



Chapter 3. Ungrateful Teenagers and Misbehaving Women

On the second day of the 2018 Oklahoma educators' strike, then-governor Mary Fallin made a now-infamous public comment at a press conference: "Teachers want more, but it's kind of like a teenage kid who wants a better car" (News on 6). Some educators' responses employed a common refrain used to justify the shutdown. As Liz Hogget, Norman Public Schools educator said when asked for a response by the Washington Post, "We're doing this for our kids" (Villafranca). For many Oklahoma educators and beyond, the emphasis on striking "for the kids" was both true and a discursive strategy to ensure public support and avoid (gendered) non-producerist tropes (i.e., "teachers are lazy," "teachers want more money for less work"). Many educators sought (and felt pressure) to appear as though their demands for livable wages were second and inconsequential to their demands for increased education funding. Many educators felt they walked a thin line for such public support, as teaching, like domestic and socially reproductive work generally, is often under-waged or unwaged (women's) work (Brown and Stern). In practice, however, the day after Fallin made the comment, masses of protesting educators packed inside the Capitol building and erupted in a much more confrontational response. Jingling their keys and following Fallin as she walked up the stairs to her office, they chanted in collective anger, "Where's my car? Where's my car?" (Gstalter). One teacher participant posted a video of the event on Twitter and conveyed her strong emotional response to the spontaneous collective rebuke to the governor. "I'm crying," she wrote.

Fallin wasn't the only politician to excoriate the boldness of predominantly women militant educators. State representative Kevin McDugle experienced an uncomfortable moment of fame after a visit to a high school class just before the walkouts. Students pegged him with questions and shared what became a viral social media video in which he proclaimed that he would not vote "for another stinking measure when [teachers] are acting the way they are acting," despite his previous self-stated support of educator-friendly legislation in the year prior (Williams and Hosseini). While neither state leader mentions gender, directly, educators have experienced a long and ongoing history of paternalistic infantilization and rigid gendered expectations of appropriate feminine behavior that have aimed to discipline women's labor dispositions and militancy.

Today, women comprise 98.7 percent of all pre-kindergarten and kindergarten educators, 80.5 percent of all elementary and middle school educators, 56.5 percent of all secondary educators, and 86.7 percent of all special education educators (BLS). At the same time, "nearly half of all principals, including two-thirds of high school principals and three-fourths of superintendents, are men" (Russom). In higher education, while the majority of all tenure track faculty are men, women comprise the majority of part-time (53.8 percent) and full-time (53.9 percent)

contingent faculty positions, and women faculty overall earn ten to twenty percent less than men (Colby and Fowler 2). Despite this, in the literatures on educator unionism, few examine in-depth the gendered relations of education labor organizing. Urban's historical account of gender, race, and the history of the NEA, Kate Rousmaniere's writing on the life and work of Margaret Haley, whose leadership and organizing initiative created one of the first educator unions in Chicago at the start of the twentieth century, and Jackie Blount's work on gender/sexuality and school workers are a few notable exceptions. Many other writings on educator unions and union struggles may mention gender or the contributions of people like Haley or, more recently, Karen Lewis in stoking militant social movement unionism. Yet, less commonly is gender engaged as a central lens of analysis in the history and present of an historically feminized employment sector and a majority women union composition (Brown and Stern).

Since the more widespread resurgence of militant and social justice unionism after the 2011 Wisconsin educator sickouts and the 2012 CTU strike (Buhle and Buhle; Hagopian and Green), an emerging body of scholarship and writing has sought to describe and make sense of this new era of rank-and-file militancy. As we highlighted in previous chapters, anti-collaborationist solidarity- and social movement-focused approaches are not new. Yet the early twenty-first century has certainly marked a turning point after the previous four decades of the combined repression of educator militancy, educational austerity, and the delimiting of educators' pedagogical agency in the forms of mandated corporate curricula, high stakes testing, and school privatization.

