

Online and on the picket line West Virginia teachers' use of an online community to organize

Crystal D. Howell et Caleb Schmitzer

Volume 13, numéro 2, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1088973ar>
DOI : <https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v13i2.186613>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Institute for Critical Education Studies / UBC

ISSN

1920-4175 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Howell, C. & Schmitzer, C. (2022). Online and on the picket line: West Virginia teachers' use of an online community to organize. *Critical Education*, 13(2), 59–76. <https://doi.org/10.14288/ce.v13i2.186613>

Résumé de l'article

Teacher organizing in the twenty-first century presents new and as-yet unstudied challenges and opportunities for union leaders and members. In this article, we explore the structure and function of the secret Facebook group created and used by teachers in West Virginia (USA) prior to, during, and since their historic statewide strike in February 2018. Working from poststructuralist and social movement unionist frameworks, we analyze focus group data generated with the group's admins and moderators as well as survey data collected from the group's general membership. Together, these data reveal a number of overt and covert group functions, including allowing members to imagine a new good teacher subjectivity. We argue that supporting members as they test such new subjectivities and make their personal, local activism visible within online communities is critical for organizers aiming to nurture collective action among union members, particularly teachers.

© Crystal D. Howell, Caleb Schmitzer, 2022



Ce document est protégé par la loi sur le droit d'auteur. L'utilisation des services d'Érudit (y compris la reproduction) est assujettie à sa politique d'utilisation que vous pouvez consulter en ligne.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/fr/usagers/politique-dutilisation/>

Érudit

Cet article est diffusé et préservé par Érudit.

Érudit est un consortium interuniversitaire sans but lucratif composé de l'Université de Montréal, l'Université Laval et l'Université du Québec à Montréal. Il a pour mission la promotion et la valorisation de la recherche.

<https://www.erudit.org/fr/>

Critical Education

Volume 13 Number 2

April 15, 2022

ISSN 1920-4175

Online and On the Picket Line

West Virginia Teachers' Use of an Online Community to Organize

Crystal D. Howell

Caleb Schmitzer

Randolph College

Citation: Howell, C. D., & Schmitzer, C. (2022). Online and on the picket line: West Virginia teachers' use of an online community to organize. *Critical Education*, 13(2), 59-76.

<http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186613>

Abstract

Teacher organizing in the twenty-first century presents new and understudied challenges and opportunities for union leaders and members. In this article, we explore the structure and function of the secret Facebook group created and used by teachers in West Virginia (USA) prior to, during, and since their historic statewide strike in February 2018. Working from poststructuralist and social justice unionist frameworks, we analyze focus group data generated with the group's admins and moderators as well as survey data collected from the group's general membership. Together, these data reveal a number of overt and covert group functions, including allowing members to imagine a new good teacher subjectivity. We argue that these covert functions—particularly reimagining the good teacher subjectivity—were and remain vital to the Teachers TOGETHER community and provide a model for other labor groups; as teachers around the United States and abroad continue to organize, leaders must make these functions (especially in online organizing spaces) just as explicit as more pragmatic functions.

This research was supported by funding from the Randolph College Summer Research Program.



Readers are free to copy, display, and distribute this article, as long as the work is attributed to the author(s) and *Critical Education*. More details of this Creative Commons license are available from <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. *Critical Education* is published by the Institute for Critical Educational Studies and housed at the University of British Columbia.

As we complete this article, the members of Teachers TOGETHER—a secret Facebook group comprised of thousands of teachers and other public workers in West Virginia—are at the end of their 2020-2021 winter break but are active nonetheless. In the last 24 hours, as 2020 slipped into 2021, members posted in the group 46 times. In these posts, they shared maps from the West Virginia Department of Education showing each county’s COVID status, local and national news stories about coronavirus transmission in schools, details of and responses to Governor Jim Justice’s most recent news conference, and other elected officials’ responses to Justice’s insistence that schools return to face-to-face learning as soon as possible. Multiple members shared reminders about the next meeting of the West Virginia United Caucus. In many posts from last night, someone requested prayer for another member and her husband (a police officer and therefore also a state employee) fighting the virus; by this afternoon, those posts were replaced with announcements of his death. There is a meme ridiculing the governor, another featuring a cowboy with a message of toughness and solidarity. There are questions about the vaccine rollout, conversations about how the unions ought to respond to the state’s increasingly contorted COVID map, instructions for contacting local union reps, praise for caucus leadership, and warm wishes for the new year. Most threads have several dozen comments; a few have hundreds. The community is informed and enraged, serious and supportive, funny and personal. It is complex in tone and purpose.

“Numerous groups use technology to resist hegemony,” Ramírez Plascencia (2018) writes in reference to dissidents across the global south, “and to set the scene for a war in a very different arena: the informational one” (p. 323). We focus on one such group in the United States, studying how West Virginia teachers used and continue to use the secret Facebook group Teachers TOGETHER (a pseudonym) leading up to, during, and since their historic statewide strike in February 2018. In this article, we specifically ask: *what are Teachers TOGETHER’s overt and covert functions?* We describe the six overt functions group leaders and members identified: mapping the worker community, gathering and sharing information, exchanging and generating tactics, creating a free space for members’ voices, empowering members, and entertaining members. We also describe three covert functions: creating connections to the wider labor movement, creating intersections of the personal and professional, and reimagining the *good teacher* subjectivity. Unlike the overt functions, participants never explicitly describe the covert functions as part of the group’s purpose, but we argue that these covert functions—particularly reimagining the *good teacher* subjectivity—were and remain vital to the Teachers TOGETHER community and provide a model for other labor groups. As teachers around the United States and abroad continue to organize, leaders must make these functions (especially in online organizing spaces) just as explicit as more pragmatic functions.

Social Media, Social Justice?

