializing narrative of the United States as a landscape of abstract values such as modernization, individualism, and democracy (Stewart 1996), she herself engages in the fabrication of an essentializing narrative about West Virginia.

Throughout her book, Stewart practices a style of experimental writing whereby she attempts to bring her readers into the social imaginary through which her interlocutors interact with their physical environment. She does this by inviting readers to imagine the environment for themselves. Her first chapter begins by saying:

“Picture hills so dense, so tightly packed in an overwhelming wildness of green that they are cut only by these cramped, intimate *hollers* tucked into the steep hillsides like the hollow of a cheek and these winding, dizzying roads that seem somehow tentative, as if always threatening to break off on the edges or collapse and fall to ruins among the weeds and the boulders as so many others before them have done.” (Stewart 1996, 13)

Here, Stewart chooses her words carefully, painting a detailed image of her fieldsite in southern West Virginia as a place which is wild and impenetrable, into which she has courageously delved to offer this glimpse to her academic readers. It becomes unclear over the course of this passage if she is still speaking of hillsides or if she now refers to a people at risk of falling to ruins.

Much of the rest of the chapter continues in this way, describing in vivid detail the physical environment in which she conducted her fieldwork, and interspersing photos throughout, which depict houses seen from across a river, sitting under a blanket of snow and

with a pile of wood in the backyard; a house seen through a gap in the tree branches with a pickup truck sitting outside; a church sign declaring “SINNERS WANTED PLEASE APPLY INSIDE”; and a table inside a house, with an old-fashioned telephone in the center of the table, surrounded by family photos. On the wall behind the table is a picture of Jesus, and on the shelf beside the picture are several votive candles and a cross partially hidden behind a can of Raid (Stewart 1996, 19). Through her juxtaposition of these images alongside a text which asks her readers to imagine in explicit detail a space defined by ruin and need, the image on which Stewart builds her argument is one of a space out of time, which is best viewed from across a river or through a break in the trees.

On the page opposite the photo of the old-fashioned dial telephone, she instructs her readers to

“Picture... all the living room walls crowded with signs of absent presence: the pictures of kin who have left and the dead in their coffins, the paintings of the bleeding Sacred Heart of Jesus with the beautiful longing eyes. All the mantels and tabletops covered with *what nots* and shrines. The newspaper clippings of deaths and strikes” (Stewart 1996, 18).

The place that Stewart describes is one stuck in the past, with an old telephone and hanging onto the memory of those who are gone and things that have already happened. In this description, Stewart leaves no room for the possibility of a future for this place, or even of a present with its own current concerns or day-to-day activities. Stewart’s argument that West Virginia creates a rupture in an American metanarrative of modernity stands only because she herself constructs an image of a place for which modernity is an unattainable ideal.

Throughout her book, Stewart participates in the production of a local color narrative about her field site, through which she reveals to her readers a strange and previously unknown land. Mary Anglin (1992), who writes against the local color movement, explains that this frame

of reference emerged out of the late 1800s, when “the region of the Blue Ridge was discovered by travel writers, missionaries, and robber barons” (106) of the newly-industrialized, post-Civil War United States. By focusing on the peculiarities of the mountain people, the Appalachian region began to fill a space in the American imagination as something pure and wild, “untouched by the forces of war or industry” (Anglin 1992, 106). More than a fascination with Appalachia’s apparent strangeness, however, the region became the antithesis to the story of a newly emergent American modernity, showing as much what Americans were not as what the mountain people were. If “the savage makes sense only in terms of utopia,” as Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1991, 30) suggests, then Appalachia exists within the three-point dependency which he offers, order-utopia-savagery (Trouillot 1991). Identifying Appalachia as ‘savage’ and ‘other,’ allows for the identification of ‘America’ beyond the mountains as utopic in its wealth, freedom, and technological advancement. The American metanarrative which Stewart offers therefore requires Appalachia to stand in contrast to its ‘modern’ ideals so that ‘America’ may continue to be posited as a utopia where wealth and technology abound and everyone is free to determine their own lives.

I would be remiss, however, to overlook the merits of Stewart’s work. Her concept of the social imaginary, through which a collective memory and set of understandings are written onto the landscape, will continue to underlie many of the themes throughout this thesis. As Stewart argues, “culture becomes not a haven of ideas or a fixed state of experience but a social imaginary erupting out of a storied cultural real” (Stewart 1996, 63-4). In the case of the 2018 teacher strike and its aftermath, the cultural real is the strike itself, and as teachers continue to debate what happened, they engage in a process of cultural production as they imagine together

the significance of what they did. I explore this process further in Chapter 1, as I consider how teachers have written and reclaimed narratives about the strike.

I will further explore these ideas in Chapter 2 in the context of a specific facet of these narratives: the narrative of unity, in which teachers posit the unity of those at every level of the education system across the state's fifty-five counties as one of the defining factors of the strike. In both Chapters 1 and 2, I will examine the emergence of these narrative structures and their interactions with history and personal identities, and will assess their moments of rupture, when these narratives cannot accommodate the experiences of individual teachers.

Stewart also sheds light on the concept of chronotopes, first introduced by Mikhail Bakhtin in his 1981 work "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel," as a way of considering how time and space interact, and how individuals interact with them in the present. Although Bakhtin was himself a literary critic, his concept of the chronotope offers a useful framework for my exploration in Chapter 3 of the physicality of the strike. There, I will assess the ways in which teachers manipulated and occupied their physical environments in ways such that they demanded the attention of the public and legislators and made assertions of their sovereignty.

Before I begin, I want to make note of two linguistic choices which I make in this writing. First, the terms "walk-out," "strike," and "work stoppage" have all been used to refer to the work action taken by teachers in the winter of 2018, for reasons which I explore further in Chapter 1. Unless otherwise noted, I will take the lead of *55 Strong: Inside the West Virginia Teachers' Strike* edited by Elizabeth Catte and Jessica Salfia, along with many other publications, and use the term "strike" as a catch-all for the events of February 22 through March

6, 2018 and of February 19-20, 2019, with an understanding of the legal ramifications of the term “strike,” along with the shift that occurred upon the making of a deal between union leaders and Governor Jim Justice. Similarly, when I refer to “teachers,” I include school service personnel more broadly, including but not limited to bus drivers, custodial staff, and cafeteria workers. In this, I take my lead from Heather DeLuca Nestor, President of the Monongalia County Education Association, who told me that “when I say teachers... I mean service personnel also. I think we’re all teachers.”

What follows is a challenge to a metanarrative like the one Kathleen Stewart presents: one in which West Virginia is the savage other to and within the utopic United States. Instead, it offers a glimpse at some of the anxieties felt by West Virginia’s educators, for their local and national perception, their own continued sense of unity, their right to democratic representation, their own and their students’ futures, and the future of the state of West Virginia. Moreover, it offers an analysis of the processes by which teachers in West Virginia are engaging these anxieties with the history of the state in order to work for a more accessible future grounded in a re-emergent collective identity as a people who strike.



## Rednecks, the Mine Wars, and the UMWA

“Governor Justice’s trip around West Virginia that one day, when he went and held the different meetings, town meetings, with the different communities... that was also the day that he referred to us as ‘rednecks.’ Yeah, he said, ‘I can also be the town’s biggest redneck, and, you know, going out, making a scene,’ and so that was, to fight against that, that was when we all started wearing red bandanas on the picket line was when he referred to us as ‘rednecks,’ because that’s a - you know, that’s historically significant for a West Virginian. And, you know, for him to refer to us as that, a lot of us took a lot of anger with that. I know like, I wore my red bandana every day on the picket line after that comment.” -Keisha Kibler

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“Do you know where the term ‘redneck’ really comes from? The West Virginia Mine Wars Museum preserves the little-known history of an era (~1910-1921) when white, Black, and immigrant miners and their families fought militantly for their basic human rights, culminating in what would become the largest armed uprising of US citizens since the American Civil War: the Battle of Blair Mountain in 1921. During this guerrilla war in the Appalachian coalfields, 10,000+ striking miners wore red bandanas around their necks to identify themselves on the battlefield against the white-armband-wearing, industry-funded opposition.

“Although the term ‘redneck’ predates the Mine Wars era, this period is often understood as the birth of the term as slang in America. It was originally used in the popular media to denigrate an Appalachian working class uprising as backwards, uneducated, and dangerous, and the stereotype and negative use of the term persists today. Reclaiming this word is part of our strategy for bringing this history into the present!” (“NEW Red(neck) Bandana”).



**Figure 4.** This photo, posted on West Virginia Public Employees UNITED, depicts a woman wearing a red bandana around her neck and holding a sign that says “United mind workers.” The slogan alludes to the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA), the miners’ union which has had an important presence in West Virginia for generations and played a role in organizing miners during the Mine Wars in the 1910s. Editing the phrase “United Mine Workers” to “United Mind Workers” refers to the role of teachers in creating knowledge, and draws a line of historical legacy from UMWA to the teacher strike.



**Figure 5.** This photo, shared by AFT-West Virginia on their Facebook page, shows then-President Christine Campbell speaking at a rally on the southern steps of the Capitol on February 20, 2019. She speaks from a District 17 UMWA podium. UMWA members were supporters of the teacher strike and were said to stand on picket lines with teachers.

## Chapter 1

### **“Proud Union Redneck”: Claiming and Re-Claiming Narratives Online and Off**

Intrinsic to the 2018 teacher strike is a question of narratives: how are people speaking about the strike, its motivations, and outcomes? For public school teachers, public support is of the utmost importance. Without the faith and respect of students and parents, teachers cannot do their jobs effectively. However, in a strike, more than at any other time, teachers need the support of their school communities to provide childcare and meals for out-of-school students and as a display of solidarity and unity which lends legitimacy to the teachers’ cause, as I will discuss further in Chapter 2. As such, West Virginia’s teachers are engaged in an ongoing process of mediating the prevailing narrative about the strike, not only for the sake of maintaining continued public support, but also as a way of making sense of what occurred in February and March 2018. Narrativization of the strike therefore takes on multiple audiences: the lawmakers with the power to meet their demands, the public whose support they need, and themselves, to maintain a sense of unity and collective identity.

Insofar as narrating an event is a way of organizing and sharing one’s experiences, it is fundamental in the process of solidifying an individual’s relationship to that event. Through the process of shaping a narrative, a storyteller establishes a specific chronology, determines what is and is not important to them, and offers the story through a personalized lens of experience and interpretation. Thus, narration is both process and product: the effort involved in synthesizing events into a finalized narrative through which experiences are shared with others (Cortazzi

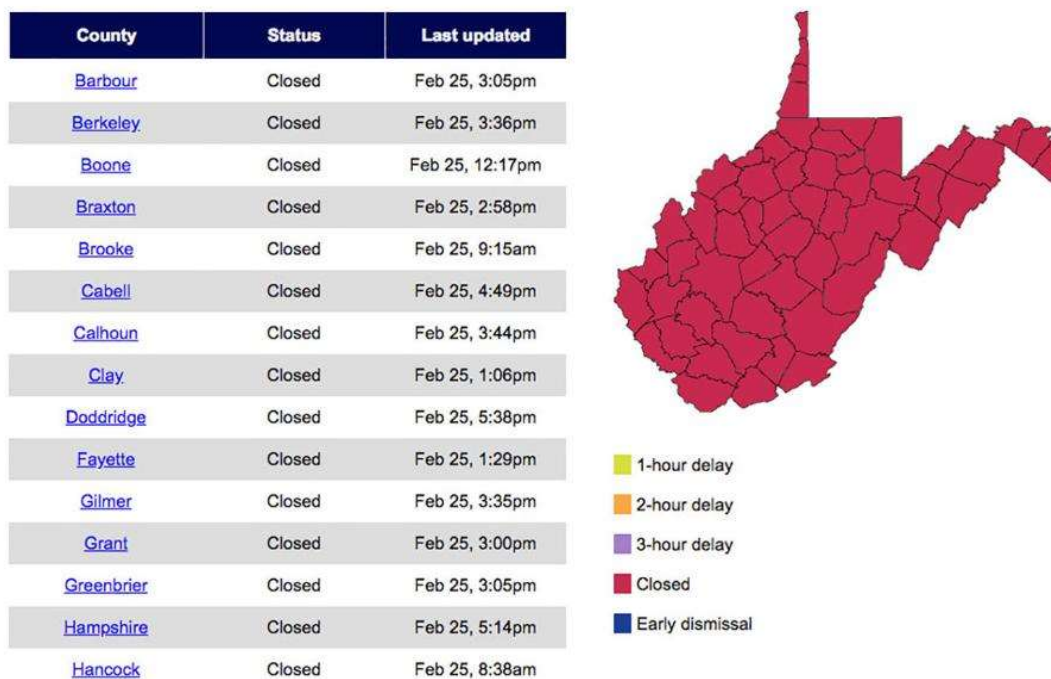
2001). In the context of the 2018 West Virginia teacher strike, the process and products of narrative are twofold. Thousands of individual teachers' personal narratives about their own experiences converge to constitute a wide-scale narrative of what the strike was and what it meant. By nature, the process of producing this metanarrative is unruly, and the danger of synthesizing one overarching narrative lies in the potential for erasing the experiences of individuals. Throughout this chapter, I will highlight some of the ways in which this collective narrative has been and continues to be shaped, and identify a few moments of rupture, when the metanarrative cannot accommodate individual teachers' experiences of the strike.

The word "strike" is itself fraught with political and legal implications, and as such has been a major topic of debate. The first time I became aware of this debate was in conversation with Jacob Stagers, in June 2018. I asked him if he felt that the strike had been a success, and what kind of work still needed to be done. He responded,

"I do think what we did this year was a success. Nobody thought we would even be able to get organized enough to even go on a strike. And technically what we did wasn't officially a strike, it's a work stoppage, because we kept getting school closed, as opposed to schools being open and us having to picket. And that was something that was annoying, people were like 'it's not a strike, it's a work stoppage,' like 'whatever!' But you know, it was kind of amazing watching the counties close one-by-one each day. Every night, people would screenshot - on the website, there's a map that shows school closings, and you know it gets red whenever schools close, and one-by-one we turned the whole state red every day, and it was impressive. It was really cool. I know there are teachers who went out and got that tattooed: the whole state with the county lines drawn in, in red. I did not, but I do have a t-shirt with it on though."

What Mr. Stagers is describing here, in discussing the school closings map, pictured below, is an especially important political decision made by all fifty-five county school superintendents across the state. By closing school every day of the nine-day action through the same process as ordinary snow days, no teacher anywhere in West Virginia ever had to make a decision whether or not to report to work or cross a picket line. The map took on a symbolic weight as a visual representation of the unity of teachers and superintendents everywhere in the state, which many

For today, **Monday February 26, 2018** - as of Feb 26, 7:18am



FROM WEST VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

**Figure 6.** This photo, taken from a CNN article about the 2018 strike (Criss 2018), depicts the school closings map as it appeared on the West Virginia Department of Education website on February 26, 2018, the first Monday after the initial two-day walkout. Counties are demarcated by lines, and the red color indicates that each of the fifty-five counties is closed. The table on the left lists counties alphabetically and shows their status and the time of the latest status update. This is the same map which indicates school delays and cancellations for inclement weather and other emergencies and looked much the same as this every day of the nine-day strike in 2018.

teachers consider to be the defining factor which lead to the success of the strike. I will return to this decision and its impact on the concept of unity in Chapter 2, but what is most significant here is the debate that it sparked regarding the language used to describe the work action. Although Mr. Staggers brushed it off with an exasperated “whatever!” he also acknowledged the importance of closing schools when he considered how impressive it was to watch the map turn red every day, and recognized how important it was to his colleagues, that they would have the map tattooed on their bodies as symbols of success through unity.

Most often, the specifics of the language debate entered into conversations when people corrected themselves after saying “strike.” When I sat down with Keisha Kibler to talk through

her experience in 2018, she said, “we got our marching orders at that rally in Charleston, and then we started with the two-day strike. Or walkout, I should say.” A moment later, she used the words interchangeably: “when you talk about, like this strike, when you talk about the walkout.” When I asked her to explain the difference, she expressed a similar disinterest in the debate as Mr. Stagers, saying, “it’s all jargon and politics.” However, she followed that statement with further explanation:

“I say ‘strike’ a lot, although it started out as a walkout, because we were told - when Dale Lee stood and gave us our marching orders - no, excuse me, not a walkout, a work stoppage. He called it a ‘work stoppage.’ He said, ‘the first official work stoppage since the 1990s.’ But then things changed during the work stoppage, and we were given promises, and we were told to go back to work, and then we didn’t, and that’s a wildcat strike.”