Studies of the histories of Southern Black educator organizing illuminate the key significance of gender and women's work in professionalist approaches to educator organizing (V. S. Walker). For Black educator organizing in the North and South, BIPOC women excluded from and marginalized by White teachers' unions sought community-based forms of educator professionalism. The history of the NEA illuminates that, while its origins were rooted strongly in the leadership of predominantly men administrators and academics, it relied on a resounding majority women membership base and was significantly shaped over time by rank-and-file women- and queer-led organizing from within the organization who sought union democratization and the prioritization of women's and queer people's grievances in the workplace (Blount; M. Murphy; Urban). And rank-and-file women educators across the nation, like Margaret Haley and the Chicago Federation of Teachers (CFT), organized caucuses and unions driven by communalistic, feminist, and class struggle orientations to educator labor and socio-political responsibility (Blount; M. Murphy). Conservative professionalist or singularly class-centric analyses of the histories and ongoing present of educator unionism can diminish the ways in which both race and gender animate the structuring and experience of class and class exploitation.

In the context of higher education, college and university faculty have been predominantly men, historically. As women have entered the ranks of the faculty since the 1970s, so has the casualization of faculty employment increased. While

contingent, non-tenure track faculty employment was utilized as a stop-gap measure by college and university administrations during the economic crises of the 1970s, shifts toward part-time and low wage academic employment have, in the past few decades, constituted a drastic restructuring of higher education labor. Women and contingent faculty of color represent the majority of casualized labor (Schell). In many places within higher education, contingent faculty are overrepresented in disciplines and departments that more often undertake “care” labor, e.g., undergraduate general education areas like composition courses in English and public speaking in communication studies, and, of course, departments of teacher education, in particular early childhood and elementary education). In the context of writing studies, a site within higher education that has been both the source of intense casualization and adjunct faculty organizing, Eileen Schell writes:

[W]omen are thought to be particularly good at delivering the kind of care work associated with teaching writing or providing language instruction: painstakingly poring over drafts and making comments, tutoring and administering writing centers and writing programs, holding one-on-one conferences, offering informal advising and support for students struggling with writing and with adjusting to the higher education environment, especially first-generation college students, students of color, international students, and women students. (xv)

Within these sites, women have often been on the forefront of organizing to address the disparities experienced by feminized contingent faculty, advocating for feminist and social justice approaches. For example, contingent faculty labor activists, Sue Doe and colleagues forefront the affective dimensions of organizing. They caution against “[m]easuring success by a limited set of predetermined outcomes [which] can cause activists to overlook important work that is not readily measurable.” Doing so can have the effect of delimiting organizing work within “the pervasive, market-driven language of productivity” (214). For the authors, such an approach is hegemonically patriarchal. Rather, they suggest that “social change is spurred by and maintained through emotion,” and it gains legitimacy among workers via centering the stories of educators’ lived realities and attachments (217).

Histories of educator unions illuminate the struggles of women, in particular BIPOC women, to fight for power within their unions, and in so doing, as Doe and colleagues advocate, they have engaged in particular forms of organizing. More often, women-led and feminist-oriented movements within union organizing sought coalitional approaches, engaged families and community, developed practices of mutual aid and care, and more often avoided more public positions of celebrity movement leader (which, historically, were positions predominantly held by men) in favor of less hierarchical and more horizontalist approaches.

Through an in-depth examination of Oklahoma, we illuminate that educator organizing within and on the periphery of established unions in the 2018 strikes is both a continuation of and historically specific gendered dynamics of power.

● Women and Gender/Sexual Minorities

Negotiating Power in Hostile Territory

During the educator uprisings in 2018, Bhattacharya wrote that women educators were building a new labor movement: “These are women fighting for dignity and security in the most commodious sense of those terms. Their gender is not incidental to this strike, their narratives of fear about their families and health, are not backstories to what is merely a wage struggle” (“Women Are Leading the Wave”). Bhattacharya aimed to bring much needed attention to the gender politics of the education strikes, noting that women disproportionately undertake the caregiving labor in their families, schools, and communities. More commonly, the 2018 educator strikes were narrated as popular uprisings, class struggle, and/or a struggle of college-educated professionals for dignified wages and respect. Similarly, gender and sexual politics (through which socially reproductive labor is contested and disciplined) is not incidental to educator organizing but fundamentally shapes its theory and practice (Russom).