While participants in recent teacher walkouts across the United States have certainly relied on traditional organizational channels to communicate and coordinate individual and collective actions, the ubiquity of social media in teachers’ personal lives has created a new space for teachers’ union activity and political participation among school stakeholders more generally. Facebook is the most popular social media platform other than YouTube among Americans: 69% of U.S. adults are Facebook users and of those, 70% log in daily (Shearer, 2021). Unlike other platforms, Facebook is popular among various demographic groups; that is, similar percentages of U.S. adults report using Facebook when sorted by gender, race, ethnicity, income, education,

geographic location, and age. Age is a particularly compelling demographic, as adults over 50 have not taken to other social media platforms such as Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok, or Twitter (Shearer, 2021). Four-in-ten U.S. adults turn to Facebook for the news, a much larger portion than those who turn to YouTube (21%), Twitter (12%), or Instagram (8%) (Gramlich, 2019). For perspective, as of January 2021, CNN's official Facebook page had 34 million follows and Fox News nearly 19 million.

In response to early researchers such as Heckscher and McCarthy (2014) and Saundry et al. (2012) who found that “digital organizing could not generate a sense of labor solidarity,” Maffie (2020) points out that Web 2.0 networks like Facebook “are structurally different than the mechanisms in previous studies of digital organizing because they are dynamic spaces that allow people to engage in more personal and interactive ways,” “mimic[ing] the most salient features of offline communities” (p. 2). He points to Teachers TOGETHER specifically, citing O’Donovan (2018). O’Donovan (a reporter for BuzzFeed news) interviewed numerous striking West Virginia teachers and supporters who described the significance of the Facebook group. She writes, for instance,

“This strike wouldn’t have happened without the grassroots organization through the private Facebook group,” said Ryan Frankenberry, an organizer with the progressive West Virginia Working Families Party, which supported teachers’ efforts. “The legislative leadership, unions, other organizations, were all helpful. But without questions, I don’t think this would have reached the critical mass that was needed had they not had the platform of the group to communicate.” (para. 3)

Webb (2021) and Hampson (2019) write about similar conversations in which the teachers with whom they spoke express a tangle of the past and present, citing over and over the significance of the state’s rich but violent labor history as well as the importance of the secret Facebook group in the present lives of teacher organizers.

“The relationship between movements and social media networks is complicated,” Krutka, Asino, and Haselwood (2018, p. 381) muse as they consider early lessons learned from Oklahoma teachers’ use of the hashtags #OklaEd and #OklaEdWalkout during their 2018 collective actions. “On the one hand,” they explain, “social media platforms offer participatory spaces where activists gain power through their digital connections and collective knowledge and support, and movements gain strength through their ability to mobilize and coordinate action quickly.” But, they continue, “networked movements can be fragile because they may fail to develop tactical maneuverability and resilience, specifically because organizing can be so easy online” (p. 381). Valenzuela (2013) echoes some of these sentiments; in his study of social media use among Chileans during 2011’s nationwide protests, Valenzuela found a positive, statistically significant relationship between social media use and protest, particularly among social media users using platforms to express opinions and join causes. Like Krutka, Asino, and Haselwood (2018), Valenzuela (2019) emphasizes social media’s participatory benefits for organizers but cautions that “there is the risk of furthering inequality if the population of social media users is skewed toward the technologically savvy and those with high human, social, and economic capital” (p. 17). Moreover, as Upchurch (2014) (writing from a Marxist perspective) warns, web-based communication and social media in particular have “given employers an extra opportunity to monitor, spy upon and ultimately discipline and control employees” (p. 125), highlighting teachers. Yet social media may also allow employees to “‘turn the tables’ on employers by monitoring and exposing employers’ own (mis)behavior,” creating a “reverse panopticon” (p.

130). In short, while organizing via social media may encourage participation on- and offline and offer a pathway for workers to shed light on workplace exploitation and other misconduct, it also poses tactical and ethical challenges and opens workers to additional scrutiny.

Theoretical and Practical Frameworks

As we began to study the lives of teachers organizing online and their negotiation of the affordances and constraints of social media, theoretical and practical frameworks guided our thinking. *Poststructuralism* is the underlying theoretical base upon which the practical and methodological elements of the project rest. We see meaning as shifting and playful (Derrida, 2001), bounded but not contained by linguistic and social structures. Humans both create these structures—these discourses—and are created by these structures when subjectivities emerge. Subjectivities, Weedon (1987) writes, encompass “the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relations to the world” (p. 32). Weedon continues, explaining that subjectivity “is precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted in discourse every time we think or speak” (p. 33).

As researchers of education broadly and teachers’ lives and work specifically, however, we recognize that deconstruction alone is a fruitless task. Thus, our work in this project is also informed by *social movement unionism* (SMU) (Moody, 1997) as a means of imagining more equitable structures. SMU, Moody (1997) writes,

is deeply democratic, as that is the best way to mobilize the strength of numbers in order to apply maximum economic leverage. [...] It multiplies its political and social power by reaching out to other sectors of the class, be they other unions, neighborhood-based organizations, or other social movements. It fights for all the oppressed and enhances its own power by doing so. (pp. 4-5)

SMU provides a way to think about and work within neoliberal U.S. school structures while simultaneously seeking to reassemble those structures in ways that reflect the value of labor, the workers who create that labor, and the diverse background whence they come. Education practitioners more commonly employ the term *social justice unionism* (SJU), a term that makes clearer for contemporary practitioners the commitment not only to improving working conditions for teachers but also to meeting community needs more broadly (Fletcher, 2011; Brogan, 2014). Typified by the work of Chicago’s Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) and Philadelphia’s Caucus of Working Educators (WE), SJU highlights the entanglement of teachers’ work and students’ experiences with broader social issues like racism, classism, and climate change (Dandala, 2019; Maton, 2016; Weiner, 2012). As a result, bargaining expands beyond typical business unionism concerns such as pay and benefits to include issues such as students’ access to affordable housing and healthcare as well as progressive tax laws.