Keisha’s explanation highlights the difference between a “work stoppage” and a “strike.” Use of the word “strike” specifically suggests a grassroots action in which teachers were expected to report to work but refused, whereas the term “work stoppage” suggests that the closure of schools was coordinated through official channels by higher levels of authority, including the teachers’ unions and boards of education. She argues that although the work action in 2018 began as a work stoppage organized by WVEA, AFT-WV, and WVSSPA, the nature of the action changed when the union presidents made their deal with Governor Justice to try to put teachers back to work. When the action was no longer sanctioned by the unions, it became a specific kind of strike well-known in West Virginia’s history: a wildcat strike, in which workers organized their own strike, independent of their union leaders.

I became engaged in the debate when over the summer of 2018, I posted messages on the West Virginia Public Employees UNITED Facebook page, hoping to recruit some people to interview about their experiences. The post itself was fairly innocuous: I introduced myself as a Morgantown High School graduate and current Wellesley College student and requested that

anyone interested in being interviewed for about an hour email me to set up an in-person, phone, or Skype meeting. However, I used the word “strike” twice in the post, and the first comment read simply “It was not a strike.” Another comment, posted a few minutes later, said “It was a walk out...” These two comments set off a debate about the definition of a strike. I have compiled screenshots of the post and some of the comments, edited to protect posters’ identities, in Appendix A. What stands out most about that particular debate is how heated it became. One commenter, indicated in dark blue, showed frustration with the issue, saying, “Gosh, I feel like we go through this all the time. Yes, we had a strike. Refusing to work is what a strike is.” The comment was accompanied by a screenshot of the dictionary definition of “strike,”. This person then got into an argument with another participant (indicated in light blue in Appendix A) who similarly posted screenshots from labor activist network Jobs with Justice’s website. As each commenter posited the authority of their own definitions of “strikes” and “work stoppages,” they argued that their own way of narrating the work action was correct.

Despite apparent frustration, many teachers continue to participate in the debate about what to call the 2018 work action. In this way, they engage in a process of narrative creation through which, by deliberating over a seemingly minor linguistic choice, they highlight what they find most important about the events: either the individual choice or the support of county superintendents. Importantly, narratives are “doubly anchored” in both the events described and the context in which they are shared (Bauman 1986). The performance or act of telling a story is therefore itself a form of communication. Martin Cortazzi (2001) abstractly defines narrative as “structures of knowledge and storied ways of knowing” (384). Engaging in the process of narrative creation must, therefore, involve a level of cultural capital and membership within a particular group. Within this framework, we can see how participation in the shaping of the

prevailing strike narrative, such as through disputing the words used to describe it, involves both an attempt to make sense of what happened and a claim to membership within the group of teachers who went on strike. Thus, the argument which unfolded on my Facebook post went beyond simply parsing out the specific language use, but also involved claims by each commenter to authority and ownership over the strike story.

Facebook offers a unique platform for such debates. Returning again to Evans and Boyte's (1986) concept of free space, which I discussed in the introduction, the "settings between private lives and large-scale institutions where ordinary citizens can act with dignity, independence, and vision" (17), we can see how West Virginia Public Employees UNITED provides individual members with a way to connect with other members-at-large of their unions across the geographic expanse of the state. As a free space, the Facebook group exists at the intersection of personal lives and unions, moderating the divisions between public and private, traditional and modern, online and offline, virtual and real. Teachers have not only debated language and shaped a narrative, but they have also organized, discussed the possibility of future actions, and connected over their commonalities as teachers both in the classroom and in West Virginia in order to build a stronger sense of community and collective identity.

A key aspect of a free space is that it fosters democratic potential by encouraging dialogue (Evans and Boyte 1986). The 2018 strike was highly transformative for many teachers in this way, as exemplified by a conversation I had with Daniel Summers. Mr. Summers told me that he has always tried to be socially conscious, but that he has rarely engaged in social actions such as political demonstrations. He cited Facebook as a site of political engagement, saying,

"I've followed West Virginia politics for a number of years now, but I've never really had people in my social circle - Facebook excluded - but like in person who did, and it was just kind of like all of us were watching these things. We were watching live streams and town hall meetings and stuff

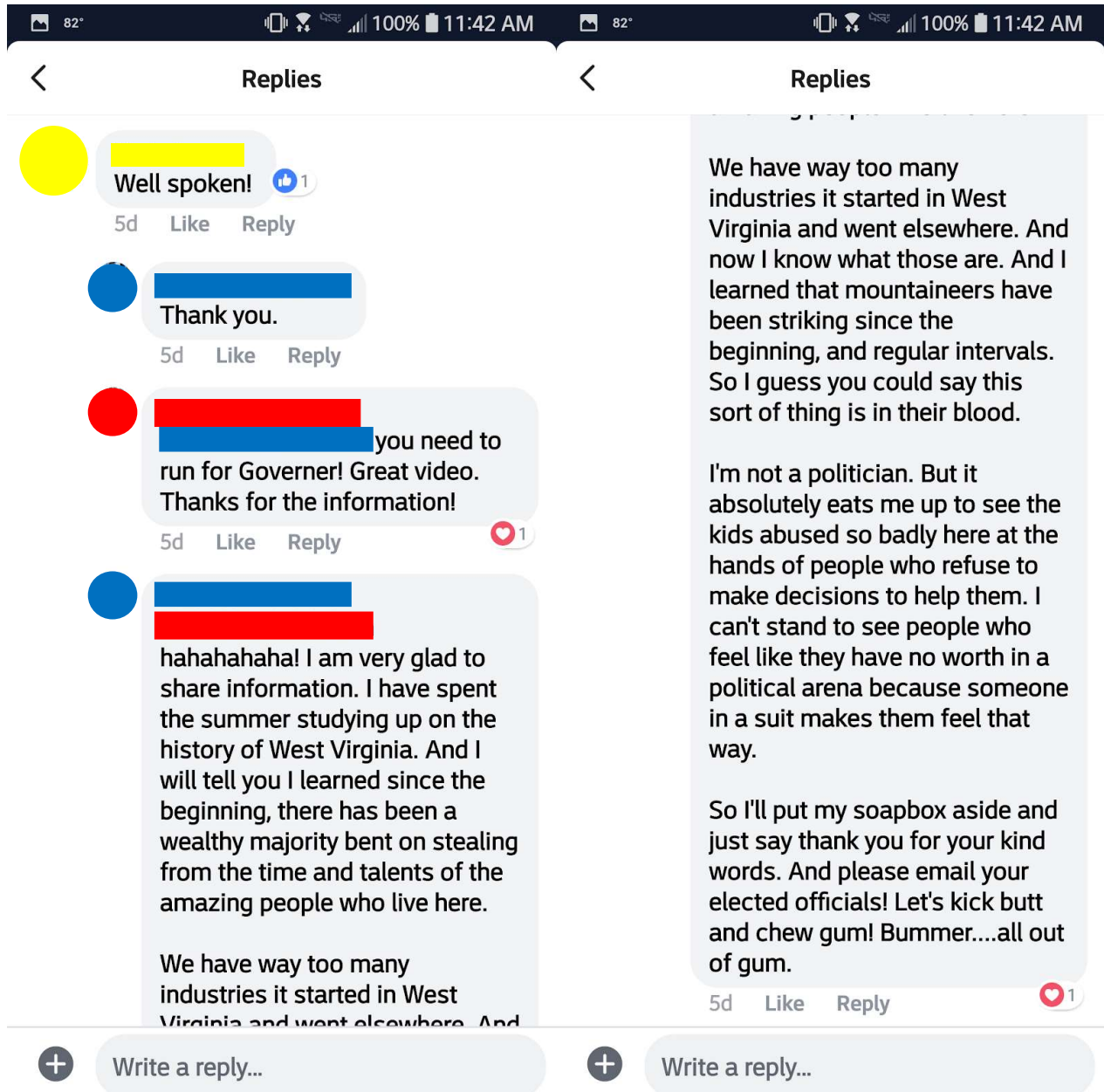


- all of it - and getting to know these politicians. You know, Mitch Carmichael was not a new name to me, but he suddenly became like a celebrity - you know, an infamous one.”

In this statement, Mr. Summers indicates a blending of the online and offline realms. Where before the strike, his offline social group was not particularly politically engaged, they became more so as tension built and issues like PEIA came to the forefront of West Virginia’s political conversation. Much of the engagement he describes here, such as watching live streams of town hall meetings, takes place online, circulated throughout the statewide teacher community through the Facebook group, where teachers have the opportunity to comment and share their thoughts.

One particularly poignant example of how teachers have utilized the Facebook platform to engage with the issues is a video created by one group member in response to a PEIA Task Force Subcommittee on Public Outreach meeting on July 31, 2018. After attending the meeting at the Capitol, she posted the video outlining the key takeaways and her reaction to the meeting, thereby offering access to those who were unable to attend the meeting in person. In the video, recorded on her phone, she is sitting in her car in a parking lot outside the Capitol, wearing a purple t-shirt with the state of West Virginia, divided by county, printed in white. She begins by providing details about the upcoming meeting, and requests that people attend it if they are able. She then provides an account of the discussion and addresses a Facebook post made by Mitch Carmichael, in which he praises Republican leadership for giving teachers the “largest raise in the history of the state,” without raising taxes. Here, she points out that the raise was not really 5% across the board, but \$2,020, a 5% raise from the starting salary of teachers in the state. She also argues that, “we weren’t given anything. We fought for it, like this state has a history of fighting for itself and for each other when people come in and exploit us and use us, and enough was enough.”

An especially compelling exchange that occurred in the comments under the video involved another group member commenting, “you need to run for Governor [sic]! Great video. Thanks for the information!” The conversation, pictured below, highlights several of the qualities of a free space. The commenter’s call for the maker of the video to run for governor exemplifies



**Figure 7.** This conversation took place in the comment section under the video posted in response to the PEIA Task Force meeting in Charleston. The original poster of the video is indicated in blue, and the two commenters are indicated in yellow and red.

a larger trend among teachers in response to the strike. Increasingly, teachers have been running for public office in West Virginia, including new Delegates Cindy Lavender-Bowe and Cody Thompson, both Facebook group members who were elected to the House of Delegates in November 2018. While direct campaigning has been limited on the Facebook group, conversation about it has not. In March 2018, then-candidate Thompson posted on the page, wondering why the teachers' unions would endorse his opponents, and a conversation ensued about why that might have been the case and the importance of reaching voters in his district. Through the free space of the Facebook group, teachers have been engaging in the political process, not only discussing running for office, but doing so and winning.

Couto (1993) offers an additional quality of free spaces to Evans and Boyte's existing definition: within free spaces, knowledge of past democratic movements is operationalized to inspire new efforts. This too can be seen in the conversation pictured below. In it, the original poster responds to the commenter's claim that she should run for governor by mentioning her research about West Virginia's history:

“We have way too many industries it [sic] started in West Virginia and went elsewhere. And now I know what those are. And I learned that mountaineers have been striking since the beginning, and regular intervals. So I guess you could say this sort of thing is in their blood.”

Here, she elaborates on a moment in the video which I quoted above, when, by alluding to West Virginia's “history of fighting for itself,” she disputes Mitch Carmichael's claim of giving teachers a raise. In both of these moments, she identifies a direct relationship between the history of labor organizing in the state and the teacher strike. Through this identification, she creates an opportunity in the free space for Facebook group members to draw inspiration from historical examples of labor organizing to motivate their own activism.

In order to understand how teachers are integrating West Virginia's history into their narrative of the strike, it is important to understand that history. To this end, my own position as a West Virginian offers some insight. However, it is necessary to note the multiplicity of identities which impact my approach to both the state's history and how it is encompassed in the teacher strike. By its very nature, the title "native anthropologist," which I claim at least in part, involves at least two interacting identities: that of the "native" member of the studied culture, and that of the scholar educated in research methods likely unknown to those studied. Kirin Narayan (1993) draws attention to the necessary bi-culturality of the native anthropologist, and I must likewise consider how my education at Wellesley College, six hundred miles away from home, affects my experience of the strike and forces me into the position of an outsider despite the situated knowledge I have as a West Virginian. Perceived primarily through the filters of Facebook, national and local reporting, and interviews, I cannot write about the strike as it occurred, but rather as its participants reacted to it. Likewise, within West Virginian society, I am not a teacher, but a concerned citizen, and I cannot claim to understand what it means to be a teacher. Therefore, there are limits to the objectivity I can offer by virtue of my birthplace. My role as a native anthropologist lies at the intersection of my identities and those of my interlocutors. However, this too is part of the value of the free space: it draws together the disparate identities of its inhabitants and builds connections through their commonalities. The free space of the Facebook group encompasses primarily teachers and public employees, but also involves other West Virginians who are invested in PEIA, workers' rights, and the future of public education in the state.

It is therefore through my identities as West Virginian and Morgantown High School graduate that I can most closely identify with my interlocutors, and it is here where my role as

“native” ethnographer can be claimed. What these positions offer me is a situated knowledge of the mythologized narrative of labor organizing within the state. I grew up knowing that West Virginia’s coal industry is famous – or perhaps infamous – for the exploitation of miners, who worked in unforgiving conditions until their backs broke or they couldn’t breathe through the coal dust, who lived in company-owned houses, prayed in company-owned churches, and were compensated in a worthless currency valid only at company-owned stores. It used to be the case in West Virginia that to work in a coal mine was to be owned by your company. To be fired by your company was to lose everything. Under these conditions, the coal miners organized, and when their actions were met with violence from the companies, they fought back. West Virginians look to the Mine Wars of the early twentieth century, especially to the Battle of Blair Mountain, the largest civil insurrection in this country since the Civil War, and see that our history is one in which outsiders seek to exploit our populations and landscapes. We see the strength that those who came before us held in their unity, and we feel their fierceness as they refused to be silent while our mountains were dug up and our people’s lives destroyed. Embedded in our collective identity is a deep pride in our resilience and readiness to fight for one another.

I don’t remember ever learning this history, but I have deeply internalized it. I stored away this understanding of West Virginia until it became immediately and inescapably relevant when teachers left their classrooms in February 2018. Then, I saw the legacy of the Mine Wars everywhere. Much like the teachers in the conversation above, I witnessed the reemergence of a long-standing tradition of union organizing, built of the solidarity between teachers and their communities around the state. My purpose in sharing my own experience as a West Virginian is to suggest that engagement with this historical narrative occurs at a subconscious level (or

unconscious, as with the teacher above who did not research this history until after the strike), affecting identities in undetected ways until moments of concentrated political action such as the 2018 strike. At the subconscious level, the history places organized work actions such as strikes firmly within a category of things that we can do and indeed have done. As the free space of the Facebook group fostered democratic potential and this history came to the forefront, the question then became not ‘are we capable of going on strike?’ but rather, ‘how are we going to make this strike effective?’

During the strike, teachers called upon their knowledge of state history to inspire and claim legitimacy for their actions. In the historical interludes throughout this thesis, I offer snapshots of historical information alongside ethnographic data in the form of photographs and quotes to draw attention to the ways in which direct connections are drawn between historical moments of labor organizing and the current moment. These connections may not be immediately evident to those outside West Virginia. Sherry Cable (1993) cites media such as the television show *The Beverly Hillbillies* as originators of a stereotype of Appalachians as weak-willed, apathetic, and submissive. Operating from such an assumption, which I will further address in the conclusion, a teacher strike in West Virginia may seem, at first, to come from nowhere. However, as Richard Bauman (1986) notes, stories as they are told consist of layers of interpretive signification which, if the audience of a story does not possess the framework through which to unravel the meaning, will be misunderstood or overlooked entirely.

One of example of Bauman’s point is the sign in the photo below. This photo, taken during the 2018 strike, was posted on Public Employees UNITED in response to a call for pictures of people’s strike signs. The sign tells a story, the significance of which may be missed

without the proper historical context. On the one hand, the sign could simply express this man's pride in his union and the fact that he sees himself as a redneck, a stereotyped "country" person with a specific way of dressing and behaving.