Crys Brunner writes that battle metaphors are pervasive as descriptors of teacher activists and leaders: teachers on the frontlines, as warriors, in the trenches, fighting for educational reform and the common good. For Brunner, they “are warriors because they fight for children; they are also warriors because they have entered a domain from which they and their beliefs have been historically excluded” (as cited in Abowitz and Rousmaniere 239). For Abowitz and Rousmaniere, Brunner’s conceptualization of women teacher activists and leaders as warriors is important in two key ways. First, it acknowledges how “women leaders negotiate power in a hostile territory that is not of their own making,” within the conditions and decision-making of education and within established educator unions that seek to exert influence upon it (239). Secondly, Brunner’s conceptualization of the “warrior” challenges pervasive sentimentalization of women teachers as self-sacrificing caregivers and, instead, draws on longer traditions of feminist organizing within unions and education. Abowitz’s and Rousmaniere’s description of such a model, in which they draw on feminist political theorist Lauren Berlant’s notion of the diva citizen, is worth quoting at length:

The history of women’s political participation and activism is typically narrated as cooperative, relational work that is characterized by solidarity and the communal networks which embed the single activist in a larger associational web (see Eisler, 1987; Welch, 1990). As progressive educators, we go against the grain to hold up a model of political activism and leadership that is characterized in part by its acknowledgment of the benefits of individual strength and the singular ambition to influence others. While we understand the limits of the diva citizen—progressive politics cannot survive without cooperative, communal models of political work—there are many moments in schools and in public life at large that call for the diva’s assertive, near domineering power. Diva

citizens work for the good of others. Originating outside of power, their motivation is to make power available to others from the margins. They have a strong understanding and respect for the everyday struggle of everyday people, and their leadership is informed by resistance strategies and a “logic of survival” intended to obtain dignity for ordinary people amongst the institutions and policies they did not build (Bettina Aptheker quoted in Jones 114-116). (Abowitz and Rousmaniere 243)

With Abowitz and Rousmaniere, we suggest (the marginalized) histories of traditions of women, feminist, and queer organizing that have shaped educator unions and movements helps us to understand such “cooperative, communal modes of political work” as distinct and in-tension with (heteropatriarchal) modes of organizing that rely on centralization of authority and hierarchy. Further, these histories offer important examples of diva citizen leaders who work to “make power available to others.”

In highlighting feminist traditions of organizing within historically feminized education labor, we continue to foreground that traditions and instances of feminist organizing are not homogenous, but are situated with relation to race, class, and geography, among other intersections. In noting gendered differences in modes of organizing, we do not seek to suggest that all women and queer educators organize to “make power available to others,” or that historical instances of feminist organizing are uncomplicated by White supremacy, compulsory heterosexuality, or patriarchy. Catherine Beecher, as one prominent example, advocated strongly for the mass hiring of women as teachers during the late nineteenth century. A class-privileged White woman, she argued for the proliferation of common schooling in the service of nation-building and successfully made the case that women could be paid much less than men (Grumet). And, within early feminist-oriented educator union movements, White women leaders foregrounded ethnic and class solidarities yet perpetuated anti-Black racism. Rousmaniere’s racial biography of Margaret Haley details the Chicago Federation of Teachers (CFT) class-struggle-oriented founder’s White silence and exclusion of the city’s growing number of Black educators from the CFT. Rousmaniere articulates a context in which Haley’s class struggle unionism for White elementary school teachers, even in the face of her own experiences of ethnic discrimination as an Irish Catholic, refused to understand the racial capitalist exploitation of Black workers by industrialists and politicians (11). Her own racist ideologies created long-standing legacies within Chicago’s educator unions that created tension (rather than solidarity) with Black social movements in the city’s schools and communities, “limiting efforts [for anti-racist work]” (Lowe, cited in Rousmaniere, “White Silence” 13).