Researcher Positionality

I (Crystal) grew up in West Virginia and taught middle and high school Spanish for seven years in West Virginia’s public schools before leaving the state to pursue a doctoral degree and become a teacher educator. Like most of the participants in this study (and most of the teachers in West Virginia), I am a white cisgender woman. Though I no longer live in West Virginia, my accent makes my West Virginia upbringing clear and brings with it moments of unearned trust from participants. In contrast, I (Caleb) am a White cisgender man. I grew up in a small town in

North Carolina and am a recent graduate from a small liberal arts college. I joined this research project after an education course helped me see how my interests in history, politics, and mathematics might be combined and applied in an education research context. Together our varying backgrounds and experiences gave us unique, often complementary perspectives during the design, execution, and writing up of this study.

Study Context

Many West Virginians are keenly aware of the state's part in U.S. labor history, and rare was the West Virginian we encountered while conducting this research who did not proudly tell us about their father's or pappaw's membership in the United Mine Workers of America (UMWA). Participants also passionately described the historic and present-day environmental and economic exploitation of the state. With this in mind, we offer a detailed description of West Virginia in both the past and present.

West Virginia: Past

The state of West Virginia is the only U.S. state entirely within Appalachia, a region of 205,000 square miles beginning in southern New York and following the Appalachian Mountains south to Mississippi (Appalachian Regional Commission, n. d.). West Virginia has long been an example of neoliberalism run amok at the expense of its people and the environment. Large swaths of the state are owned and exploited by out-of-state corporations with little motivation to do anything other than extract as much as possible from their holdings. During the late nineteenth century, West Virginia's economy shifted from agriculture to energy and throughout the twentieth century was concentrated on coal, timber, and gas. By the 1970s, an Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force (1981) study including fifteen of West Virginia's 55 counties found that three-quarters of surface land and four-fifths of minerals were owned by individuals or companies from outside the county where the land and minerals were located. While today's numbers are not nearly that high, the West Virginia Center on Policy and Budget (2013) found that the top 25 private landowners still own nearly a fifth of the land in the state, and the state's top ten private landowners are all companies headquartered outside the state.

Cheap labor is essential to profitable resource extraction; even better are workers willing to risk injury or death. Coal mines in West Virginia during the late 1800s and early 1900s were both exploitative and dangerous. The United Mine Workers of America was formed in Ohio, 1890, and later that year, UMWA District 17 (which included most of West Virginia) held its first meeting in the city of Wheeling, West Virginia. M. F. Moran, the first president of District 17, immediately began pressuring government officials to reform working conditions and pay. Writing to Labor Commissioner Edward Robertson that same year, Moran (1890) describes the exploitation of workers through the practice of payment in *scrip*—that is, a voucher good only at stores owned by coal companies themselves where food and other dry goods were sold at excessively high prices. He concludes:

The prospects of the miners of West Virginia were never better for obtaining many laws that could be of lasting benefit to their interest as a craft. So far as the miner is concerned at present there is no law to give him any protection whatsoever. This state of affairs comes from the neglect of organization. [...] May God speed you in your noble efforts to bring the sad condition of the miners of West Virginia, before

the light of enlightened public opinion is the wish and prayer of yours sincerely [n. pag.]

Moran's wish was unfulfilled: unionization in West Virginia was neither speedy nor easy. Multiple attempts to organize miners across the state were shut down and organizers were harassed and killed by mine operators and their hired guards over the next three decades. Several armed skirmishes took place, including 1921's Battle of Blair Mountain. The mine wars did not effectively end until President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933, protecting the rights of unions throughout the country.

West Virginia: Present

Despite this history, union participation is declining in West Virginia today. According to the U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2020), 10% of West Virginians are union members, just below the national average of 10.3% and half the 1983 average (the first year for which comparable data are available). Contributing to this decline in union participation is West Virginia's so-called "right-to-work" legislation, passed in 2016. In a report prepared for the state legislature prior to its passage of right to work, Deskins, Bowen, and Christiadi (2015) found that union participation rates in right-to-work states were about half those in non-right-to-work states. Only 68% of teachers in West Virginia are unionized (Winkler et al., 2012), split between the state's NEA and AFT affiliates. Nevertheless, in a report for the Fordham Institute comparing teachers' union strength across all U.S. states, Winkler et al. (2012) rank West Virginia in their second highest tier due to the unions' "strong presence in politics" and "reputation for influence" as well as favorable state policies (p. 350).

West Virginia state code does not address collective bargaining for teachers, and there is no statutory provision protecting the right of public employees to strike. After the state's only other prolonged and nearly statewide strike in 1990, the West Virginia Supreme Court ruled in *Jefferson County Board of Education v. Jefferson County Education Association* (1990) that without such provision, any strike by public workers is illegal. Prohibited from striking, West Virginia's teachers, with the support of county superintendents who closed schools rather than forced teachers to risk censure or suspension for failing to carry out their duties, nevertheless participated in a statewide work stoppage February 22–March 7, 2018. The action (tagged #55strong by teachers on social media in reference to the first-ever participation of all 55 counties in a single action) was covered extensively by local, national, and international news outlets. After the action, the West Virginia legislature passed a 5% pay raise for all state employees, temporarily stopped insurance cost hikes, and formed a task force to investigate possible fixes for the state's broken health insurance program, the West Virginia Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA). Many speculate, however, that the teachers' success and significant public support provoked the ire of the Republican-led state legislature, especially Senate President Mitch Carmichael, leading to the introduction of Senate Bill 451, or the omnibus education bill, during the 2019 legislative session. As "omnibus" suggests, the bill had several provisions, including an additional pay raise for teachers and increased funding for counselors and other school services but required that proposed changes be adopted all or nothing and was written such that no single element could be repealed in future legislative sessions without repealing all provisions. The most contentious element of the bill was its authorization of state-funded but privately managed charter schools. Teachers in all but one county engaged in an additional two-day work stoppage in response. The bill's passage was halted during the regular legislative session, but a modified version of the bill passed in a special

session later that summer after schools were closed for the year (and while we were conducting this research).