However, West Virginians claim that the word "redneck" originated in West Virginia when striking mine workers tied red bandanas around their necks to differentiate themselves during the Battle of Blair Mountain. Only through this additional layer of knowledge can we access this man's meaning and the connection he makes between the historic labor struggle at Blair Mountain and the 2018 teacher strike.

Here, vividly, we can see Bauman's (1986) theory at work. He argues that "events are not the external raw materials out of which narratives are constructed, but rather the reverse: Events are abstractions from narrative" (5). With his sign, the man in the photo is telling a story about his personal involvement in the event of the strike: he is proud to be a member of a union on strike. However, the story he tells does not follow from the event itself in succession. Rather, the two are intertwined, existing in the same spatial and temporal location: his involvement in the strike takes the form of his act of storytelling. In this, the sign embodies what literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) calls the "chronotope." In it, time and space merge as history takes the physical form of the sign and the



**Figure 8.** This photo, posted on West Virginia Public Employees UNITED, depicts a man holding up a sign with the words "Proud Union Redneck" next to a drawing of a red bandana.

symbol of the red bandana. History is enacted in this frame both through the inspiration of the past and the creation of a new historical moment. In the 2018 teacher strike, many participants experienced something of a temporal shift, wherein history became not something ‘of the past,’ but rather an ever-present tool, offering inspiration and legitimacy to current efforts.

Not every teacher felt the connection between the 2018 strike and the state’s labor history, however. I spoke with Darrell Hugueley, an English Language Arts teacher in Logan County who chose not to participate in the 2018 strike. He told me that, being from Tennessee originally, he feels like an outsider in Logan.

“Well when the meetings started happening in schools to plan all these things, I was really - I was really amazed at how quickly everybody wanted to strike. So I’m not a native West Virginian, but I’ve done a lot of reading about the history of West Virginia and the tradition of union presence here, and the striking, the strike war, the mine wars all through the 20th century. So I kinda understood the culture and I kinda understood the tradition, but I was not seeing a connection to the teaching profession with the same impact that the coal mine wars had. I didn’t think there was a direct correlation.”

Mr. Hugueley’s story displays a site of rupture in the teachers’ narrative about the direct linkage between the state’s history of labor organizing and the teacher strike. Regardless of his research about the state’s history, he wondered about the nature of the teaching profession as compared to coal mining. His concern is valid, and we must consider the significance of teachers claiming stewardship over a history which primarily revolves around the struggles of coal miners and other manual laborers. Insofar as teaching in West Virginia does not have the same history of total company ownership as coal mining, there is a certain level of appropriation of symbols such as the red bandana occurring without experiencing the same type of abuses. Nonetheless, for many West Virginians coal labor demonstrations are in a literal sense ‘in their blood,’ only a few generations removed from coal miners and United Mine Workers of America members. Despite the differences between teaching and coal mining as professions, they are connected in West Virginia by the historic pervasiveness of the coal companies.



Recognizing that he is not originally from West Virginia, Mr. Hugueley acknowledged in his comments a divergence of his own set of multiple identities from those of many of his colleagues who participated in the strike. Whereas the metanarrative of the strike requires that the teachers involved maintain the historical interpretive framework of a native-born West Virginian, he approaches the strike as a West Virginia teacher with an outsider's understanding of the state's history. Here is the rupture in the narrative: if someone does not have both identities of teacher and West Virginian, it is possible that they, like Mr. Hugueley, will have difficulty finding their place in that narrative.

Part of constructing a narrative about the strike has also included identifying heroes and villains. While Mr. Hugueley may have found himself in something of a villain role in his school, which I will discuss further in an exploration of the concept of unity in Chapter 2, statewide heroes such as Richard Ojeda and villains such as Mitch Carmichael became figures to support or disdain. At the time of the 2018 strike, both Ojeda and Carmichael were sitting state Senators, and were often presented as opposites, Ojeda fighting for teachers against Senate President Carmichael. In the photo on the right, the Ojeda-Carmichael dichotomy is displayed physically through t-shirts suggesting an aspiration to be like Ojeda.



**Figure 9.** This photo, shared on the Facebook group, offers a material display of simultaneous disdain for Mitch Carmichael and support for Richard Ojeda through the two women's t-shirts.

Known for his fiery speeches, Ojeda was praised by many teachers as truly caring about West Virginia. Carmichael, on the other hand, is narrated as anti-West Virginian, and even un-



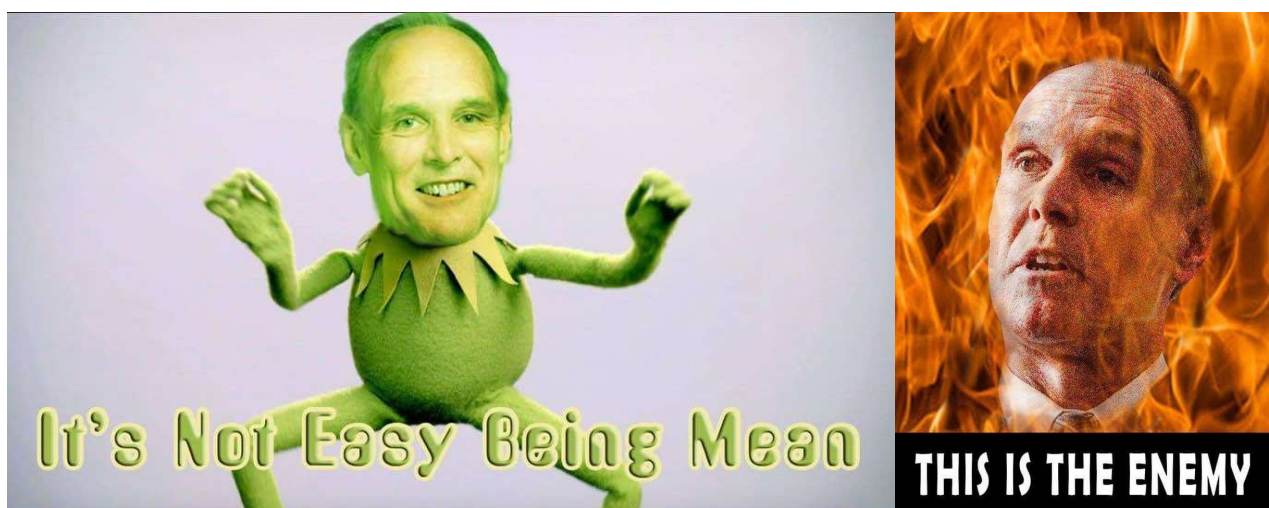
**Figure 10.** This meme, depicting an edited version of Mitch Carmichael’s Wikipedia page, was shared multiple times on West Virginia Public Employees UNITED in February 2019.

West Virginian. A meme which circulated around Facebook in February 2019 depicted a screenshot of Carmichael’s Wikipedia page, shown on the left, which had been edited to call him “the dictator of WV.” Alleging that Carmichael “hates teachers, West Virginia, Pepperoni Rolls, and doesn’t know the words to Country Roads” is as good as saying he is not from West Virginia. Furthermore, many associate the song “Sweet Caroline” with the University of Pittsburgh, the perennial rival of West Virginia University, because they play the song in the fourth quarter of their football games.

In this post, Carmichael is not called out for his treatment of teachers or his policies (both of which have been exhaustively discussed on Public Employees UNITED), but he is rather accused of being against everything that is quintessentially West Virginian: pepperoni rolls, a beloved local delicacy; the John Denver song “Take Me Home, Country

Roads,” which is something of a state anthem; and Mountaineer football. In this way, teachers not only posit Carmichael as un-West Virginian, but in so doing also assert their own claim to the West Virginian identity. According to this supposition, teachers must be the ones who are truly working for West Virginia, because they are working against Carmichael, who hates the state.

Expressions of disdain for Mitch Carmichael take many forms in addition to editing his Wikipedia page. The hashtag #DitchMitch became popular on Facebook and was even put on a bumper sticker. Several memes were made and shared online, such as the two pictured below. Memes, which generally involve familiar photos accompanied by a caption conveying a joke, phenomenon, or idea, are popular in online interactions. They often require some background understanding of the subject matter or the meme format (the photo and the type of joke it is ordinarily used to convey). As such, sharing these images on the free space of the Facebook group serves several functions. First, it can provide a feeling of catharsis to express frustration in creative and sometimes comedic ways. However, perhaps more importantly, it identifies – sometimes quite explicitly – a collective enemy. In its own way, sharing memes also



**Figure 11.** These memes, posted on the Facebook group, target Mitch Carmichael as the enemy of the teachers.

inspires democratic action, as teachers, even those who do not live in his district, regularly post about contacting Carmichael to express their grievances.

Through the creation and sharing of online materials, Facebook group members also participate in a sort of economy of digital materials, including comments, posts, likes, photos, and memes, which establish a social capital specific to West Virginia Public Employees UNITED. Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as the resources one has as a member of a particular social group. Forms of participation, especially more active ones such as commenting and posting, therefore become not only part of a process of narrating the strike, but also a display of social capital. By circulating materials, each Facebook group member individually carves out room for themselves in the free space, demonstrating solidarity to enact their group membership.

Creating rallying points such as support for Richard Ojeda or disdain for Mitch Carmichael is vitally necessary for establishing a sense of unity across the state and across a group each with a multitude of personal identities which may come into conflict at any given time. This is where the free space provided by the Facebook platform becomes immensely effective as a “[space] in which people could reclaim the past and make a claim on the future” (Couto 1993, 183). West Virginia Public Employees UNITED has been an important coalition-building platform for teachers by centering their shared experiences as state employees. Furthermore, by creating additional commonalities through appeals to history and a process of narrative production, the Facebook group has constructed a fiercely united force. Despite this unity, however, Darrell Hugueley’s story of coming from out-of-state and feeling like an outsider

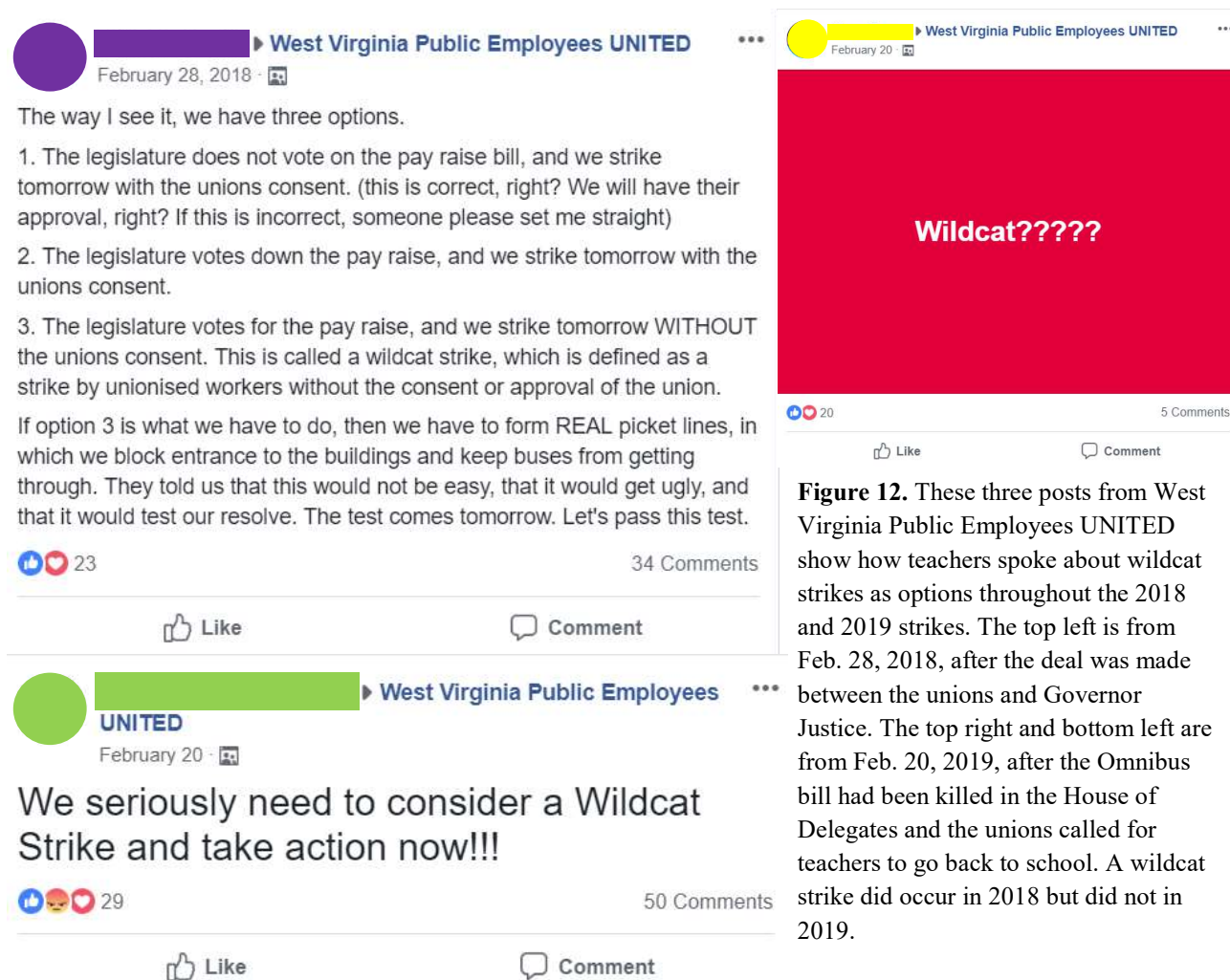
in Logan County offers a window through which to view the limits of the narrative being constructed.

In the next chapter, I continue to explore this process of narration through the concept of unity. What has become clear through the course of my research is that every teacher approaches the teacher strike from their own perspective; everyone has a different reason for going out. However, as the hashtag #55United suggests, the teacher strikes depended on the unity of the educational system, from bus drivers to county superintendents, across all 55 counties of the state. Despite narrative assertions that teachers are 55 United, unity often comes as more of a question than a guarantee. What, then, happens when cracks form in the unity of the 55 counties? I turn my focus now to this question and offer two examples of moments of division: first between teachers and their union leaders in the 2018 strike, then between the counties themselves in 2019. Through investigations of these two moments, I present a deeper understanding of how breaches in the identity-forming metanarrative of the strikes require teachers to reassess and rewrite the narrative.

## Wildcat Strikes

In the 1970s, the West Virginia coal industry experienced a rash of wildcat strikes, in which workers went on strike without the approval of their union leadership, and often in protest of that leadership.

“WASHINGTON, June 22 – Much of the soft coal industry was crippled today by wildcat strikes as roving pickets protested the policies of their union and a closed-door meeting here on mine safety by Government and coal industry officials.... Strikes are illegal under the union’s contract, which provides for the settlement of membership grievances by arbitration. But the contentions of rank and file members that union officials had failed to use the arbitration process aggressively caused some of the strike agitation” (Franklin 1970).



**Figure 12.** These three posts from West Virginia Public Employees UNITED show how teachers spoke about wildcat strikes as options throughout the 2018 and 2019 strikes. The top left is from Feb. 28, 2018, after the deal was made between the unions and Governor Justice. The top right and bottom left are from Feb. 20, 2019, after the Omnibus bill had been killed in the House of Delegates and the unions called for teachers to go back to school. A wildcat strike did occur in 2018 but did not in 2019.

## Chapter 2

### **#55Strong: Unions and the Narrative of Unity**

In June 2018, when I was first starting my research for this project, I met with Keisha Kibler to discuss her experience of the strike and to ask for her advice in moving forward with my fieldwork. After the meeting, when she was driving me back to my father's office, I noticed a sticker she had on her back windshield: a white outline of the state of West Virginia, with the phrase "55 United" written in curly letters. I complimented the sticker, and she said "oh, I have a story to tell you about that." The day before Memorial Day weekend, she had been pulled over and received a speeding ticket for \$140. The police officer asked if she was familiar with the area, so she could deal with the ticket. When she replied that she had taught in Preston County for fourteen years, she could see his demeanor shift. Later, when she called to address the ticket, the woman on the phone asked her to repeat the number, and then said "oh, you can tear that up." Apparently, just ten minutes after pulling Keisha over, the police officer went to the station and voided her ticket, saying that because she was a teacher and stood on the picket line for public employees, it was the least he could do. After that, Keisha joked that she bought the sticker in case she got pulled over again.