Along the lines of Blount, we seek to illuminate that the experiences of rank-and-file women, gender minorities, and queer educators in their unions and workplaces have been shaped by particular gendered/sexualized experiences of exploitation. From the disciplining power of binaristic gender and normative

heterosexual kinship relations, women and queer educators have, often of necessity, birthed alternative forms of power to survive and fight for a more just world (Blount; Quinn and Meiners).

● Gender and Educators' Work

The history and ongoing dynamic legacies of the genderization and feminization of educators' work coupled with historically shifting social conceptions and policing of sexuality and sexual identity, have always impacted and shaped practices of educator organizing. Blount, historian of gender, sexuality, and school workers, writes that schools have always been and are "gender-polarized places," and places where educators were/are tasked by social and political authorities to police and nurture "proper" gender roles and sexual behaviors/identities among school workers (1). As common schooling proliferated in the late nineteenth century, gendering educators' work became a strategy mobilized on multiple fronts to exploit and control women's labor for low wages (Albiseti; Grumet; Strober and Tyack). Women's early pedagogical traditions (starkly different from the militaristic style of many men teachers) and organizing (for equal pay, for community responsibility, to be able to work after marriage and/or pregnancy) were often met with gendered/sexualized retaliation (Bailey and Graves; Blount).

In the early twentieth century, as teaching became "women's work," educator organizing was often fraught with gendered notions of labor value. Often, men (high school) teachers would not support women (elementary school) teachers in efforts to equalize pay across grade levels. At the time, as teaching became staunchly feminized, school administration became decidedly masculinized. In part, the development of the hierarchical administrative structure of schooling was firmly rooted in policing women in public space. According to Blount, as early women educators became teachers of co-educational spaces, opponents circulated fears of their supposed inability to successfully discipline boys, especially adolescents. Blount writes,

Typically they used persuasion and other nonviolent means of maintaining discipline. Experts eventually conceded that women generally seemed to have as good, if not better, results with their disciplinary practices than many men who resorted to corporal punishment and intimidation. Word quickly spread that women teachers governed their classrooms effectively. (23)

With an increasing number of women living independently and "exerting authority in a public place," fears arose that women were becoming too independent, and perhaps, "that they may not need men." From these fears arose the position of the superintendency, a means for men to serve as a "gender-regulating presence" (23). Many early superintendents were not experienced educators yet supervised women's work and were paid significantly more to do so.

In 1920, women teachers comprised eighty-six percent of all teachers, and ninety-one percent of all women teachers were single women (or seventy-eight percent of the total teacher workforce) (Blount 59). In unprecedented ways, teaching and nursing offered working- and middle-class women a means toward self-subsistence without reliance on a husband's or family's income. Blount recounts the ways in which women school workers were able, in ways previously limited, to live differently: in shared housing and kinship that pushed social boundaries of mentorship, knowledge-sharing, and socialization beyond the watchful eyes of patriarchs. The rise of the eugenicist movement and the spread of White supremacist fears surrounding the decline of White college-educated women's rates of marriage and reproduction created policies and practices that sought to staunch women's ability to live independently of heteronormative family structures. In 1929, a writer in a popular periodical of the time shared an increasingly common sentiment:

In two ways, at least, these women [spinsters] are all alike, both marked with one stamp. They do not have a normal social life, no matter how good a time they may be having, and they do not have a normal release for the deepest emotions in them, which may therefore, either atrophy or nurture them or find an unnatural and illicit outlet. (Banning cited in Blount 67)

From the 1920s to the 1940s, the rise of the science of sexology and eugenics created social associations between spinsterhood and lesbianism. Coupled with educator organizing, locally and on the part of the NEA, to challenge districts to change policies that banned married women from teaching (among other post-WWII labor shifts) and the genderization/sexualization of single women teachers as diminutively "queer" and abnormal, the demographics of women teaching shifted from majority single to majority married by the 1960s (Blount).