In short, West Virginia is—and historically has been—run for outsiders, not its residents. Corporate taxes are low and environmental regulations lax. Its teachers are the lowest paid in the nation (Winters, 2017), its children the poorest (U.S. Census Bureau, 2018), and its waters the dirtiest (Environmental Working Group, 1996). Yet participants in this study saw themselves as the torchbearers of West Virginia’s labor history and made connections between the specific context of their strikes to national and international demands for gender equity and environmental justice.

Methodology

Connecting with Teachers TOGETHER

We conducted this study during the summer of 2019 before and during the special legislative session, but our connection to Teachers TOGETHER began much earlier. Although now an assistant professor of education, I (Crystal) remain in friendly and professional contact with many former colleagues, mostly via Facebook as I no longer live in West Virginia. In early October 2017, I noticed several friends asking others if they would like to be invited to a secret Facebook group for teachers, service personnel, and other public workers. At the time, most had just learned about dramatic changes to their common health insurer, PEIA. These changes included drastic cuts in their health care benefits alongside increases in health insurance costs. I asked a friend to add me to the group to stay abreast of the proposed changes and efforts to stop them, in part to share information with my mother (a teacher in the state but not a Facebook user) and in part to appease my personal and professional interest. I joined the group shortly thereafter and have remained a member since then.

Participant Recruitment, Data Collection, and Analysis

We generated data using an exploratory sequential mixed methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). After securing IRB approval, Crystal contacted group administrators (or “admins”) and moderators (“mods”) via Facebook messenger. When this study took place, the group had two admins, Eugene and Mary. Eugene and Mary created the group together in October 2017 and as admins could change group settings (including the group’s secrecy); invite and delete members; appoint and demote mods; and create, delete, and comment on posts. Most of the six mods joined the group shortly after its creation. Mods had a more limited range of functions, including creating other mods; inviting and deleting members; and creating, deleting, and commenting on posts.

Of the group’s eight admins and mods, four responded to our invitation to participate in the focus group. Admin Eugene was a white, cisgender man with a decade of teaching experience; at the time of the study, he taught middle school social studies in one of the state’s largest cities. Admin Mary was a white, cisgender woman with a decade of experience teaching music in one of the state’s most populated counties. Mod Francis was a white, cisgender woman with more than two decades teaching secondary music and language arts in one of state’s southern coalfields counties. Mod Lucy was a white, cisgender woman with just under a decade of experience as a secondary special educator, also in one of the state’s southern coalfields counties. All participant

names are pseudonyms and refer to prominent U.S. labor activists: Eugene Debs, Mary “Mother” Jones, Francis Perkins, and Lucy Randolph Mason.

We scheduled a two-hour focus group session for the four leaders who agreed to participate. The focus group conversation included a semi-structured question protocol as well as a collaborative assessment activity adapted from Millis (2004) to elicit participants’ understandings of the group’s general structure and to help identify and rank its function(s). The conversation took place in a private room at a community center in West Virginia, in a town centrally located for participants. Participants received a \$50 gift card from a national retailer of their choice. Afterward, we created a transcript of the session; engaged in member checking to clarify muddy points; and then, using field notes, photographs, and participant-generated writing from the assessment activity, amended the transcript with thick, rich description to improve validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Thematic analysis of these qualitative data led to the creation of a 28-item survey using Google Forms. After debriefing with peers (including two colleagues with expertise in survey design and administration), Crystal contacted ten group members selected to represent the range of professional and personal perspectives of the population overall to pretest the survey (Ruel et al., 2016). After final revisions, Crystal made the survey available to all group members ($n = 22,775$ at the time of survey administration) through a post on the group page. (For context, the Bureau of Labor Statistics [2019] estimates that there were 22,100 PK-12 teachers in West Virginia in May 2018. Some group members—like Crystal—were connected to the state but no longer employed there. Other members were retired or worked for state agencies other than K-12 schools.) The survey remained open for two weeks (June 15–29, 2019); 154 respondents completed the survey. Quantitative data analysis included the use of descriptive statistics and graphic visualization.

Limitations

An obvious and consistently frustrating limitation of this study was working within the confines of Facebook’s algorithms. We had no way of controlling (or even knowing) who saw our invitation to take the survey for general group members. In secret groups with more than 500 members, even admins cannot see how many members have seen an individual post. Facebook pushes content toward users most likely to engage with that content; as a result, the members most likely to see the survey invitation in their feeds were my (Crystal’s) friends or friends of friends. In short, many group members likely never saw the survey invitation; we simply have no idea to speculate how many or which members did not. This challenge is not unique to our study and we expect has stymied other researchers in similar research spaces.

Findings

The group’s admins and mods identified a complex web of group functions (see Figure 4) during the assessment activity, ultimately describing six distinct functions: (1) mapping the worker community, (2) gathering and sharing information, (3) exchanging and generating tactics, (4) creating a free space for members’ voices, (5) empowering members, and (6) entertaining members. Participants resisted our request to rank these functions, instead stressing their interconnectedness. As Mary explained:

Survey responses suggest general members were also interested in community mapping (*who else is interested in this action and what are others doing?*) and situating themselves within that map (*how might I fit into this work?*). When asked to identify the group's three most important functions, the second-most highly ranked option was "Allows me to learn about other teachers' and public workers' experiences and views"; nearly all respondents (97%) indicated this was something the group did. Respondents also pointed toward this function when asked what they wished the group did better or differently: 55% of respondents indicated "Showed me what others are doing in their local schools and communities," more than any other option.

Gathering and sharing information. This function refers to finding or distributing discrete, often time-sensitive pieces of information. Admins and mods initially created a broad category they simply called "communication," but as they continued to discuss and sort their responses during the collaborative assessment activity, they distinguished between several distinct kinds of communication. This kind of information gathering and sharing included asking and answering questions such as: When and where would a local union meeting take place? Who was traveling to the capitol building to protest on a particular day, and who was staying at their local picket line? How did individual legislators vote on any given bill? General members agreed that this was an important group function. Just over 86% indicated that the group "Gives me a place to find information about candidates and legislative issues," and 68% indicated the group gave them a place to share the same information. Members also ranked this function as the most important thing the group did.