In Keisha's story, we can see a number of important markers of what is almost certainly the most prevailing aspect of the collective narrative which teachers have pushed: the construction of unity. The sticker itself includes one of two primary rallying cries of the strike, "55 United" and "55 Strong," which circulated as slogans on signs, t-shirts, and hashtags. "55"

refers to the fifty-five counties in West Virginia, each with its own school system. These slogans draw on the strength teachers found in numbers and assert the inseparability of the counties. Furthermore, they work to focus attention on the actions of teachers by simultaneously centralizing and decentralizing the narrative. Emphasizing the interconnectivity of the fifty-five counties attributes the action to those standing on picket lines all across the state, but also calls attention to the convening of teachers from every corner of West Virginia at the State Capitol. The concepts of 55 United and 55 Strong speak to the grassroots nature of the strike; it was not the lawmakers in Charleston who created change, but the union members who leveraged the strength of their unity to demand action from their elected officials. This is the narrative of unity.

Keisha's claim to this narrative, which she asserts by explaining to the officer that she has taught in Preston County for fourteen years, affords her a new social status. In the eyes of the police officer, she took a risk by participating in the strike for the benefit not only of herself and her colleagues, but for all public employees affected by PEIA, including state troopers. Here we see another aspect of the narrative of unity: the teacher strike was not enacted only on the behalf of teachers and school service personnel, it was for all public employees. Kristine Alvarez, an English teacher at Morgantown High School explained this to me at a walk-in demonstration in January 2019:

“Our intention last year was to bring attention to issues surrounding all state employees. State prison workers, firemen, police officers, those folks can't walk off their jobs to get attention without risking their jobs all together. What we did was all fifty-five counties said, 'let's walk, let's stand up for all state employees,' so that's what we did.”

Unity, in this narrative, includes all public employees, and a belief that teachers have a unique legal ability to go on strike without losing their jobs, while other public employees would risk their jobs by striking. The strike, therefore, is posited as an effort involving and requiring the support of a number of professional communities around the state. Through this aspect of the



narrative of unity, Keisha finds a new identity as someone who stands up for herself, her colleagues, her students, and other West Virginians.

The nature of the narrative of unity is such that it attempts to encompass all West Virginians, whether they are members of the education profession or not. It is symbolically encompassed by the school closings map, discussed in Chapter 1, turned completely red by the school superintendents working with teachers. It is also seen in the bus drivers refusing to drive or cross a picket line and teachers planning to picket in neighboring counties if schools there are not closed. It includes the churches, food pantries, and other community organizations offering childcare and free meals for students who are out of school, and the parents bringing food and supplies to teachers standing in the cold on their picket lines all day. The narrative of unity extends beyond classroom teachers and makes claims to authority rooted in the support and collective efforts of the people of West Virginia.

To a certain extent, a strike requires this kind of unity across the education community. Generally, strikes are preceded by strike votes by union members which, if passed, are a bargaining chip for union leaders in their negotiations with management, including in this case, legislators. A strike therefore requires a consensus of union members, but simultaneously depends on individual members' personal decisions of whether or not to vote for a strike (Durrenberger and Erem 2005), and in turn, whether or not to participate in a strike. Indeed, the personal facet of collective action may be easily overlooked in a circumstance such as the 2018 teacher strike, especially when much of the teaching profession in West Virginia is engaged in a process of narrative production which represents the strike as a necessarily and enthusiastically

united effort. However, what has become clear in my research is just how diverse and personal the reasons for participating – and for not participating – are.

The question “why did you go on strike?” usually has a two-part answer. The first involves policy matters, what the unions hoped to accomplish: a full and sustainable stream of funding for PEIA, a pay raise, and the blockage of harmful legislation. Teachers generally agreed on these issues, though they might individually prioritize one over another. Jacob Staggers told me a story about a teacher’s aide he met in Charleston during the strike, who told Hoppy Kercheval, a radio host for West Virginia MetroNews, that she cared more about the PEIA issue than the pay raise because the insurance would not cover visits to medical specialists that she needed to see. Even with issues that teachers agreed upon, there was room to disagree and re-prioritize based on personal experiences.

The second part of the answer to the question “why did you go on strike?” often involves much more personal reasons. Keisha explained her reasons in this way:

“When I stood on that line, I wore many hats. So, first and foremost, I’m a West Virginian. You know, my daddy was a coal miner, my mom an entrepreneur in the southern part of the state, my grandfather a business owner in the southern part of the state, so I was a West Virginian. But I stood on that line as a teacher educator, and I had so many phone calls from previous students that I had taught here at WVU and had gone out and were teaching in the state of West Virginia, and I mean, I’m talking like three or four phone calls a night, or text messages. ‘Keisha, what do I do?’ ‘I don’t know what to do.’ And I felt a sense of guilt because I had encouraged them - in my classroom at WVU, I had encouraged them to stay in the state to be a teacher, because our students are West Virginians, our young West Virginians, they deserve quality teachers. They deserve a quality education, and the sense of guilt has overpowered me, like ‘what have I done? Here’s all these teachers that I have taught and are now teaching in the state, and they’re struggling to make ends meet, and their insurance is under attack, and the profession itself is under attack,’ and it just took me a while to realize that I’m not just there as a West Virginian, I’m not just there as a classroom teacher on the line, I am there as a teacher educator, and I’m there because, you know, my future teachers that I educate, they deserve better, and they deserve to have fair and equitable insurance, and they deserve to be in a state that values them, and so it was just the many different hats that I wore. And if you go back and you look at some of the signs that I made, I had one sign that listed, I put on the sign the name of every single one of the teachers in the state that I had taught, and it was about 70 names. And so, you know, I took a picture of the sign, and I texted it to those that I still communicate with, and I was just like, ‘you know, we’re in this together, but I’m in this with you as well...’ I know a lot of my teacher friends, they were on the on the line because they have children

in the [public school] system. So every teacher is on the line for a different reason. You know, I think every teacher has his or her own story to tell about why there were there.”

Keisha’s story displays the nuanced and multi-layered motivations teachers had for participating in the strike. What she calls her “many hats” are different aspects of her personal identity which came to the forefront of her experience during the strike. She approached her participation not only as a classroom teacher, but also as a West Virginian and as a teacher-educator, who has prepared future teachers for their careers and encouraged them to stay in the state. Embedded in each of these identities is a deep sense of rootedness and connectedness in place and people. She presents her connection to this place by discussing the generations of her family who have lived in southern West Virginia and the way in which she has encouraged her students to stay in the state to teach, to offer the students of this place a high-quality education. Although Keisha holds these identities individually and has used them to make personal decisions regarding her involvement in the strike, they are by their very nature social identities, held in relation to others.

Many of the other teachers with whom I spoke offered similar stories. Toni Poling, an English teacher at Fairmont Senior High School and 2017 West Virginia Teacher of the Year, told me that every day when she was on the picket line, she thought about her students. For her, the defining moment of the strike came when she was standing on her picket line in a church parking lot across the road from her school. One day during the strike, a number of cars pulled into the parking lot, and students got out of the cars and held their own picket in support of their teachers. She said it was amazing to see that support from the community and from her students. Like Keisha, Mrs. Poling’s decision was based on her personal circumstances and identities, but it was nonetheless rooted in a sense of connectivity to her students and a desire to create a better education system for them.

Daniel Summers, the University High School English teacher introduced previously, likewise explained that during the strike, he had a newborn baby at home. When I asked him why he did not take the strike as a few extra days to be at home with his wife and new baby, he replied,

“I don’t know what choice I had. I respect other people’s choices, but I don’t know that that’s the kind of person I want to be, the person who doesn’t do it [participate in the strike]. And I have children, and I want them to be that kind of person too.”

By acknowledging that other people made different decisions and he had to respect them, Mr. Summers makes a pronouncement of his identity and what kind of example he wants to set for his children: a person who does what he believes to be right and who reflects the meaning of his sign, which said, “today I teacher perseverance.”

For each of these teachers, the decision to participate in the 2018 teacher strike was a personal one, made between themselves and their families based on personal circumstances and identities. Stories such as these have difficulty fitting into the unity narrative, in which the state’s teachers all worked as a collective body to affect change at a statewide level. Nonetheless, these teachers elsewhere affirm their belief in the narrative of unity, discussing the important roles played by individuals at every level of the educational system in working together. These two narratives – the personal and the political, the individual and the collective – do not exist in tension with one another because in the 2018 teacher strike, the personal in many ways is political. The ability of parents like Daniel Summers to raise their children is connected to their ability to pay their medical bills, and the ability of teachers like Toni Poling to teach their students is directly affected by laws governing teacher qualifications and seniority. Likewise, the ability of teacher-educators like Keisha Kibler to produce a new generation of teachers for the

state of West Virginia is dependent on the benefits and working conditions those teachers will receive if they remain in the state.

Unity, therefore, is a core value among those who participated in the strike, as their identities were deeply embedded in the policies for which they were collectively fighting. Keisha explained that standing on the picket line in Preston County for nine days was a bonding experience, and that she has a “bond that cannot be broken” with her fellow teachers at West Preston School. However, this unity does not extend to every teacher in the state. Darrell Hugueley explained that his relationships with some of his colleagues suffered due to his decision not to participate in the strike.

**Mr. Hugueley:** “There’s people along my hallway that I would speak to every day, and you know, over three years, you get to know people and things, and since - well, actually since before the strike, since I stood up and said if schools were open, I’d be at work - those people have not said a syllable to me since then.”

**Catherine:** “Really? Interesting.”

**Mr. Hugueley:** “Yeah, it just really - I look them in the eye and say ‘good morning,’ and they just look at you and move on and not say a word. So, there’s some really - there’s really interesting dynamics in the building now. There’s some clearly divided camps.”

Unlike the three teachers discussed above, Mr. Hugueley’s story exists in tension with the narrative of unity. His individual decision not to participate in the strike, derived from his personal identities and circumstances, has been the reason that some (though, he was clear to say, not all) of his colleagues have ostracized him.

Mr. Hugueley’s story presents a crack in the well-polished surface of the unity narrative which allows us to see what unites teachers on the most local level, within the school building. Although he personally supported many of his colleagues’ concerns, he disagreed with the unions’ actions and chose not to take part in them. Teachers seem then to be united not by motivation or any one issue, or even at times by personal connections, but by the simple

commitment to the strike, whatever that means for each individual. What separated Mr. Hugueley from his colleagues, therefore, was not his own motivation or stance on any of the teachers' concerns, but his unwillingness to participate in a strike.

A third kind of unity exists within the 55 United narrative, in addition to the unity of West Virginians and the unity of the education system, and it is here where we find our first significant rupture within the narrative: the unity of the teachers' unions. Unions, it is important to note, serve the primary function of balancing the scales between those who provide labor and those who manage the resources which control the use of labor. More simply, unions mediate the power imbalance between workers and bosses by providing workers a voice by which to advocate for their rights. Unions therefore deal in alternative forms of power beyond wealth, the advantage of which almost certainly lies with the bosses (Durrenberger and Erem 2005). West Virginia's public education system has three primary unions, mentioned previously: American Federation of Teachers-West Virginia (AFT-WV), West Virginia Education Association (WVEA), and West Virginia School Service Personnel Association (WVSSPA). The first two primarily serve classroom teachers, while WVSSPA serves school service personnel including cafeteria workers, custodial staff, and bus drivers. These unions use the strength of their numbers as their primary currency, leveraging the unity of the public education workforce to put their weight behind political issues which affect teachers and school service personnel. As such, the unions depend heavily on the unity between teachers and leadership to be able to effectively lobby for the unions' political agendas.

Unity of the unions in the 2018 teacher strike involved not only unity within but also among the three unions. WVEA and AFT-WV are notoriously competitive for membership and

sometimes find themselves at odds with one another. Nonetheless, all three of the unions worked closely together during and after the strike to amass the greater political force of their three individual bodies of membership brought together. While the effort to merge the three unions for the purposes of the strike was incredibly important, pre-existing tensions had to be mediated in order to develop a broader sense of community. To that end, individual teachers must feel a sense of connection with their fellow teachers, through direct and egalitarian relationships (Evans and Boyte 1986). The unique structures of the unions lend themselves well to such community building through individual connections, with central offices in Charleston overseeing the work of local branches in each of the counties. Teachers therefore not only got to know their local leadership, but worked in buildings with teachers belonging to each of the other unions. Through these preexisting relationships, many teachers were able to move beyond the tension and work with their colleagues of other unions, with whom they have already built a rapport.

A clear example of the unity within and between the unions comes from a cold afternoon in February 2019, on the second day of the two-day teacher strike. The strike itself, which I will discuss further in the next chapter and the conclusion, was a response to a piece of legislation being called the “Omnibus Bill,” a proposed sweeping education reform which many teachers saw as detrimental to public education. When I arrived at the site of the Suncrest Middle School picket line in Morgantown, I saw that a crowd had gathered under a tent. Heather DeLuca Nestor, a science teacher at South Middle School and President of the Monongalia County Education Association (an affiliate of WVEA), and Thomas Bane, the WVEA Regional Representative of the Northeast Region, were giving updates to the teachers gathered about what was going on around the state, and mentioning that Sam Brunett, the AFT-Monongalia County

President, was doing the same. As Heather spoke, one of the teachers standing next to her, presumably a friend, rested her head on Heather's shoulder. After she finished speaking, she gave a few people hugs before she and Thomas left to visit another picket line.

Even though not every teacher on the Suncrest Middle School picket line was a WVEA member, nor were all of the people on the picket lines that Mr. Brunett visited AFT-WV members, they saw Heather and Thomas as resources. As union representatives with regular contact with state union leaders throughout the strike, they had valuable information, and were trusted by those gathered, regardless of their specific union association. Not only were they trusted, but as evidenced by the teacher who rested her head on Heather's shoulder, they were recognized members of the Monongalia County public education community, and they were friends with the teachers on the lines. I once asked Heather how her roles as teacher and union leader interacted during the strike, and she replied,

“You know, I really feel like it's about building relationships with people, and I tried to treat people the way I would want to be treated and see their perspective from an administrative standpoint to a teacher standpoint to a union leader standpoint. You know I think it's really important to put yourself in their shoes as much as you can, because I think sometimes we get tunnel vision to where we are. And so, the people that I work with here I can depend on, they're my friends. Being my friends, they tell me the truth, and so you know, there were moments when I had to tell them the truth.”

Here, Heather describes building and maintaining relationships throughout the strike which were based on a mutual respect independent of union affiliation. Through such local relationships in schools and around the counties, face-to-face community building transcended tensions between the unions and enabled unity to emerge from a grassroots level.

Although unity can be found in unions at the local level, that unity does not always extend vertically to the statewide union leadership. On Tuesday, February 27, 2018 came the first of two major rifts in the narrative of unity, when AFT-WV President Christine Campbell, WVEA President Dale Lee, and WVSSPA leaders made a deal with Governor Jim Justice. The



deal included a good-faith agreement that if Governor Justice pushed in the legislature for a five percent pay raise for teachers and a task force to pursue options for fixing PEIA, the unions would tell the teachers to return to school. After that meeting when the deal was made, the union leaders announced the deal to the teachers gathered on the Capitol steps and were met with boos and angry yelling. The next day, during which schools remained closed as a “cool-down” day, teachers in each of the fifty-five counties in West Virginia individually decided to stay out, rather than going back to work on a handshake they did not trust.

For the next several days, according to Jacob Staggers, the union leaders essentially hid from the teachers. By all accounts, even Dale Lee’s, the mood had shifted drastically between the unions and their leaders. Before the deal, the union presidents had been something of celebrities to the teachers, leading chants and giving rousing speeches to energize those gathered at the Capitol. However, Mr. Staggers said that after the deal, “Dale Lee and Christine Campbell would have nothing to do with us in the lobbies outside the House and Senate chambers.” It seemed that although the union members remained united enough to continue their strike without the support of their leadership, unity between the union members and their leaders had been broken.

Underlying this break in the narrative of unity is a gap in communication between the union members on the picket lines and the union leaders negotiating with the governor. The nature of the teacher strike, as with most labor movements, is such that it encapsulates two fronts: the protest and the negotiation. Thus, as Durrenberger and Erem (2005) claim, “people construct meanings from their location in social structures from the flow of available experiences and intentions” (182). The union leaders and the union members have two distinct roles based on their roles within the union: the members collectively apply pressure to the legislators, which the

leaders leverage to compel a solution to be found. However, these differential roles come with somewhat varied priorities, from which they make meaning out of the circumstances at hand. Leaders who often focus primarily on the long-term sustainability of such solutions must consider not only the needs of their constituents, but also the interests of those on the other side of the negotiating table, and the logistical feasibility of their plans. This is not to say that rank-and-file members do not also care about the feasibility and sustainability of whatever solutions are created. In fact, one of the primary demands of the teachers was to find a permanent funding source for PEIA. However, for the teachers who experience first-hand the effects of education policies in their daily lives, they do not have the privilege or the luxury to spend a long time deliberating; immediate solutions must be found.