During this era, as women gained access and influence within public space, (predominantly men-authored) research on teaching and teachers' work tended to emphasize uncertainty as to how the increasing numbers of women teachers would impact the socialization of boys and normative masculinity (Bailey and Graves). During the war years, women took up superintendency positions (usually as long as there were no possible men candidates) in greater numbers. After the war, women were pushed out from administration in large numbers as men returned from overseas and sought out civilian jobs (Blount). At the same time, qualities desirable in administrators increasingly drew on certain ways of understanding "masculine": athletic, military experience, and family patriarch. In 1946, one district gushed over its new "ideal" administrator: "The man selected could not be labeled as an effeminate being. He was a former collegiate athletic hero. His physique was comparable to any of the mythical Greek gods. He was truly the ultimate in manliness. The last, but not least in importance of his personal characteristics, was the fact that he was married" (Blount 84). Rank-and-file (majority single) women educators' organizing in the early twentieth

century through the 1930s, alongside broader rising labor, anti-racist, and socialist movements, often marked by bloody struggles in the streets and picket lines (S. Smith), among other threats to the status quo of power, produced a retaliatory moral panic on multiple fronts. The post-war years saw a structural repression and push-out of single women, queer, and socialist and communist educators and intensified pressures to police the roles of gender and sexual identity and behavior in schools (Blount).

Scholarly and popular writing on gender, sex, and teachers' work in the first half of the twentieth century tended to focus singularly and only implicitly on White middle class women, "render[ing] Whiteness invisible and foreground[ing] gender as a unidimensional concept rather than a site of intersectional and multidimensional meanings imbued with racialized, classed, and religious standpoints (among others)" (Bailey and Graves 692). As historians of the formation of the common schooling system and interrelated social institutions, i.e., the juvenile justice system, White wealthy women socially organized to wield influence over the development of such institutions driven by (still persistent) motivations to correct the "culture of poverty" (Wolcott). In such a frame, the problem of education is rooted in the "poor" behavior of working class and racialized students, families, and communities. Alternatively, many rank-and-file women and queer educators who organized to exert influence via unions and professional associations recognized the material conditions and challenges facing urban and rural communities during the peak of industrialization and its decline (Blount; M. Murphy).

Gender inequity in teaching and teachers' work is historically complex, intersectional, and cannot be mapped neatly along a progressive timeline. Rather, as Blount writes, "current conditions have developed in specific historical contexts" and struggles (11). As Blount and other historians of educator organizing illuminate, the collective organization and influence of women and gender/sexual minorities in education-related struggles have emerged and waned within specific conditions and were challenged within and beyond historically heteropatriarchal educator unions. By understanding the longer, deeper story of gender/sexuality and educator organizing, we can see gendered differences in theories of power and change put forth by educator organizers, whether within frames of professionalist, trade, solidarity, or social movement approaches to unionism.

● Rank-and-File Women and Queer Educators' Community-Based Approach

Scholars of teachers' unions and teachers work illuminate that the NEA has existed as a historically patriarchal organization with efforts in key points of its history on the part of predominantly women teachers to democratize and wield influence in the interest of rank-and-file educators (rather than men administrators). Early on, the NEA operated mainly as a teacher institute, where

predominantly women schoolteachers would convene to listen to lectures provided by men academic educational experts. Growing increasingly agitated by the NEA's centralization and bolstered by local organizing of, especially, elementary school urban educators, rank-and-file predominantly women teachers organized a teachers' rebellion within the organization in various eras of its existence, the earliest at the turn of the twentieth century.

During this time of industrialization, urban educators and students experienced difficult teaching and learning conditions that mirror, in many ways, today's struggles: overly-prescriptive curriculum; few resources; untenably large class sizes; and corporate evasion of tax contributions that would appropriately fund education. Marjorie Murphy writes of the gendered significance in women educators' organizing approaches:

The women proposed their own vision of education that was based on experience in the classroom as opposed to university credit; they thought that knowing the community was more important than satisfying the top administrative personnel. In the beginning the women did not regard their battle as being particularly feminist; instead they modeled their cry for human dignity on the example set by the trade unions. Eventually, however, as the educational stage became more contested, they responded more self-consciously as working women and identified the inherent sexism in the educational establishment (53).