Francis speculated that the platform strengthened this function, explaining:

The information coming out of the group was no different than what we've been telling them. It was the exact same thing, but it's just like the medium was different. And so Facebook was more personal. Like if you and I was the same way until [our county] cut our salaries. If I would see AFT's letterhead in my box I would glance at it and throw it away. I wasn't very active and I think we had a lot of that. So like they were, they had the information, they just chose not to read it or give it the consideration that it needed. But when it's on Facebook and it's in a secret group, by golly I'm going to pay attention.

Mary agreed, suggesting that control over the information was appealing for members. If a member has "enough bad shit going on," she explained, they could simply mute the group, but

whenever they get to that point of wanting to, like, wanting it on their own, they can access it anytime they wanted to. They could shut it off whenever they wanted to. They can participate or be a voyeur, whatever it is they like. They have the ability to do that and still have, like, that I can be informed if I want to be.

Eugene expanded on Mary's response, noting that the group allowed him to share and ask more than he would otherwise: "There's stuff honestly that I'd feel more comfortable saying on Facebook that I wouldn't say at a local meeting."

Exchanging and generating tactics. This function refers to the sharing or creating of doable individual or collective actions to achieve desired ends. Group leaders identified exchanging and generating tactics as another distinct form of communication. Mary described, for instance, how her county staged a "fed-up Friday" walkout after learning about the strategy from group members in a neighboring county; their action in turn inspired a third nearby county. Many

general group members echoed the leaders' thoughts. About half (48%) of survey respondents indicated that one of the group's current functions was "Gives me a place to discuss my ideas about how to effect change," and 44% of respondents said the group "Lets me solve problems with other teachers and public workers." General group members, however, desired more of this sort of specific communication. When asked to identify the most important thing the group should do better or differently in the future, a plurality of respondents (32%) ranked "Provide suggestions for organizing with other teacher or public workers locally" most highly; the second-most highly desired function was "Show me what others are doing in their local schools and communities" (selected by 23% of respondents).

Creating a free space for members' voices. This function refers to all group members' ability to create and comment on posts relevant to the group's purpose. Lucy described the group as "giv[ing] people a voice." Mary built on Lucy's comment, adding that the group was "a free space to share." At times, Lucy explained, that sharing might just be "ranting" and the group a "sounding board." Mary linked the success of other group functions to creating this free space. "Like, it isn't top down," she explained. Any member could create a post and could engage with others' posts, not just state or local leaders (or the admins and mods). Survey respondents seemed to agree: 63% of respondents indicated the group gave them a place to share information about local candidates and legislative issues, and about half (48%) said the group gave them a place to share information about local or national union activities. Thirty-nine percent of respondents said the group gave them a place to rant or vent, and 58% indicated the group "Makes me feel as if my voice is an important part of my organization."

Empowering members. This function refers to the cultivation of individual and collective purpose. While completing the collaborative assessment activity, they discussed several terms group leaders ultimately categorized as empowerment, including "unifying force," "activism," and "rallying the troops." The admins and mods described empowerment as the result of the other group functions. Francis explained this interconnection:

For me, it's the community aspect of it. I think because...once you have that community then you can kind of deal with all the rest of it. Like, you need this before you can feel empowered. You need to know the people that have your back and that are dealing with the exact same things you are.

Lucy agreed that empowerment was linked with other group functions but expressed frustration with the notion of empowerment as something leaders needed to give members. "Empower yourselves," she quipped. "I'm tired." She went on to explain in more detail: "We've put the information out there. We've given you the safe space to do it in. Pick up the sword and go forth and empower yourselves."

General group members overwhelmingly agreed that the group empowered them, at least within the group space. Seventy percent indicated the group empowered them to share their experiences with other teachers and public workers in the group, 45% said they were empowered to share their experiences with others online beyond the group, and 37% said they were empowered to share their experiences with others face-to-face. Empowerment was not highly valued by respondents, however. Just under 20% of respondents ranked "Empowers me to share my experiences with other teachers and public workers in the group" in their three most important group functions. Empowering members to share with others online outside the group and others face-to-face were ranked by even fewer respondents (5% and 3%, respectively). Only 13% of

respondents indicated that empowering members to be more politically engaged outside the group was the most important thing the group should do better or differently in the future.

Entertaining members. This function refers to sharing or consuming relevant but funny content. The admins and mods spent the least amount of time discussing how the group entertained members but insisted it was an important function. “I love the [Richard] Ojeda, like, Chuck Norris memes,” Mary said while laughing, referring to a colorful congressional candidate from the state’s southern coalfields. Fifty-nine percent of survey respondents indicated the group entertained them with funny memes, posts, photos, or videos, but only 6% ranked it among the three most important group functions.

Covert Group Functions

Creating connections to the wider labor movement. This function refers to the development of practical as well as affective connections between group members and other workers at local and global levels. This function builds on the overt function of mapping the community, expanding it in terms of affinity. At the local level, this function appears in descriptions of connections among teachers, other school personnel, and public workers. As Mary explained, for example:

If it hadn’t been for the cooks and the bus drivers, there would have been days we would have had school. [...] I know one of my schools—their principal is very anti-union and open about it—and so she squashes everything in the school except for the cooks. The cooks are like “F you, lady,” and they absolutely refused to come in and so the school, like, even if they would have opened the county for like one school, it couldn’t have happened because the cooks were like “We ain’t cooking today.”

Lucy had similar experience with the bus drivers in her county:

Our [bus drivers] are all Amalgamated Transportation Union basically. They will not cross a picket line in part because, you know, it’s not a thing. [The School Service Personnel Association] got the school buses on board, and they’re like, “If they won’t cancel school, I’m going to need four of you at 4:45am.” And like, we had our bus driver, and they brought in their people from their national to tell us what we needed to do if they would not cancel schools.

Important in these examples is not the specific tactic (work stoppage) used but the shared purpose and parity of agency cultivated among various school personnel (teachers, cooks, and bus drivers).