Due to these differential priorities, the deal struck between union leaders and Governor Justice felt like a loss to many teachers. On Wednesday, February 28, 2018, schools remained closed as a “cool-down” day. Jacob Stagers described waking up that day in a horrible mood and spending the day sitting in his apartment, refusing to participate in the ongoing picketing. He told me about a conversation he had with his brother, a teacher in another county, in which he said that “it’s stupid that people are out doing picketing right now.” He explained his concerns about the deal to me, saying, “it hadn’t passed either house in the legislature. So who cares what the governor is promising? He got elected as a Democrat and then turned into a Republican. You can’t count on him for anything.” Mr. Stagers’ views reflected the concerns of many teachers around the state, who distrusted the governor and the legislature, especially Senate President Carmichael, who openly stated that he would not allow the agreement to pass in the Senate. Handshake agreements, according to Mr. Stagers and many of his colleagues, meant nothing in the West Virginia Capitol until action was taken to fulfill them.

Keisha Kibler marks the moment when teachers decided to continue the work action without the support of the unions as the beginning of the real strike.

“I would say we started off as a work stoppage, and then we unionized. Cause I mean, the union’s not the union leaders, the union are the people. And we as a union said, ‘no, we’re not going back.’”

The moment Keisha is describing is a turning point for many teachers, which bisects the nine-day action. In this moment of separation from the leadership, members were forced to redefine what it meant to be a part of a union, and in fact what that union was. Returning to Durenberger and Erem’s (2005) definition, the union is meant to balance the scales between the workers and the management, or the teachers and the lawmakers. If the union leaders, who are the negotiators who speak on behalf of their members at the negotiating table, fail to represent the needs of the members, how can they be trusted to do the work of the union? Although many teachers had previously placed their faith in the negotiating abilities of the union presidents, when the bad deal was made, members turned their attention to the source of the unions’ power: its membership. In this moment of recollection, Keisha explained her understanding of unions as defined by their members, and refers to the three unions as “we as a union.” At least discursively, the unions became more closely united in their dissatisfaction for the deal which had been made.

Dale Lee, on the other hand, spoke from his role as a union negotiator, recognizing the frustration of the members while also working within the existing structures of the legislature.

When I asked him his reaction to the responses the deal received, he replied,

“One thing, there were at that point... eight days left in the session. You couldn’t fix PEIA in eight days - it just wasn’t gonna happen. The best thing to do was the task force, with certain deadlines and everything else. And we knew that. But the public - or the people outside the Capitol didn’t understand that. Because of the mistrust of the Senate, they weren’t sure of the 5%. They thought games would be played, and they were right. Games were played.”

Ever the union president, even in this telling, he plays the role of the negotiator. I remember leaving my meeting with him wondering how much he had said from his position as Dale Lee

the person, rather than Dale Lee the President of the West Virginia Education Association. In this statement, he honors the concerns of his constituents: they did not trust the Senate to uphold its end of the bargain, nor should they have. However, he also indicates the difficult situation in which he found himself. Despite a general distrust of the Senate, he also recognized that within the structure of the legislature, it was not possible for a PEIA fix to be found within the eight remaining days of the session, rendering the task force the best option. He must balance the needs of the union members with the constraints of the existing system.

During our conversation, Dale Lee also discussed his own concerns about miscommunication between himself and WVEA members on the picket lines. He felt that much of the ill will members bore regarding the deal was the result of misinformation spread online:

“It’s the misinformation out there. We actually found that there were bots - a group that was trying to break the union with misinformation and bots on social media. There was one group - one individual - I guess not an individual, it was a bot - that from late January to early March, had 100,000 tweets. Well that’s when you know it’s a bot, because one person can’t do that. So that was a problem that we would’ve never thought about in West Virginia. It was our national people who were helping us that recognized the patterns.”

For Lee, the communication gap manifested itself as a lack of correct information countering the misinformation which was spread online by Twitter bots and union-busting groups. After he realized how much misinformation was circulating online, he began making daily videos updating teachers on what had been happening at the Capitol, which were likewise circulated online and through the Public Employees UNITED Facebook group.

In this instance, we can see both the promise and the peril of social media platforms as tools for community organizing. As with the bots Lee mentioned, it is often difficult to identify misinformation online, such that he did not recognize the problem until the trained eyes of the national union representatives pointed out the patterns. In what is a hypothetically democratic space in which everyone has equal freedom to post and express their opinions, it can be difficult

for organizations such as WVEA to retain control over the narrative. Freedom from elite or organizational control can be positive and foster dialogue (Evans and Boyte 1986), as is often the case in the free space of the Facebook group where teachers debate important issues and display their solidarity. However, in cases wherein multi-tiered unity is important, it can also offer ways for external actors to assert their interests in ways that might be damaging to the work of the group.

Sharing a personal anecdote which reveals more about his understanding of the deal with Governor Justice than was readily available to teachers during the strike, Dale Lee told me that one of his daughters is a teacher in Mercer County. She called him on the phone after the deal was announced, and said, “Dad, you’re saying you believe we should go back in, what should I do?” He told me,

“I couldn’t tell her to stay out, because then I wouldn’t be doing what I said. But I said, ‘you have to stand with your teachers and your educators. If they’re not ready to go back in, that’s the position you take, you’re not ready to go back in either.’ After the fact, she says, ‘I knew at that point you knew we weren’t going back in.’”

He explained to me that he told Governor Justice when the deal was made that he did not expect his union members to go back to work until the 5% pay raise bill had been passed by both houses of the legislature. Therefore, the deal was not that he would force his members to go back to work, but that he would tell them that he believed they should go back to work. Such a deal necessitates the broadening of the communication gap between teachers and their union leaders; by virtue of the agreement made with the governor, union leadership could not explicitly tell members to stay out. Leaders could not communicate the full nature of the agreement so that their calls to return to work would seem genuine. Teachers on the lines, therefore, saw only that their leaders had made a handshake agreement that an untrustworthy government would pass a

pay raise and work on finding solutions for PEIA, and that these leaders thought that should be enough for them to return to work.

With many members feeling as though their unions had betrayed them or sold them out, the teachers in Monongalia County met on Wednesday night at the old Mountaineer Mall to determine their next course of action. At this meeting, cracks in the narrative of unity, which started when the deal was announced, began to be felt on the local level as well. Mr. Staggers explained that those at the meeting generally fit into one of two categories: those who wanted desperately to return to work and those who were angry that anyone would go back until some better solution was found.

In the midst of this emotionally-charged debate, the the local union representatives Heather DeLuca Nestor, Thomas Bane, and Sam Brunett – who Durrenberger and Erem (2005) would classify as “stewards,” volunteer, worksite-based union leaders – become necessary facilitators who bridge the gap between members and state leadership. Thomas reported being displeased by the decision, but he and Heather felt that it was their job to communicate what they knew with Monongalia County teachers and facilitate decision-making regarding whether or not to return to schools. He explained to the teachers gathered – about 150 of them, he estimated – that they had to build a strong case for why schools should remain closed. While Thomas gathered the thoughts of the teachers, Heather was on the phone with Dr. Devono. In that call, he told her that he would support them and close schools again, but he needed to know what it would take to get them back into school.

Many teachers have identified that evening, at the end of the so-called “cooling-off” day, when counties began to make the decision to remain on strike, as a turning point. In this moment

of deep tension, when it felt that the unity of the movement was at risk, local union leaders played an important role in perpetuating the sense of solidarity on which teachers had built their campaign. They worked at both the state and local levels to retain a connection, if tenuous, between the union leaders and members. Thomas Bane echoed Dale Lee's sentiment that the union leaders had to act in good faith with the governor, but he felt that they would support the decisions of their members. As local union representatives, he, Heather, and Mr. Brunett occupied a middle ground between union leaders and members. Through direct daily communication with their leadership, they had access to information and updates from the Capitol that teachers on picket lines may not have, but they had simultaneously built personal relationships with teachers locally, as previously mentioned. Through these existing relationships and mutual respect in addition to the line of communication they had open with state union leaders, they organized the county and stayed out for four more days, until the pay raise bill was signed into law. The narrative of unity survived this moment of rupture, and by the end of the strike, Dale Lee reported that when the Senate was stalling and refusing to pass the bill, teachers were again widely united with their union leaders, chanting "we made a deal, now pass the bill."

The second major rupture in the narrative of unity did not come until February 2019, during the two-day strike responding to the "Omnibus bill" making its way through the legislature. On Monday, February 18, the teachers' unions held a joint press conference calling for a strike to begin the following day. In the midst of frantically organizing a trip back to Morgantown, I took a moment to text Keisha:

**Catherine:** Hey Keisha! I'm sure you've heard the news. What are your thoughts?

**Keisha:** this is going to get ugly  
real ugly -

**Catherine:** What makes you say that?

**Keisha:** and I have 37 student teachers at [Fairmont State University] out there now that we are pulling in...

I am fearful that we will not have the support of every county super[intendent] to close schools... so, this may be a more traditional strike with actual picket lines

Keisha's concern got at the heart of a necessary component that allowed the 2018 strike to unfold as it did. In 2018, the narrative of unity relied not only on the unity of teachers across all fifty-five counties, but also on a sense of solidarity between teachers and their county superintendents. Without superintendents closing schools, teachers would have had to decide whether or not to cross a picket line and report to work. Such a decision would have divided teachers on the most local level: within their own school buildings.

Keisha's fear was realized in the 2019 strike, when Putnam County superintendent John Hudson refused to close school for the two-day strike. In response, teachers from surrounding counties organized quickly and reported to picket lines in Putnam County to help teachers there hold their lines. They picketed in front of schools and at the bus garage, both days preventing the school buses from picking up students. Stories circulated on the Public Employees UNITED Facebook group that parents were dropping students off at schools, and due to the lack of supervision, students were sitting in school gymnasiums all day with nothing to do. These stories were offered as points both of anxiety for the safety of the students, and of triumph, evidence that they had been successful in closing down school operations.

The photo below, posted on the Facebook group, indicates the nature of unity in the 2019 strike. In it, a teacher from Lewis County stands at a picket line in Putnam County. It is significant to note that Lewis County does not border Putnam. Rather, it is a two-hour drive from Weston, the seat of Lewis County, to Winfield. That a teacher from Lewis should drive two hours to stand on a picket line in Putnam suggests that, despite the tenuous sense of unity





**Figure 13.** This photo, posted on Public Employees UNITED, shows a teacher wearing a red bandana around her head and holding up a sign that says “Lewis Co. supports Putnam Teachers and Service Personnel” as she stands in front of the Winfield Middle School sign.

between teachers and their administrators, teachers retained feelings of solidarity within their own ranks and enacted that unity by standing together, both literally and emotionally.

Success in Putnam County became a source of pride for many teachers, inspiring, among other things, memes, such as the one pictured below. As discussed in Chapter 1, the creation and circulation of memes serves as an enactment of social capital, a display

of solidarity. The meme below does so explicitly, performing solidarity by asking if Putnam County teachers need assistance from their out-of-county colleagues. Furthermore, given the outcome of the film *The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King* from which the image for this meme was taken, and given that the meme was not posted until after the 2019 strike, it takes on a victorious tone. It celebrates the courage of Putnam County teachers and the allyship of teachers from surrounding counties. Against the odds, the teachers prevailed.

# THE BEACONS ARE LIT



# PUTNAM COUNTY, DO YOU REQUIRE AID?

**Figure 14.** This photo, posted on West Virginia Public Employees UNITED, pictures a scene from *The Lord of the Rings* wherein Pippin lights the beacon in Minas Tirith to call to neighboring allies for help in battle. The caption “The beacons are lit, Putnam County, do you require aid?” suggests a sense of allyship between Putnam and neighboring counties, and alludes to teachers from surrounding counties coming to Putnam’s aide when schools remained open during the 2019 strike.

Preventing schools from opening felt for many as a direct admonishment of those, such as John Hudson (who by now, teachers were saying was in Mitch Carmichael’s pocket), who would challenge their unity. Not only were teachers successful in Putnam County insofar as they kept schools from operating normally, but also in that the narrative of unity under which they were operating was validated. As a result, Putnam County teachers who refused to go to work become heroes for many of their peers around the state during the 2019 strike. They were said to have risked their jobs and held their ground even as their superintendent turned his back on them and some of their closest colleagues decided to cross their picket lines. When certain bonds of unity within their own county seemed to crumble, the bonds between Putnam teachers who stayed on the line and teachers from surrounding counties were strengthened. A new school closings map emerged as a symbol of strength. As one Facebook group member posted during

the 2019 strike, “the real MVPs today... Putnam County Employees! Why? Because they didn’t need a red dot on the map to validate what needed to be done!! #wvproud #55strong.”



**Figure 15.** The school closings map, maintained by the West Virginia Department of Education, as it was on February 19-20, 2019. On it, every county but Putnam is shaded in red, indicating that schools were closed. Putnam County, in gray, remained open during the two-day strike.

The narrative of unity depends upon a complex web of interrelationships across the state of West Virginia. In both 2018 and 2019, however, cracks in the narrative formed as certain threads in this web began to break. During the 2018 strike, a rupture came from within the unions themselves, causing teachers to feel as though their leaders had sold them out. Daniel Summers described how he felt during the meeting at the old mall in this way:

“One gentleman I remember was saying that the union leaders - they were kinda bashing the union leaders, and I just said, ‘it’s not their job [to decide what to do],’ and he said, ‘what do you mean, whose job is it?’ And I said, ‘it’s ours,’ and I’m sorry for this, but, ‘it’s ours, and it scares the fuck out of me. But it’s our job.’ I guess that’s the only thing I was feeling, like, ‘it’s our job, and it is so scary, but it’s our job.’ You know, you can’t train for a job like that. Maybe if you go to school for public relations or marketing or something – I don’t know what degree you would need to be good at fighting for an ideal, but it was our job.”

Because the source of the rupture in 2018 was rooted in the relationships between union stakeholders, it demanded that teachers reevaluate what it meant to be part of a union. For some

teachers, this meant withdrawing their union memberships, but for others, it meant focusing their trust on their fellow members, rather than their leaders. Mr. Summers realized after the deal was made with Governor Justice that it was not the responsibility of the union leaders to make change. Rather, leaders' power comes from their membership, and by his view, it was the members' job to make the change they hoped to see.

What distinguishes the rupture in 2019 from that in 2018 is that in the 2019 strike, its source came from outside the unions. A different thread in the web broke when John Hudson decided not to close schools in Putnam County: whereas solidarity from superintendents had been a significant narrative in 2018, it was threatened a year later. Unlike the division between union members and their leaders, however, this rupture did not demand a redefinition of union identity. Instead, it became a rallying point for teachers around the state to stand with Putnam County.

In both cases of fractures in the narrative of unity, what can be seen is that when one thread in the web breaks, another one is strengthened. When union leaders and members broke from one another, feelings of solidarity between the fifty-five counties grew as each individually decided to stay out and the strike began to be felt as a truly grassroots movement. Likewise, when Superintendent John Hudson no longer showed solidarity with his teachers, inter-county relationships grew as teachers from all over the state flocked to Putnam County to stand on their picket lines with them.

Despite the dubious nature of the narrative of unity, teachers in West Virginia became ever more closely connected in the face of perceived abandonment from those they previously believed to be allies. However, unity has always been more of a question than a guarantee. When

I stood on a picket line in Morgantown on February 20, 2019, the sense of camaraderie and fun felt by teachers as they danced along to the radio blasting out of a huge speaker and waved at passing cars overlaid a deep anxiety about the status of their united coalition. They worried about what would happen the following day, if they would stay out on strike or go back in to work. One teacher raised a concern that if the unions said to go back the next day, some of the southern counties may not. “I have people down there,” she said, “and they’re not ready to go back in.” While free spaces such as the Facebook group were useful in helping people to share information, organize, and connect across all fifty-five counties, they could not guarantee that when offline decisions about whether or not to remain on strike had to be made, teachers would remain united.