Through militancy and collective bargaining women educators (especially elementary level educators who bore the brunt of under- and unpaid care work in schools) sought to challenge the ways in which women teachers were tasked with solving the issues of systemic failure via the extraction of their supposed infinite reserves of emotional, intellectual, and physical labor (Shelton).

For Urban, the NEA's origins in promoting a professionalist approach existed at odds with, and predominated because of, the more men-dominated militancy of trade unionism. Urban suggests that the NEA catered to women teachers' needs and issues in strategically rhetorical yet insubstantial ways for much of its pre-union (pre-1960s) existence. Yet as both Urban and M. Murphy demonstrate in their respective historical studies of the NEA and AFT, the early twentieth century saw a women-led teachers' rebellion within the NEA to decentralize leadership and decision-making, and to push the organization toward trade unionism rather than (White) professionalist respectability.

While Margaret Haley is one of the more well-known figures in initiating and leading women teachers to organize labor unions in the early twentieth century, M. Murphy notes that women-led efforts among primarily elementary school teachers took place in cities across the country. Three thousand teachers organized in local federations and delegations from Milwaukee, St. Paul, St. Louis, New York, Washington, and Philadelphia, among other places. They joined Haley and the Chicago Federation of Teachers at a 1904 Boston NEA meeting to express their frustrations with its administrator-led conservatively professionalist

orientations. M. Murphy writes of one speaker, an elementary school teacher, from one of these delegations, who spoke to “enthusiastic applause”:

“[H]igh salaried officials who direct the destinies of the National Education Association . . . point out the way to educational perfection for the benefit of teachers who receive extremely low salaries.” Yet this latter class, which [the speaker] termed “the silent partners,” had to “pay the bills for the support of the association in the main.” (57)

At the same meeting, Haley spoke of the need to push for more labor-oriented forms of organization and “insisted that industrial workers and teachers had a common cause ‘in their struggle to secure the rights of humanity through a more just and equitable distribution of the products of their labor’” (M. Murphy 58). Likely, these early efforts of women educator’s union militancy and organization existed in relation to the increasingly eugenicist derogation of White spinsters as gender/sexual deviants.

Despite the efforts, women educators did not succeed in decentralizing decision-making within the NEA nor shifting its organizational focus toward the issues that motivated rank-and-file women educators to organize (M. Murphy; Urban). It was not until decades later, 1960–1973, the NEA experienced a dramatic shift from professional organization to union. In the 1950s and 1960s, the NEA’s national leadership was predominantly White men “often with minimal experience in the schools,” with an organizational structure that diminished the practical power of the elected representative assembly and centralized decision-making among staff (Urban 171). Around this time, state-level affiliates similarly were dominated by men administrators “who agreed with the NEA staff in their suspicions about teacher power. The two groups [state affiliate leaders and NEA staff] together managed to exercise an effective veto over NEA policies and actions they considered undesirable, especially the establishment of any independent teacher voice” (172).

While Urban wrote his history of the NEA in 2000, his analysis of the NEA’s role in the burgeoning teacher militancy of the 1960s seems prescient in relation to the 2018 strikes. He writes, “While these [1960s New York City teachers’ strikes], like most strikes, originated in local conditions and were affected primarily by local circumstances and concerns, the failure of the NEA to respond effectively to those conditions and circumstances for its own national organizational advancement” significantly shaped its history in the 1960s (172).

Urban suggests that there is consensus among analysts of this era that the increasing influence of militant urban secondary educator organizers, more often men, catalyzed the NEA’s shift from professional organization to union. Yet, M. Murphy disagrees with prioritizing gender over other factors of militancy, namely generational differences. The post-war years saw an influx of younger men into high school teaching, dramatically shifting the gender and age demographics in secondary education: “36.2 percent of secondary teachers but only 25.5 percent of elementary school teachers were under thirty years of age” (220). Further, M.