But Mary had a broader vision, musing that she would like to see more connections with groups like Labor Notes. She continued:

[Many union trainings] are not really organized. They don’t talk about, like, this is how you talk to people and this is the power of strikes beforehand and don’t you remember that the coal miners went on strike for two years? Can you imagine being on strike for two years? ...so it’s like, that, I wish we could figure out how to get people more to say “You know what, it’s okay for me to look for ideas outside group, outside of my, you know, my association because there are people everywhere that have made big changes.” I mean...you, other countries have, you know, shut down things completely. I mean, France, good lord, they’ll strike over

cigarette prices. The whole entire country will be like “uh-uh,” and I wish that as a nation, could you imagine what we could get done? Instead of our people getting poisoned over and over and over again and left in the deeper and deeper poverty if we as a state were like, “We ain’t doing shit.”

Lucy built on Mary’s points, thinking more broadly both geographically and in terms of issues: “Eastern Kentucky is literally being poisoned by their water. Their water is not drinkable. You know, people want to talk about Flint, like, literally an hour from here our water is being poisoned.” Again, the specific tactic (work stoppage) is not the most salient detail of this excerpt. More significant is the cultivation of a shared affinity with other workers and others affected by inequitable economic and ecological policies.

Creating intersections of the personal and professional. This function refers to members’ creation and consumption of posts or comments that elucidate previously hidden, shared connections between their personal and professional lives. Mary, for example, described a specific post made by her husband (also a teacher and group member) exemplifying the overlap of personal vulnerability and professional concerns: “...he shared our checking account balance. I don’t remember what it was like. I thought it was like two dollars, but it was less than that.” Francis immediately remembered the exact amount: “a dollar sixty-eight.” Mary continued:

Yeah...it was, like, really small, and there were like hundreds of comments and like nobody had over fifteen bucks. Lots of people were in the hole, and it was just kind of saying, look, we all are in this boat together. It’s not a personal failing. Like, that’s one of my favorite things to share because we as a society guilt ourselves. We’re like, I shouldn’t have so many kids, I shouldn’t have bought that car, I shouldn’t have done this, I shouldn’t have taken out so many student loans. Maybe if I’d worked harder at this, but it’s just, you know, American society is stacked against us.

Mary’s post inspired dozens of similar posts from members on their personal Facebook pages where they shared photos of their paychecks or checking account balances along with descriptions of their working conditions and demands. Although poor pay is a common complaint among teachers, Mary’s post captured the financial precarity many teachers experience and its real effects on their personal lives, limiting their ability to save for the future, purchase a home, or even put dinner on the table.

Reimagining the *good teacher* subjectivity. This function refers to opportunities for members to reject or revise their discursively situated conceptions of what it means to look, talk, act, and think like a *good teacher*. As we described in our theoretical framework, subjectivity encompasses the discursively situated ways one understands herself and her relationship to the world; this function refers to group members’ opportunities to understand themselves and their relationship to the world differently as a result of group activities. Discussions of subjectivity are axiological (*what is good or valued?*) as well as epistemological (*how does one know?*). What does it mean to be a good teacher? In the United States, teaching is dominated by women; the *good teacher* subjectivity, as a result, overlaps considerably with that of the *ideal American woman*. She is motherly, capable but yielding, so driven by her innate desire to nurture that she will forgo her own needs to provide for her children. How do we know? Depictions of teachers in books, movies, and television shows; news coverage of real teachers and their work; the conversations we have

with our friends and family members. A striking teacher is just the opposite: defiant, demanding, and confident of her own worth.

The group provided members with a safe space to engage in such reimaginings. Key to the group's success, admins argued, was its secrecy and the ways members could present and understand themselves while under the auspices of the group. Leaders speculated that members felt comfortable revealing facets of themselves in the group they were reticent to share in wider online contexts and in face-to-face settings. These versions of themselves, leaders agreed, were not necessarily the versions deemed most acceptable for influencing West Virginia's children:

Lucy: [describing a popular protest sign parodying a pop song with the line "Move, bitch, get out the way" altered to ridicule Senate President Mitch Carmichael] Oh yeah, the "Mitch, get out the way"? [speaking as if someone else] "Do you want your children being taught by these people?"

Mary: [also adopting a contrived, proper voice] "This is not professional."

Lucy: Yes I do! If I have children those are the kind of people I want teaching my children.

Mary: Right? Seriously.

Lucy: Like, I need people who will say "this isn't right."

In this and similar moments, leaders seemed to be imagining a new *good teacher* subjectivity. The typical teacher—which, Mary noted, is usually a woman—is also pliant, easily shaped by more powerful forces. But Mary was aware that she occupied many subjectivities, some conflicting. She explained, "I'm not just a teacher. I'm a mother, I'm part of this community, I'm a West Virginian, and you continue to let that ripple out, I'm working class, I'm poor, you know, because whenever you're looking at West Virginia we have one billionaire. He's the governor, and all the rest of us are poor." The group seemed to give members a space to consider these conflicts while adjusting their understanding of what it meant to be a *good teacher* and then to occupy this revised subjectivity safely—secretly—before doing so in a wider context.

Discussion

Social media platforms provide labor organizers with a unique mechanism for connecting with teachers and other public workers, with malleable spectrums of personal to professional, public to private. In Teachers TOGETHER, leaders and general members valued their secret Facebook group because it provided a place where they could easily gather and share information, share tactics, and work as members of a community rather than as individuals. These obvious group functions proved important to the overall success of their movement. But group members did not always agree about the management of the group or its purposes. When asked what the group should do better or differently in the future, 9.4% of survey respondents selected "More frequently stop conversations about candidates' positions and legislative actions unrelated to education," while 3.1% indicated that such conversations should be more frequently allowed. In a write-in response to the same survey item, one respondent wrote, "Understand that some teachers are Republican but don't support the WV Senate's action. Often we don't feel welcome in the group." Another wrote, "Be more professional with exchanges on the website. Teachers should be setting examples as leaders." Responses to this item reflect my (Crystal's) informal observations of group interactions. There were few contentious posts, but when a post became argumentative,

it was usually because the conversation had expanded to topics beyond candidates' stances on issues explicitly related to PK-12 schools and their faculty and staff or had become openly partisan.