In the next chapter, I will explore the roles of free spaces which take shape offline, including not only how they inform collective decision-making, but also how they provide opportunities for teachers to embody their needs and their aspirations for a better public education system. By examining the physicality of the 2018 and 2019 teacher strikes, I hope to situate the teachers’ narratives within the relationship between the online and offline realms. Furthermore, I hope to offer a greater understanding of how teachers have asserted through the strikes their right to West Virginia and its public spaces.

## The West Virginia Teacher Strike of 1990

*Excerpt from an interview with Dale Lee, West Virginia Education Association President*

**Dale Lee:** “The superintendents were adamant, ‘we’re not going back to school until this is settled.’ And that’s a - that’s a key component of this. You’ve gotta remember, at no time did anyone have to make a decision, ‘do I cross a picket line, do I take a day without pay?’ Which is unlike the strike in 1990, which I was a participant of.”

**Catherine:** “Oh were you?”

**Dale Lee:** “Oh yeah, I was a third year teacher. Then, the lines were drawn. They weren’t calling school off until that morning. So you had picket lines, you had those who crossed to be in the school, those of us who were on the picket line, and this wasn’t like that... My daughter’s a middle school teacher, and she was out. I participated in 1990, I was active in the 1990 strike - and it’s really how I got involved in the association. In 1979, my dad was a teacher, and they had a one-day walkout for public education, so my daughter became the third generation in my family to walk out for public education. And as a father, that makes you very proud, but it also is very sad to think that we’ve been fighting this same fight for three generations. I had my copy of the [pay raise] bill framed and gave it to my daughter for her birthday at the end of March, and she has it hanging in her room - her classroom.”



**Figure 16.** This photo, courtesy of Bloomberg, depicts a teacher who was a student during the 1990 teacher strike. Through her sign, she expresses a continuous sentiment across the strikes, nearly thirty years apart: the importance of valuing one’s own worth.

## Chapter 3

### “Space for Reverberation”: The Physicality of Aspiration

The first thing I saw when my father and I pulled into the Boston Beanery parking lot on February 20, 2019, was a tent. Not the kind you’d take camping, but the kind you’d take to a tailgate: just a tarp stretched over a metal frame held up by four poles. There were about fifteen people gathered under the tent, squeezed together around Heather DeLuca Nestor and Thomas Bane, who were talking about what was going on in the county and trying to gauge what the teachers felt should be done next. Heather and Thomas stood between two small folding tables piled high with donuts, jugs of coffee and hot chocolate, chips, cookies, hand warmers, and bottles of water – donations dropped off by supporters throughout the day.

After Heather and Thomas finished their conversation with the assembled teachers, they left and the teachers, one-by-one, made their way back to the sidewalk, homemade signs in hand. Throughout the afternoon, I stood on the mud-covered sidewalk and chatted with teachers as they held up their signs and waved at passing cars. This was a smart location for a picket line: at the corner of University Avenue, which connects Evansdale to Downtown Morgantown; and Patteson Drive, which, turning into Van Voorhis Road at that intersection, runs from Route 19 to the hospital; this is one of the most heavily trafficked intersections in town. From their cars, people offered a number of reactions to the teachers: many waved or honked their horns in

support. Some flashed rude hand gestures. A few even rolled down their windows to shout their support as they passed, or to call the teachers names and tell them to “go back to work!”

When the stop light turned red, five lanes of traffic came to a halt, and while many drivers averted their gaze and tried not to engage with the teachers on the side of the road, I saw several stealing glances or reading signs, and a few took the opportunity to talk with the teachers. One woman, the mother of a Suncrest Middle School student that many of the teachers knew, rolled down her window and shouted across three lanes to ask if they needed anything to keep them warm. A teacher replied that they were okay, and they had a lot of hand warmers. Another woman yelled out her window “don’t go back! They can still add more to the bill!” Mike, a tech ed teacher, yelled back “that’s what we’re worried about,” and the two held a conversation about the Omnibus bill across Patteson Drive while she was stopped at the red light.

It’s an unexpected scene to see a woman leaning out her window and holding an entire shouted conversation across three lanes of traffic with a teacher standing on the side of the road. However, this interaction offers a clue to the real-world spatial politics of the teacher strikes. Through their fleeting encounters with drivers on the road, the teachers on the picket line staked their claim to public life by disrupting the routine isolation of these “public” spaces and demanding attention by inhabiting ordinarily uninhabited space.

In order to consider this scene fully, it is important to first understand the meaning of public space. Generally, public space is understood as any space, usually managed by some level of government, which is accessible and available for public use. These locations can include public parks and squares, roads, sidewalks, and some government-operated buildings such as public libraries. To a certain extent, the state Capitol, which I discuss further below, is also



something of a public space insofar as public access to governmental officials and processes is a cornerstone of a democratic system. As a result, anyone can, in theory, walk into the Capitol, explore the building, meet with legislators, and attend sessions of the House of Delegates or the Senate. Despite the apparent openness and availability of these spaces, however, many of them tend to be inhospitable in one way or another, often to certain activities or certain parts of the population.

For example, the public sidewalk on the corner of University Avenue and Patteson Drive on which the Suncrest Middle School teachers stood, maintained by the city of Morgantown, is governed by informal rules which dictate the appropriate behavior for that space. The sidewalk, and the roads next to it, fall into a category which Marc Augé (1995) calls “non-places”: non-relational, non-historical, non-identified places with no particular meaning. These locations simply exist. People move through them on their way elsewhere, never stopping to inhabit the spaces for extended periods of time. On the road, in their cars, people exist within secluded spaces while the public non-place of the road hurries past outside. Through these daily routines of isolation and transience in these spaces, we internalize what Henri Lefebvre calls a space of representation: “the lived space of sensations, the imagination, emotions and meanings incorporated into how we live day by day” (Harvey 2006, 279). As spaces of representation, we understand roads and sidewalks to be nothing; the meaning ascribed to these spaces is that they have no particular meaning. We pass through them as unconsidered locations.

To occupy such a space, then, is to approach it with intentionality and creativity. Importantly, a non-place is not a pure form. Rather, a given non-place such as a street or a sidewalk can be manipulated. New places, which are defined by their relationality (Augé 1995),

or the presence of influences acting upon the ways in which people relate to the space (Harvey 2006), can be created within non-places. Occupation of a non-place, then, draws on its potential to become a place ascribed with relational and historical meaning. This process occurs through navigating Lefebvre's categories of material space, the representation of space, and spaces of representation. Material space is straightforward; it is the tactile world which can be experienced through sensation. Lefebvre's other two categories, however, reflect the intangible aspects of spatial relationality: the representation of space involves the ways in which space is conceived and described, and the spaces of representation involve the ways in which space is lived and ascribed meaning. Through daily routines and the repetition of representations of space, spaces of representation are produced (Lefebvre 1974; Harvey 2006).

Through occupying the corner of University Avenue and Patteson Drive, the teachers manipulated these three categories to create a place where there was previously a non-place. By disrupting the norms of social interactions in the space, new representations of space emerged to create a new space of representation. This group of teachers returned in 2019 to the same picket location that they had held in the 2018 strike, and I found that the events of the previous year and the memory of disrupting the routines of isolation that occur in the space assigned it new meanings as the teachers began to regard it as "our picket location." I asked Emily Tanzey, an 8th grade English Language Arts teacher, if the Boston Beanery behind us was okay with the teachers being out there, and she responded "sort of, as long as we stay on the sidewalk." Then she explained that the previous year, the real problem was the Wells Fargo across the road. The accountants, she told me with a hint of mockery in her voice, didn't like it when the constant honking of passing cars interrupted their accounting. In this brief conversation, Emily demonstrated a shift in her understanding of that space: she no longer imagined it as a transient

non-place, but rather as a place imbued with the memories of a specific event. She represented the space and her use of it by the confines within which it was acceptable, and to whom, thereby identifying the bounds of the place which she and her colleagues had carved out of the non-place.

Although the teachers' occupation of the street corner was a sustained effort over the course of nine days in 2018 and two more in 2019, the interactions between teachers and passersby on the adjacent non-place of the road were fleeting. Many people were visibly uncomfortable with the teachers' seeming disregard for the established rules of engagement in this non-place, averting their gazes, timidly peeking out their windows at the signs, or choosing to ignore the picket line altogether. Others, such as the woman who spoke with Mike across the width of Patteson Drive, actively engaged in the process of place-making by participating in the disruption and reimagination of this location. What this exchange indicates is that by breaking from the routines as something "radically out of place" (Harvey 2006, 280), teachers have required encounters within this space to draw individuals out of their seclusion and interact in some way with their presence, even by ignoring them. Just as Andrew Hannon (2014) says of the Occupy movement, "in seizing space, the movement succeeded in seizing the popular imagination" (11). Here, I return to Kathleen Stewart's (1996) idea of the social imaginary. On this picket line, in what is quite literally "a space on the side of the road," The teachers' presence in the space not only changed their own spaces of representation, but by forcing passersby to break from their own routines of interactions within the space, began to create an emergent public space of representation through memorable encounters.

It is through the multiple layers of this radical out-of-place-ness that the physical aspect of the strike gains its potency. Not only were teachers “out of place” insofar as they occupied ordinarily unoccupied non-places, but they were also out of their expected places, their classrooms. The combination of these two factors called into question the nature of public spaces and who has a right to inhabit them, and in what ways. Picketing on the corner of University Avenue and Patteson Drive offers one example. Another emerges at the state Capitol in Charleston, through the fight for control over the space and the narrative.

Jake Zuckerman, a political reporter with the Charleston Gazette-Mail, described the scene inside the Capitol during the 2018 strike:

“Okay, so that entrance [by the Culture Center], you would see teachers lined out, and they wrapped around the Culture Center. You walk in, and the ground is vibrating. You could hear - they had like the same ten chants they’d recycle through. Everyone’s complaining. It was just hard to think... It was kind of a steady, dull roar. It’s kind of a cliché, but there was always a roar going on. You couldn’t - there were no nooks and crannies that weren’t filled with teachers in red shirts. It was pandemonium. Anywhere you wanted to get from point A to point B, you’d pass hundreds and hundreds of angry people.”

This quote, along with the above photos, depicting a wall-to-wall crowd inside the Capitol rotunda and an enormous rally on the building’s southern steps, suggests the extent to which the strike at the Capitol consisted of not only an occupation of space, but a complete take-over of that space. This take-over included not only physical presence, but total sensory inundation. Jake Zuckerman described the physical sensation of entering the Capitol building full of teachers: “the ground is vibrating.” Here, he suggests that not only do the teachers occupy the space, but the building is physically moved by their presence, vibrating with their energy. They not only exist in the space but affect it.



**Figure 17.** These photos, from Jacobin Magazine (above) and USA Today (below), depict the scene at the state Capitol building in Charleston, West Virginia, during the 2018 strike. Although it is important to note that these photos were taken at times of particularly high teacher attendance, they show how, by occupying the Capitol in large numbers, the teachers took control over the space. In the photo above, teachers inside the rotunda completely fill the space, effectively halting traffic inside the building. Below, teachers gathered on the southern steps of the Capitol, across from the Kanawha Boulevard through the city, show a massive public display of collective strength.



This sensory occupation further included domination of the aural environment in the building. Made almost entirely of marble, the Capitol's interior echoes considerably. Jacob Stagers described to me how he used his sign to take advantage of the structure of the building:

"I had made my sign out of this like foam board, and the second day I was [at the Capitol], I figured out that I could kind of hit it, and the Senate lobby area - I forget what it's called, it's like part of the upper rotunda there - it's all marble, and it echoes. Any kind of loud noise echoes in there. So my sign made a loud banging noise, almost like a small drum, and so I would beat on it to the beat of whatever we were yelling..."

"I ended up building three different signs. I would take two big pieces of foam board and I would take wooden dowels and put them in the middle to create space for reverberation and make them really loud."

Standing on the ground floor of the building, as seen in the first photo above, teachers' voices and chants echo off the walls and up through the well of the rotunda, filling the entire central portion of the building, including the Senate and House lobbies and the Governor's offices. Mr. Stagers described using his sign, the physical manifestation of his reasons for going on strike, as I discuss in more detail below, as a tool to control the auditory space of the Capitol. The noise he produced, then, became part of the unified voice of the teachers, representing their spaces of representation which brought them to this moment of protest. Between the two boards connected by dowels, he created a symbolic space - a "space for reverberation" - in which the needs, desires, and aspirations of the teachers on strike were amplified. The presence of the teachers in the Capitol therefore was not only visually impactful from the sheer number of bodies crammed into the space, but sensationally inescapable to those attempting to maintain the routines associated with the space. Lawmakers were forced to engage with the striking teachers and their anger.

The teachers' occupation of space constituted part of what became something of a battle for control of the Capitol and the right to determine its place-ness. After the strike ended, the rotunda, in the central section of the building, began to undergo construction, significantly

limiting the capacity near the Senate and House of Delegates chambers. Although the Charleston Gazette-Mail reported that the construction was due to ongoing concerns about the structural integrity of the dome (“Closed-off WV Capitol” 2018), teachers read the change as a response to their strike. Some speculated that the construction was due to damage that they had done to the building; as one Public Employees UNITED member said, “It was all the chanting. Bringing down the house!!!” Through such claims, they asserted their physical authority over the space. Others, such as the Facebook group member who said, “Convenient isn’t it!!! They had that one planned out too!! All about revenge!” saw it as a slightly too opportune timing that would limit similar activities from happening again. In both cases, the construction on the rotunda was seen as being connected to the strike, either as the reified impression of their presence on the building, or as a pernicious attempt to limit teachers’ further access to the building.

In what seems to be a battle for public space, what many teachers read as a retributory act against their occupation of the Capitol building, brings to question the nature of the state Capitol as public space. The Capitol building constitutes what I term a space of government, in which the actions and decisions of the task of governing occur. Michel Foucault’s (1982) “question of government,” examines this task in order to understand the nature of power. For Foucault, government is not simply a political structure, but rather a way of controlling the actions of others. Because “to govern... is to structure the possible field of action of others” (790), those who control the government control the ways in which, for example, teachers might take collective action within the bounds of the law. To exist within this space is to be able to directly participate in the process by which actions are controlled. The accessibility of this space of government is therefore fundamental to a truly democratic system in which elected officials represent the wishes of the people.

As previously mentioned, the Capitol is at least nominally open to the public. Theoretically, anyone can walk in and participate in the task of government by contacting a legislator, attending a meeting, participating in an event such as the Undergraduate Research Day with which I began this thesis, or even sitting in a session of the Legislature. However, entry into the building is policed even when protests are not taking place. When I entered the Capitol through one of only two visitors' entrances on my visit to Charleston in summer 2018, I was asked to open my bag to be searched and to walk through a metal detector. Although I passed through security without any difficulties, police gatekeeping can act as a barrier to access for those who might be deemed 'dangerous' by police officers.

Access to the Capitol as the primary space of government is therefore fraught with questions about democratic representation and participation. One Public Employees UNITED member posted in February 2019 that the Capitol police had informed her that very few people would be admitted into the building during the strike due to the construction. This comment suggests that engagement in democratic action in the space of government not only can be, but in 2019, was actively barricaded by police. Questions arose for some teachers, as exemplified by one Facebook commenter, who said, "if WV citizens are restricted access but out of state lobbyists aren't there needs to be legal ramifications for those making that decision. Just my opinion."

Underlying this comment is a question of sovereignty. To whom does West Virginia belong? Who has the right to decide the future of the state? What access does the public have versus external organizations to the spaces in which these decisions are made? This specific commenter referred to Senate Bill (SB) 451, the education "omnibus" bill, which was introduced



by Senator Patricia Rucker, a Republican from Jefferson County. On February 20, Rucker was named Legislator of the Week by the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), a conservative non-profit organization which advertises itself as “a forum for stakeholders to exchange ideas and develop real, state-based solutions to encourage growth, preserve economic security and protect hardworking taxpayers” (“About ALEC”). ALEC’s website features twenty-seven different policy areas, from criminal justice to agriculture to cronyism, and each policy area offers a variety of pre-written bills and resolutions which can be accessed by the general public and introduced directly to state legislatures. SB451 was said to have been written by lobbyists, without the input of West Virginia educators, students, or parents. ALEC, it seemed, had been granted access to the Capitol and to the lawmakers working within it, while teachers’ access had been severely restricted, both through the physical space and the process of writing and bringing SB451 to the Senate.

Through this frame of understanding, the act of occupying the Capitol takes on additional meaning. Not only does the action demand attention and create new spaces of representation, but it is also an assertion of the teachers’ sovereignty and right to representation by their democratically-elected officials. By overtaking the space of government which has been otherwise denied them in favor of external lobbyists, they stake a claim to the work of the legislature to serve them, the people of West Virginia, rather than external forces. In return, they were treated by some as matter out of place. Mary Douglas (1966) uses this phrase to define that which constitutes dirt, as matter which exists where it should not. Some legislators, most notably Senate President Carmichael, were said to have leered and made rude gestures at teachers during the 2018 strike. He treated them, if not as a literally polluting presence, as something unwanted and even dangerous which severely complicated the day-to-day workings in the Capitol. It is

against this sense that the space of government did not belong to the public as a place in which their voices could be heard that the teachers worked, perhaps just as much as they worked against low pay, poor health insurance, and the privatization of public education.

Protest signs have therefore played an important role in the occupation of space and the amplification of teachers' voices. I have included photos and discussions of many of these signs throughout the body of this thesis because they offer important clues to the ways in which teachers have narrativized themselves and their actions in the 2018 and 2019 teacher strikes. Importantly, although not every teacher would have the opportunity to speak directly with lawmakers or the public through the duration of the strikes, making signs highlighting their primary concerns offered a way in which to represent themselves publicly. Signs, then, became physical extensions of individuals' voices. As representations of teachers' spaces of representation, or in other words, representations of the affective qualities of the space they inhabited, signs brought teachers' concerns into the realm of the material and undeniable.

An excellent example of a sign used as a physical manifestation of teachers' demands is pictured on the right. In it, the woman

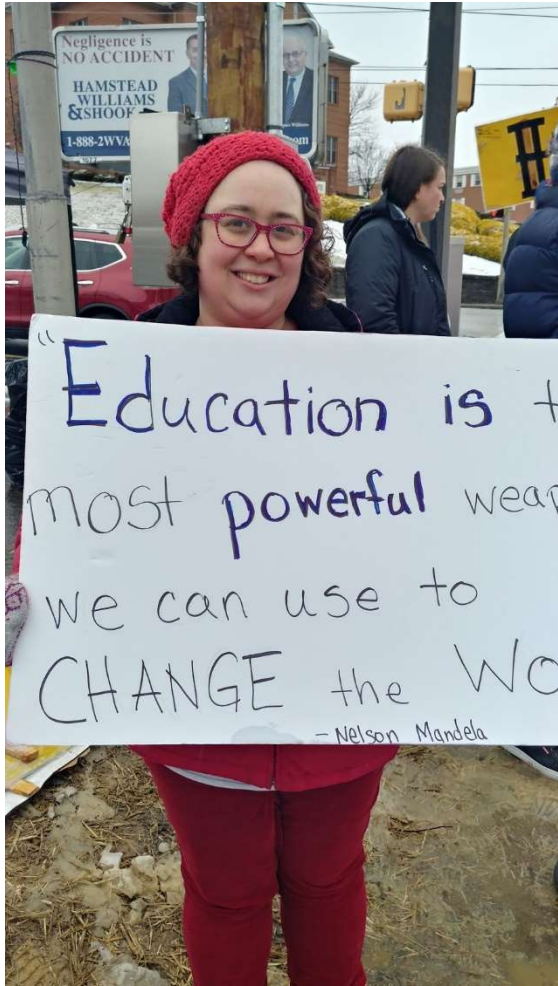


**Figure 18.** This photo, shared on West Virginia Public Employees UNITED, depicts a woman holding a sign that says “Hey Jim! We want Justice” Her sign plays on the name of Governor Jim Justice, and alludes to the two primary demands of the 2018 strike: funding PEIA and raising teacher pay.

holding the sign uses the representational code of language to evoke her space of representation – her feeling that justice has not been found, and her desire for it by way of a full funding source for PEIA and a pay raise of more than one percent. Through it, her message is manifested physically, imprinted on the place of occupation. In this way, representations of space can be used to bring spaces of representation into the material space (Harvey 2006). In so doing, the power of these spaces of representation is heightened by virtue of taking up physical space and demanding attention when a teacher’s voice can be ignored. Through her sign, this teacher addresses Governor Justice directly, calling him out in such a way that he is publicly depicted as complicit in the poor compensation of teachers. Although she may never be able to speak to him face-to-face, she airs her grievances so that he may yet see her message through the circulation of photos such as this.

Herein lies another significant advantage of using physical objects such as signs to communicate a message: they are less transient and changeable than spaces of representation. As a tangible object, signs can be captured, retained, and circulated in photos like the one above in a way that fleeting thoughts, emotions, and mental associations cannot. The strike is over, and yet many of the signs depicted throughout this thesis likely still exist. Moreover, the photos capturing them still exist in digital space. They have power through their relative permanence and, for many, their continued relevance.

Reusing signs from 2018 became common in collective actions in 2019. When I stood on the Suncrest Middle School picket line in February 2019, Emily Tanzey showed me the sign she had made for the new strike, pictured below. Despite my poor photography skills with which I cut off the right edge of her sign, it reads “Education is the most powerful weapon we can use to



**Figure 19.** This photo was taken by the author on February 20, 2019, at the Suncrest Middle School picket line in Morgantown. In it, English Language Arts teacher Emily Tanzey holds up the sign she made on the back of her poster from the 2018 strike.

CHANGE the WORLD,” a quote from Nelson Mandela. This quote was written on the white side of her poster board. On the other, red side, was written a call for the legislature to fix PEIA. She explained that she had made her new sign on the back of the one from the previous year, because it was still relevant. Throughout my afternoon on the picket line, I saw Emily hold up the poster showing both sides interchangeably.

Likewise, at a Morgantown High School walk-in in January, I asked Sam Brunett about his sign, a laminated poster printed with big blue letters saying “For our Kids, For our State,” over a red image of the state of West Virginia. I asked him if he made it, and he said that no, some company printed them last year, and he saved his and laminated it, and he brought it back out for the

walk-in. Just as Jacob Staggers told me in the summer after the 2018 strike, “I know a lot of teachers who were part of the 1990 strike, and it’s always been sort of like this badge of honor that they all wear and they’re all sort of proud of. It was so cool watching some of them dig out their old ‘90s strike clothes that they made. And so we all have ours still and I’m ready. I can dig it out.” In 2019, many teachers revived the material culture - from signs to t-shirts - from the

2018 strike, citing their continued relevance. In this way, they showed a sense of continuity between the two years in the ways in which they manifested their concerns physically.

Ultimately, the impact of the West Virginia teacher strikes has as much to do with the use of space as it does the messages being sent to the state government. Complaints about teacher compensation and benefits, when circulated only online, do not demand the attention of those in power. What then becomes crucial to the success of the strikes was the ability of teachers collectively to put their online organizing into offline action. It is through the use of physical space, therefore, that democratic potential fostered in the free space of the West Virginia Public Employees UNITED Facebook group was actualized. By occupying public non-places and spaces to which they have limited access, they demanded attention from the public and from lawmakers through the breaking of existing routines within those spaces. Staying awhile in spaces of transience and claiming control over spaces of government in which others ordinarily exercise control over them constitute acts of radical out-of-place-ness by which teachers asserted their own claims to sovereignty and representation in West Virginia.

As these efforts progress, spaces take on new meanings. Teachers begin to identify specific street corners or parking lots as their picket locations and associate spots at the Capitol with particular events. Breaking routines of spatial interactions creates new spaces of representation through memorable associations with extraordinary events. Claims to sovereignty thereby become associated with places such as the Capitol, directly confronting and destabilizing existing spaces of representation which would suggest that spaces of government are inaccessible - even antagonistic - to the public.

The question of sovereignty is not a new one: for a long time, West Virginians have fought against external corporations seeking to extract material wealth from the hills and the people through the primary method of paying off politicians. In this climate, wherein decision-makers are believed to listen to those with money rather than their constituents, there can be no protest or grassroots movement in West Virginia that does not also address this question of sovereignty and political representation. For a group of citizens to air their grievances in any effective manner, they must first demand that their elected officials listen to them. Here again we see how the teacher strike participates in an ongoing and historic discourse. The 2018 and 2019 teacher strikes not only addressed concerns about teacher benefits and education privatization, but deeper questions which have plagued West Virginia throughout its history, and in each of the historical moments which I have highlighted throughout this thesis: whose voice matters in West Virginia?

The historicism embedded in the teachers' narrative makes West Virginia a space predisposed to collective labor action. As discussed in Chapter 1, event is not antecedent to the narratives describing it (Bauman 1986). Rather, the event is the template on which to graft pre-existing situated knowledges of place. Modern questions about health insurance and compensation merge with historical questions of sovereignty and access to produce an narrative of an event – the 2018 and 2019 teacher strikes – situated in an effort to claim stewardship over the history and land of West Virginia. Manifested through conflicts over space, this narrative demands that the public nature of space be reimagined through new spaces of representation.

This reimagination of space occurred so effectively in the teacher strikes that it not only changed the discourse about public education in West Virginia, but also around the country.

Many teachers have claimed that it was their strike in 2018 that inspired the wave of teacher strikes which has swept across the United States in such disparate places as Colorado, Oklahoma, Arizona, and Los Angeles. It became, as many told me, a movement. The value of teachers' voices has become a critical issue as budget cuts across the country continue to threaten the quality and availability of public education. The problems addressed in the 2018 and 2019 teacher strikes are not unique to West Virginia, nor are they relegated to one or two moments of collective action. However, Jacob Staggers expressed his perception of the historicism of this moment:

“It’s this weird moment when I feel like something big is about to happen, one way or the other. Maybe the big thing already happened, but this is a time in history that I think will be in social studies books at some point. And I don’t know that they’ll talk about the West Virginia teacher strike, but they will talk about what teachers have been doing, and I do think that it is incredible to have lived through that and been such a big part of it, and to have seen it firsthand both down in Charleston and here... It did feel like we started a movement, doing what we did here, because nobody else has done what we have done in a very long time.”

For Mr. Staggers, the sense of place connected to the strike extends beyond his local picket line in Morgantown and beyond the state Capitol in Charleston as he identifies himself as a West Virginia teacher – one who started a movement. As teacher strikes have begun to occur across the United States, teachers' claims to public space in West Virginia become something more. They retrospectively become representative of the need of teachers everywhere, emblematic of a nationwide agony for the state of public education and the treatment of teachers. Through their situation within the teacher strikes, West Virginia's teachers become leaders in a national movement, offering a model for change through unity and a demand for the rights and respect owed to those who serve their state.

## The State of the Schools

On January 9, 2019, schools across West Virginia held walk-in demonstrations on the morning of Governor Justice's State of the State address, at the beginning of the 2019 Legislative Session. At Morgantown High School, teachers said that the work is not done.

"Today's purpose is to draw attention to teachers and state employees throughout the state, saying to our legislators, saying to our governor, who open their legislative session today that we're watching, we're looking, and we're waiting to see what kind of solutions they're gonna come up with for our health insurance. A year ago, we were promised a committee. The committee formed, the committee spent tax dollars, and the committee came up with no solutions. So we're here today to say 'we're watching, we're waiting. Ball's in your court, governor, let's get it done.'" -Kristine Alvarez, English Language Arts Teacher, Morgantown High School



**Figure 20.** This photo was shared on January 9, 2019, by a Berkeley County teacher on West Virginia Public Employees UNITED. With their signs, these teachers draw attention to some of the issues Berkeley County schools face: PEIA and professional vacancies.



## **Conclusion**

### **“For Our Kids, For Our State”**

#### **One Year Later**

It was almost a year to the day after the 2018 strike began when Dale Lee, AFT-WV’s new president Fred Albert, and Joe White held a press conference calling another strike. The issue this time was a bill introduced in the Senate that was being called the “omnibus bill” because it encompassed a broad range of educational issues. Not only did it include the 5% raise Governor Justice had promised, but it also involved measures to legalize charter schools, “paycheck protection” measures which would require teachers to annually re-authorize their union dues to be taken from their paychecks, the stripping of job security based on seniority, and the withholding of money from teachers’ paychecks in the event of future strikes. After the bill bypassed the Senate Finance Committee to be rushed to the House of Delegates, teachers took to Facebook and began to call for another strike. On February 18, 2019, their unions answered their call, and a second strike was announced.

I flew back to Morgantown on February 19 to conduct another round of fieldwork during the 2019 strike. When I stood on the Suncrest Middle School picket line the next day, I started to see parallels between what was happening in February 2019 and what had happened a year before. As I danced along in the winter chill to the music blasting out of a big speaker under the tent, I remembered stories teachers had told me about standing on local picket lines in the cold, dancing to music and eating donuts and pizza provided by the community. Although the 2018

strike ended on March 6, its implications and the issues it brought to the public attention did not disappear. Standing on the picket line in February 2019 felt like a continuation of the previous strike. Although the bills that precipitated the two strikes were different, the people, the spaces, and the issues were largely the same.

In the summer of 2018, I asked each of the teachers I interviewed whether or not they felt that the work of the strike was complete. Universally, they agreed that the strike was not the end, but the beginning of an effort to improve public education in West Virginia. Keisha said it best,

“I think that we still have a long road ahead of us. I think this was the beginning. I’m not sitting here saying that we’re gonna have another strike. But I do think that this was the beginning. I think it’s the beginning of teachers recognizing that they are more than cogs in the system and cogs in the machine, that they are the power switch of the machine, that they are the ones that can really shift the political landscape. Cause we have a lot of voting power in this state. So I think that that really has – that has made us more aware of that, and I think a lot of it’s going to come to a head in November, when we see what happens with the election. I don’t think that this is the end of the journey, I think that this was the igniting of the journey. I do.”

Many teachers echoed similar sentiments, that the issues of the strike have not been resolved, but teachers are beginning to recognize their political power.

Because the 2018 strike is still so immediately relevant and the issues it raised are still being addressed, my research has left many questions unanswered. The narrative remains incomplete because the story has yet to finish playing out, and it may be in flux for many years to come. As the situation progresses, the ways in which teachers relate to one another, their history, their unions, and the space around them, both virtual and real, will continue to develop through actions both collective and personal. This thesis captures a snapshot of a moment, between summer 2018 and spring 2019, in the long history of education and labor in the state of West Virginia, to offer a glimpse into the reality of those on the front lines of a nationwide debate over the future of public education.

One of the most significant questions left unanswered is one of gender. Common knowledge suggests that the field of primary education is dominated by female educators. Although the question of gender dynamics existed as a thread underlying much of my research, it never came to the forefront as a primary issue of the strike. In only two instances was gender directly addressed in my conversations. Once, in the summer of 2018, Keisha described to me the use of flour to compensate for the insufficient number of people to create a picket line. She said that as a kitchen product, there was something feminine about using flour for such a purpose. The second instance was when I stood on the line with Suncrest Middle School teachers in February 2019, when Emily Tanzey pointed out to me that all but two people on their line at the time were women. She suggested that the teachers' movement in West Virginia was one primarily led by women, and that there was a connection between women's rights and teachers' rights. The strike, she argued, had awoken women in the state to their political power and their ability to fight for their rights by offering them a forum and an issue for which to exercise those abilities. Emily also pointed out her perception that the majority of those in passing cars who made rude gestures or yelled at the teachers to get back to work were old, white men.

The question of women's work is an important one in the history of West Virginia's labor movements. Women have been involved in community organizing in the state for as long as there has been a community to organize. A famous example is Mary Harris "Mother" Jones, a venerated figure in West Virginia's history. As she explains in her autobiography, she began her career as a school teacher, but she saw firsthand the inequity between the wealthy and poor classes when she was living in Chicago, where she became involved with the Knights of Labor. From there, she began her career as a labor organizer, first for the Knights of Labor, then for the United Mine Workers of America. She worked for decades in West Virginia, and was

imprisoned for her involvement in the Paint Creek-Cabin Creek Strike of 1912 (Jones 1990). Famously called “the most dangerous woman in America,” Mother Jones is but a well-known example of the work of women in labor movements. In a labor movement so keenly aware of the history of the strikes preceding it, how does the legacy of women’s activism play out in the 2018 teacher strike? Likewise, how does gender inform the ever-developing identities of West Virginia teachers-as-activists?