Some group members, as the survey item responses and focus group data suggest, wanted to foster engagement on a broader range of issues, including gender disparities among workers and ecojustice. When considering these members, the group's covert functions were just as important as its overt functions. Although Teachers TOGETHER's leaders resisted the notion that they empowered members, the group gave members a space to test out a new way of occupying the *good teacher* subjectivity, which for some members meant becoming more overtly political and interested in a wider range of issues. By working to keep the group's discourse civil and organized, leaders facilitated members' stretching and testing of this new subjectivity. The other covert functions (creating connections to the wider labor community and creating intersections of the personal and professional) are not completely distinct from reimagining what it means to be a *good teacher*. Recasting themselves as equal workers alongside colleagues such as school cooks and bus drivers (employees classified as service personnel rather than professional personnel in West Virginia) and other laborers around the world requires a discursive adjustment which, we notice, shifts members' talk away from business unionism and toward social justice unionism. So, too, does rejecting the pervasive U.S. bootstrapping discourse that insists low wages and bad benefits are exclusively personal rather than economic failings. If this shift toward SJU is an aim of labor organizations (and we believe it should be), leaders must more strategically create opportunities for members to reconsider the *good teacher* subjectivity and how they enact it. This function of labor organizations must become overt rather than covert.

As the group continues to evolve, we wonder if (and, if so, how) members of Teachers TOGETHER will continue to enact their reimaginings of the *good teacher* subjectivity, particularly in more public spaces. As we write, the newly elected Republican supermajority in the West Virginia legislature has laid out an ambitious, destructive agenda for the 2021 session. It includes preventing teachers from electing to automatically deduct their union dues from their paychecks, restricting teacher speech about sexuality and other divisive topics, diverting tax dollars from public schools to educational saving accounts, making striking explicitly unlawful in state code, reducing requirements for earning a teaching license, and eliminating the state income tax while bolstering more regressive taxes. In order to successfully combat such legislation, group leaders and broader membership must reframe what it means to be a *good teacher* not only for themselves but also for their wider communities if they hope to retain the public support that helped sustain them during the 2018-2019 work stoppages.

References

- Appalachian Land Ownership Task Force. (1981). *Land ownership patterns and their impacts on Appalachian communities: A survey of 80 counties*. Washington, DC.
https://www.crmw.net/files/1981_Land_Ownership_Study.pdf
- Appalachian Regional Commission. (n. d.). ARC history.
<https://www.arc.gov/about/ARCHistory.asp>
- Brogan, P. (2014). Getting to the CORE of the Chicago teachers' union transformation. *Studies in Social Justice*, 8(2), 145-164.

- Creswell, J. W., & Creswell, J. D. (2018). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (5th ed.). Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Miller, D. L. (2000). Determining validity in qualitative inquiry. *Theory into Practice*, 39(3), 124-130.
- Dandala, S. (2019). Teacher social justice and the field of industrial relations in the United States. *Labor and Society*, 22, 571-584.
- Derrida, J. (2001). Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences. In P. Rice & P. Waugh (Eds.), *Modern literary theory: A reader* (4th ed.) (pp. 195-210). New York, NY: Hodder Arnold.
- Deskins, J., Bowen, E., & Christiadi. (2015). The economic impact of right to work policy in West Virginia. Morgantown, WV: Bureau of Business & Economic Research, West Virginia College of Business and Economics.
https://www.wvlegislature.gov/News_release/documents/Right_to_Work_FINAL.PDF
- Environmental Working Group. (1996). Dishonorable discharge: The 50 most polluted rivers in the country. https://www.ewg.org/research/dishonorable-discharge/50-most-polluted-rivers-country#.Ws4Z_Mgh3UI
- Fletcher, B. (2011). Interactions between labour unions and social movements in responding to neoliberalism. In G. Gall, A. Wilkinson, & R. Hurd (Eds.), *The international handbook of labour unions* (pp. 270-290). Edward Elgar.
- Gramlich, J. (2019). 10 facts about Americans and Facebook. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/16/facts-about-americans-and-facebook/>
- Hampson, R. (2019, February 20). ‘Any talks of striking?’: How a West Virginia teacher’s Facebook post started a national movement. *USA Today*.
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/education/2019/02/20/teacher-strike-west-virginia-school-closings-education-bill/2848476002/>
- Heckscher, C., & McCarthy, J. (2014). Transient solidarities: Commitment and collective action in post-industrial societies. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 52(2), 627-57.
- Jefferson County Board of Education v. Jefferson County Education Association, 393 S.E.2d 653 (1990).
- Jones, J. M. (2019). Conservatives greatly outnumber liberals in 19 U.S. states.
<https://news.gallup.com/poll/247016/conservatives-greatly-outnumber-liberals-states.aspx>
- Krutka, D. G., Asino, T. I., & Haselwood, S. (2018). Eight lessons on networked teacher activism from #OklaEd and the #OklaEdWalkout. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education*, 18(2), 379-391.
- Maffie, M. D. (2020). The role of digital communities in organizing gig workers. *Industrial Relations*, 59(1), 123-149. <https://doi.org/10.1111/irel.12251>
- Maton, R. (2016). WE learn together: Philadelphia educators putting social justice unionism principles into practice. *Workplace*, 26, 5-19.

- Millis, B. J. (2004). A versatile interactive focus group protocol for qualitative assessments. *To Improve the Academy*, 22, 125-141.
- Moody, K. (1997). *Workers in a lean world: Unions in the international economy*. Verso.
- Moran, M. F. (1890). Letter to Edward Robertson, Esq., Labor Commissioner. West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture and History.
<http://www.wvculture.org/history/labor/umwadistrict1702.html>
- O'Donovan, C. (2018). Facebook played a pivotal role in the West Virginia teacher strike.
<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/carolineodonovan/facebook-group-west-virginia-teachers-strike>
- Ramírez Plascencia, D. (2018). Education reform, teacher resistance, and social media activism in Mexico, 2013-2016. *The Educational Forum*, 82(3), 321-334.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00131725.2018.1457748>
- Ruel, E., Wagner, W. E., & Gillespie, B. J. (2016). *The practice of survey research: Theory and applications*. SAGE.
- Saundry, R., Stewart, M., & Antcliff, V. (2012). Social capital and union revitalization: A study of worker networks in the UK audio-visual industries. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 50(2), 263-286.
- Shearer, E. (2021). More than eight-in-ten Americans get news from digital devices.
<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/01/12/more-than-eight-in-ten-americans-get-news-from-digital-devices/>
- United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2019). May 2018 state occupational employment and wage estimates: West Virginia. https://www.bls.gov/oes/2018/may/oes_wv.htm#25-0000
- United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2020). Union members—2020.
<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>
- United States Census Bureau. (2018). County poverty rate for the United States: 2013-2017.
<https://www.census.gov/library/visualizations/2018/comm/acs-5yr-poverty-all-counties.html>
- Upchurch, M. (2014). The internet, social media and the workplace. *International Socialism*, 141, 119-138. <https://eprints.mdx.ac.uk/13020/>
- Valenzuela, S. (2019). Unpacking the use of social media for protest behavior: The roles of information, opinion expression, and activism. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 57(7), 920-942. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764213479375>
- Webb, J. (2021). The most dangerous people in the country. *BELT Magazine*.
<https://beltmag.com/the-most-dangerous-people-country-west-virginia-teachers-strike-2018-mother-jones/>
- Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. Basil Blackwell.
- Weiner, L. (2012). Social movement unionism: Teachers can lead the way. *Race, Poverty, & the Environment*, 19(2), 37-40.
- West Virginia Center on Policy and Budget. (2013). *Who owns West Virginia?*
<https://wvpolicy.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/5/land-study-paper-final3.pdf>

Winkler, A. M., Scull, J., & Zeehandelaar, D. (2012). *How strong are U.S. teacher unions? A state-by-state comparison*. https://nccft.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/20121029-Union-Strength-Full-Report_7_0.pdf

Winters, M. (2017). Where do US teacher salaries really go the furthest? <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2017-06-01-graph-where-do-us-teacher-salaries-really-go-the-furthest>

Critical Education

criticaleducation.org

ISSN 1920-4175

Editors

Stephen Petrina, *University of British Columbia*
Sandra Mathison, *University of British Columbia*
E. Wayne Ross, *University of British Columbia*

Associate Editors

Abraham P. DeLeon, *University of Texas at San Antonio*
Adam Renner, 1970-2010

Editorial Collective

Faith Agostinone-Wilson, *Aurora University*
Wayne Au, *University of Washington Bothell*
Jeff Bale, *University of Toronto*
Jessica Bacon, *Montclair State University*
Grant Banfield, *Flinders University*
Dennis Beach, *University of Gothenburg*
Amy Brown, *University of Pennsylvania*
Kristen Buras, *Georgia State University*
Paul R Carr, *Université du Québec en Outaouais*
Lisa Cary, *Murdoch University*
Antonio J. Castro, *University of Missouri*
Erin L. Castro, *University of Utah*
Alexander Cuenca, *Indiana University*
Noah De Lissovoy, *University of Texas at Austin*
Gustavo Fischman, *Arizona State University*
Stephen C. Fleury, *Le Moyne College*
Derek R. Ford, *DePauw University*
Four Arrows, *Fielding Graduate University*
David Gabbard, *Boise State University*
Rich Gibson, *San Diego State University*
Rebecca Goldstein, *Montclair State University*
Julie A. Gorlewski, *University at Buffalo, SUNY*
Panayota Gounari, *UMass, Boston*
Sandy Grande, *Connecticut College*
Todd S. Hawley, *Kent State University*
Matt Hern, *Vancouver, BC*
Dave Hill, *Anglia Ruskin University*
Nathalia E. Jaramillo, *Kennesaw State University*
Richard Kahn, *Antioch University Los Angeles*
Ashwani Kumar, *Mount Saint Vincent University*
Ravi Kumar, *South Asian University*
Harper Keenan, *University of British Columbia*
Kathleen Kesson, *Long Island University*

Saville Kushner, *University of Auckland*
Zeus Leonardo, *University of California, Berkeley*
Darren E. Lund, *University of Calgary*
John Lupinacci, *Washington State University*
Alpesh Maisuria, *University of East London*
Curry Stephenson Malott, *West Chester University*
Gregory Martin, *University of Technology Sydney*
Rebecca Martusewicz, *Eastern Michigan University*
Cris Mayo, *West Virginia University*
Peter Mayo, *University of Malta*
Peter McLaren, *Chapman University*
Shahrazad Mojab, *University of Toronto*
João Paraskeva, *UMass Dartmouth*
Jill A. Pinkney Pastrana, *Univ. of Minnesota, Duluth*
Brad Porfilio, *San Jose State University*
Marc Pruyn, *Monash University*
Lotar Rasinski, *University of Lower Silesia*
Leena Robertson, *Middlesex University*
Sam Rocha, *University of British Columbia*
Edda Sant, *Manchester Metropolitan University*
Doug Selwyn, *SUNY Plattsburgh*
Özlem Sensoy, *Simon Fraser University*
Patrick Shannon, *Penn State University*
Steven Singer, *The College of New Jersey*
Kostas Skordoulis, *University of Athens*
John Smyth, *Federation University Australia*
Beth Sondel, *University of Pittsburgh*
Hannah Spector, *Penn State University*
Marc Spooner, *University of Regina*
Mark Stern, *Colgate University*
Peter Trifonas, *University of Toronto*
Paolo Vittoria, *University of Naples Federico II*
Linda Ware, *SUNY Geneseo*