Deeply embedded in the question of sovereignty which I highlighted in Chapter 3 is an additional question of retaining young people in the state. This question gets at a statewide anxiety which is bigger than the teacher strikes, but which ran as an undercurrent throughout both the 2018 and 2019 strikes: how can West Virginia attract and retain young people? Between 2016 and 2017, West Virginia was one of only eight states to experience negative population growth, second only to Illinois (Henderson 2017). As its population ages and its young people and families leave for school and work, those who remain are left wondering about the future of the state. The teacher strikes therefore are not only a fight for better public education, but also a bitter struggle for the future of the state.

In this struggle, teachers hold a unique position. Every day, they interact with those who will at some point have to make the decision to leave or to stay. Keisha expressed this tension in her capacity as a teacher-educator when she told me, as mentioned in Chapter 2, that she felt a lot of guilt for encouraging her students to stay in-state to teach. Although through the strikes it can be seen how teachers advocate for their own benefits and compensation along with protections for public education, we are still left to wonder how anxiety over retaining youth played out in these collective actions. What impact does this concern have on teachers’ intersecting identities

as educators and as West Virginians, and how does it play out in the everyday classroom experiences of teachers and students?

However, many teachers expressed concerns not only for their students' futures in the state, but for their own as well. As of the 2018 strike, there were 727 classrooms in West Virginia without certified teachers. In response, one of the pieces of legislation proposed in 2018 was a measure to decrease teacher qualification requirements so that every classroom would have a teacher, whether that teacher had an education or subject degree or not. Keisha called this effort "the de-professionalization of our profession," and explained to me that it hit home for her when she left her teaching job in Preston County for her position at Fairmont State University.

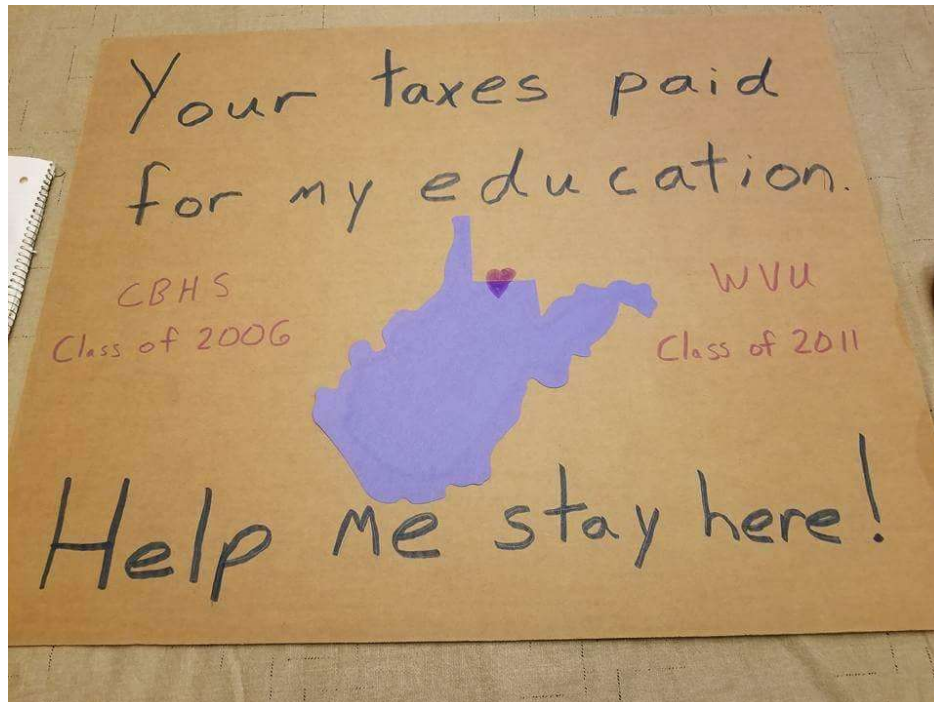
"My position right now is being filled by somebody who's uncertified... They posted my position as just a one-year long-term sub, and nobody who's qualified with certification applied for it. So right now, my position - my position is being filled by somebody who does not have a teaching certificate or an English degree. Yep. So that hit hard. That hit real hard."

She went on to tell me that her position had been posted three times without any applications by certified teachers. Daniel Summers told a similar story, saying,

"I just got to know so many amazing teachers who go out and find a job, and it's not here, and they're from here. And I'm so happy for them, but it makes me sad for the state. We should be fighting to keep those people, cause I think a lot of people would stay if given the choice. My school lost two really, really awesome math teachers to other fields. And those things come from - I don't know if anyone will ever believe this, but it's less about moving up financially and more about just going somewhere where you're respected... If you don't have the support of your community, your administration, and your state, you're gonna leave. You're gonna leave real quick, you're gonna burn out fast."

The strike for teachers is therefore not only a fight for better health insurance or higher pay, but a fight to gain respect for the teaching profession in West Virginia. It is a fight to build the support structures that would allow teachers to stay without burning out. We must therefore turn our line of questioning back to the narrative of unity. Through this understanding, the stakes of the narrative change. Unity is no longer only a tool for making effective change, but becomes an effort to build a self-sustaining community of support at every level of the education system

for teachers around the state. How do the structures of the teachers' unions fit into this need for support? Finally, if the strike is an aspirational effort for the future of public education, how are these anxieties embedded in teachers' individual and collective actions?



**Figure 21.** This photo was shared on West Virginia Public Employees UNITED by group member Beth Durst Hutson. The sign displays a concern felt by many teachers in the 2018 and 2019 strikes. By claiming West Virginia as home by virtue of the sign-maker's education, this teacher expresses a desire to stay in-state, but a feeling that it may not be possible to do so. The sign calls on legislators to use their power to make West Virginia a place where those who want to stay, such as this teacher, can.

Anxieties about the future of West Virginia, the sovereignty of its public versus external forces, gender, relationships with the space and the history of the state, and relationships between tenuously united groups culminate in a final question: why West Virginia? Since Donald Trump won all fifty-five counties in the state in the 2016 presidential election, West Virginia has been popularly identified as “Trump Country,” a place so solidly conservative that it has been seen by many, especially Democrats, as the key to understanding the rise of Trumpian politics. The state, and the Appalachian region generally, has been exhaustively analyzed by those looking to figure out what makes a Trump supporter tick. Such efforts include a widely circulated 2016 article in *The New Yorker* entitled “In the Heart of Trump Country,” with the tagline, “West Virginia used

to vote solidly Democratic. Now it belongs to Trump. What happened?” and J.D. Vance’s book (and forthcoming multi-million dollar Netflix film) *Hillbilly Elogy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* which topped the *New York Times* bestseller list twice in 2016 and 2017.

In her *New Yorker* article, Larissa MacFarquhar focuses on four men from Logan, West Virginia. Through a retelling of their stories, she offers an image of a West Virginia which is violent, describing one man who was physically attacked during the 2016 primary election cycle; and holding to a sort of orthodoxy, a way of life as it used to be, in the face of modern reality. MacFarquhar identifies two redeeming qualities of West Virginians: a deep love for their state and the centrality of family. These qualities, she says, are manifested as a sense of deep rootedness in the land and a strong sense of community throughout the state. In this depiction, she defines West Virginia as though perhaps a quaint and welcoming place, nonetheless backwards, clinging to a way of life that is no longer feasible.

Vance, on the other hand, paints Appalachia as a morally corrupt place where its people are the only ones to blame for their own economic distress. The book has already been heavily critiqued, but for Appalachian perspectives, see *What You Are Getting Wrong About Appalachia* by Elizabeth Catte and *Appalachian Reckoning: A Region Responds to Hillbilly Elogy* edited by Anthony Harkins and Meredith McCarroll.

Publications such as those of MacFarquhar and Vance, along with most attempts at ‘demystifying’ West Virginia, paint an image of “an emblematic Trump voter: a white Protestant man in the dying coal industry in southern West Virginia” (MacFarquhar 2016). This narrative is not a new one as of 2016, either. Here again, I return to Kathleen Stewart’s vision of West Virginia, to a house viewed from across a river, with a pile of scrap wood in the yard. When we

stand on the other side of the river, it is easy, in our mind's eye, to plant a sign in that yard emblazoned with the words "Make America Great Again." When we follow Stewart's definition, which identifies this place by the death of the coal industry, clinging to past glories, we can see how it might be necessarily conservative, backwards, even racist. For someone working and learning at a private liberal arts institution such as Wellesley College, it is an easy answer to establish Appalachia as the explanation of President Trump's electoral victory.

In the refuse of the capitalist exploitation that Stewart identifies, it is easy to believe that Trump speaks to the archetypal "little people": the out-of-work coal miners, the little old church ladies who live off welfare, the drug-addicted single mothers who feed their babies with food stamps – the people we *real*, progressive Americans are not. Within Michel-Rolph Trouillot's order-utopia-savagery trifecta, this vision places West Virginia solidly in what he calls the "savage slot" (Trouillot 1991): to the utopia of a modernized United States, it is a peripheral place which has failed to modernize. As the antithesis to the progressive vision of America, it is easy to see West Virginia as the key to understanding Donald Trump's rise to the presidency, to distinguish for liberal Americans the kind of "basket of deplorables" who might vote for him.

However, we at Wellesley College have a civic duty to move beyond what is easy. Here, we claim to produce the future leaders who may eventually have a hand in deciding the future of public education, of workers' rights, and of public policies with broad-ranging effects. We must therefore equip ourselves with an understanding of the world beyond this campus which turns a critical eye toward those who would offer us the easy solution. We must stop looking at West Virginia from across the river, as a place different than us. We must instead take our imagined



“Make America Great Again” sign out of the yard, get closer, and realize that this, too, is America, in all its diverse, querulous, and hopeful glory.

It is only when we move past the “Trump Country” narrative that we can begin to fully grasp the meaning of the question “why West Virginia?” In understanding West Virginia as a place with a past, present, and future which shape one another – rather than a place stuck in the past – we can begin to understand what sets the state apart as a natural breeding ground for collective action. For this effort, anthropology provides a gateway to understanding how the past and future are experienced by those who live with them in the present. Using the tools of ethnographic study, we can see how teachers actively engage with the state’s history of labor organizing in order to enact their hopes for a future in which they and their students can stay in West Virginia.

Perhaps we cannot separate the question “why West Virginia?” from the politics of the moment. Maybe we have no choice but to consider it in the context of a state which voted overwhelmingly for Donald Trump. In this case, the question may not be one for an anthropologist, but may be better suited for political analysts or historians. However, as I have shown throughout this thesis, the movement which started in the 2018 teacher strike is not an isolated incident. It exists in the minds of many of West Virginia’s educators and citizens as the direct successor to earlier labor movements in the state.

A better question, rather than “why West Virginia?” may then be “why not West Virginia?” What is it about the state which makes a labor movement surprising? We must always critically consider the images that authors like Stewart, MacFarquhar, and Vance are offering us and reflect on how are they painting Appalachia as a place “other” than our American

metanarrative of modernity and progress. What opportunities do they create to see West Virginia as a place working in the present and looking toward the future, rather than bound inescapably to the past? West Virginia is not imprisoned by its history, but liberated through it. Lessons from the Mine Wars, the wildcat strikes of the 1970s, and the teacher strike of 1990 echoed throughout the 2018 and 2019 teacher strikes, inspiring the sort of collective action which, as Daniel Summers put it, “is woven into the fabric of the state.” Empowered by a shared historical narrative of grassroots action and uprising, West Virginia’s educators discovered their own political power through which to enact their aspirations for the future of public education, the future of their profession, and the future of the state of West Virginia.

At the end of our conversation, Dale Lee said to me,

“The legacy I would hope [for the strike] was educators fight for their students in a number of different ways. And when things were so bad that our students were being harmed with the cuts to education, with the 727 positions without a certified teacher and with the increased number that you were seeing in secondary school classes, they’d had enough, and they stood up, and they gave students one of the greatest civics lessons that you could ever give them in how the system worked. And not only that, they stood up and they gave them a firsthand account of how you believe in yourself.”

As a West Virginian, it is my hope that by turning an ethnographic lens to the 2018 and 2019 teacher strikes, I can offer a better understanding of how individual aspirations converge on the landscape to produce a vision for the state which is more reflective of the needs of its citizens. Moving forward with this moment, we must do so with the understanding that there is work yet to be done, but as always, in West Virginia, nothing is done alone.



**Figure 22.** Photo courtesy of West Virginia Public Employees UNITED.

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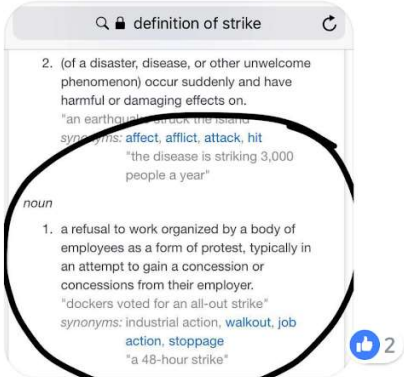
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# Appendix A.

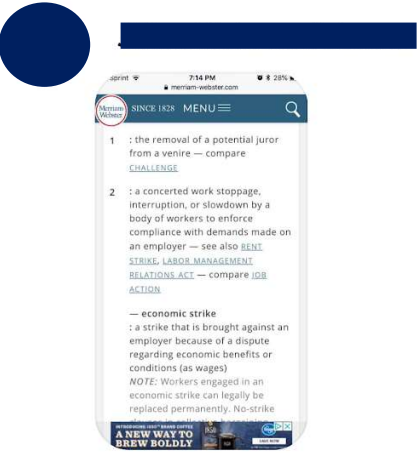
## Screenshots from July 23, 2018 Facebook Post

The image displays two side-by-side screenshots of a Facebook post from July 23, 2018. The left screenshot shows the full post by Catherine Gooding, a member of West Virginia Public Employees UNITED. The post text reads: "RESEARCHING THE TEACHER STRIKE - Hi all! I'm a 2015 graduate of Morgantown High School, and a senior at Wellesley College. I'm doing research for my senior thesis, and I'm looking for teachers, school service personnel, and public employees who want to talk about their experiences of the teacher strike. Interviews would be approximately an hour long, depending on how much you have to share. I can meet with anyone from Mon County in person, or set up a phone or Skype interview with those from elsewhere. If you have questions about my project or want to set up an interview, please email me at cgooding@wellesley.edu. Thanks!". Below the post are interaction buttons for 'Like' and 'Comment', and a notification to 'Turn on job features for this post to reach more applicants.' The right screenshot shows a series of comments on the post. The first comment, from a yellow profile, says "Buy the book" and includes a screenshot of an Amazon listing for the book "55 Strong: Inside the West Virginia Teachers' Strike" by Elizabeth Catts and 2 more, priced at \$25.00. Subsequent comments include: "It was a walk out..." (yellow profile), "Sorry, a walkout and job stoppage is a strike..." (green profile), and "No, there is a difference! We made up the days and got paid for them. That isn't the case with a strike." (blue profile). The bottom of both screenshots shows the "Write a comment..." input field with icons for adding photos, GIFs, and emojis.

Gosh, I feel like we go through this all the time. Yes, we had a strike. Refusing to work is what a strike is.



3w Like Reply



3w Like Reply

iwj.org article snippet: 'are locked out by their employers. For example, delivery drivers may refuse to cross a picket line to deliver packages to a company whose employees are on strike...' Includes sections: 'What's the difference between a strike, a lockout and a work stoppage?' and 'How often do strikes occur?'.

3w Like Reply

iwj.org article snippet: 'replace striking employees.' Because U.S. employers can permanently replace employees engaged in an economic strike...' Includes a 'Citations' list.

3w Like Reply

? It doesn't even defend your point.

3w Like Reply

I'm just saying there is a difference...



Thanks to all 55 counties superintendents for calling off school in each county on a daily basis or we would have known what a real strike was. No one was forced to cross a picket line-no one. Ask the ones who were in the last "strike" how things went when half walked across the picket line and half stayed out. We didn't have to deal with that thanks to our superintendents. Yes we did stay out and take risks but they made it easier for us.

3w Like Reply 7

90 was a strike. You are right, that's what scared me.

3w Like Reply

I am thankful to our supers. As you know relationships within every school building would have been strained. It is a part of our story. It was wonderful to see all the counties at the capitol each day. We were 55 Strong!

3w Like Reply 2