Murphy found that few, if any, of the analysts of the rise of teacher militancy in the 1960s knew of or engaged the history of the early years of teachers' union organizing. "[T]heir oversight of the contribution of the women to the revival of militancy in the union reinforced the stereotypes about women [as anti-militancy]" (221).

The literature (mainly from the area of labor-management relations) aiming to understand the demographic characteristics of attitudinal militancy in the 1960s–1980s supports M. Murphy's assertion that gendering militancy as masculine or the domain of men in this era is problematic. Conducting a study of five hundred twenty-four elementary and eight hundred sixteen secondary teachers in 1990 and an extensive review of decades of research, Samuel Bacharach and colleagues argue that "militancy of this type is best understood as an outcome of the teachers' poor integration into the school organizations in which they work, rather than as an outcome of the demographic characteristics of teachers or the geographic location of their school" (584). In 1989, Williams and Leonard analyzed a survey of four hundred fifty elementary and secondary teachers in Mississippi and found that women were more likely to support collective action than men. In other words, workplace conditions were likely the most pressing factor for militancy in this era.

Like M. Murphy, Blount argues that histories of queer educator unionist leaders have been largely erased from studies of school workers and worker organizing. Prior to the national eruption of social movements for gay liberation, notably inspired by the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969, the firing of gay and lesbian (and suspected gay and lesbian) educators were often isolated, quiet incidents (Blount). Spurred by the momentum of the gay liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s, queer educators across the nation had been increasingly organizing against their unjust termination. For example, in 1972, John Gish, a New Jersey high school English teacher formed the NEA's first Gay Caucus. In his words:

Most gay teachers are known to be gay, or are assumed to be gay, by their students and Boards of Education. Just as long as nothing is said, the system tolerates them. I'm fed up with lying to them. I'm tired of using women to accompany me to proms so that a "proper" image is preserved. I'm tired of listening to anti-gay jokes in the faculty room and being forced to laugh with the straights (Blount 115).

Gish, along with several other teachers organizing within their unions and communities were fired for organizing for the rights of gay and lesbian teachers to work. Yet, their actions inspired a wave of organizing within state and local unions across the country, most notably in California. "Morgan Pinney and students at San Francisco State University successfully encouraged the California Federation of Teachers to pass an ambitious resolution supporting the rights of homosexual teachers" (Blount 120). In 1974, Gish's Gay Teacher's Caucus passed a similar resolution in the NEA, providing much needed legal resources and support for so many unjustly fired LGBTQ+ educators. In the AFT and New York's UFT, educators had a more difficult time. Longtime leader of the UFT, Albert

Shankar, “did not want the UFT to take a public position on the rights of gay teachers, believing the matter to be too divisive” (Blount 124).

The risks for gay and lesbian teacher activists were high, and many, like Gish and others, were pushed out from teaching altogether. Nevertheless, their successes, Blount argues, were due in large part to the broad coalitions and social movement infrastructure that had been developing and building since the 1960s, which made their efforts possible in the first place (Hagopian and Green). In New York’s TU, Clarence Taylor documents the differences in women’s, and particularly Black women educators’, organizing roles and interests among radical socialist and communist educators. He writes, “By means of committees, women focused on community work, creating an alternative path to leadership” (Taylor 516).

For example, Rose Russell, leader of the TU’s Legislative and Political Action Committee, “forg[ed] relationships with political figures and labor and civic leaders and by helping to make the union an important player in the fight for civil rights, adequate funding for public schools, and decent pay and improved working conditions for teachers” (Taylor 532). Russell fought tirelessly for academic freedom and against the repression and firing of radical teachers during the red scare era in the 1940s. Lucille Spence created the TU’s Harlem Committee, and focused efforts on community-based organizing for intercultural and anti-racist professional development for teachers. Alice Citron, another organizer for the Harlem Committee, fought for African American history and culture programs in the public schools. Mildred Flacks engaged the Harlem Committee’s modes of “teacher-community relationship” model in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the city’s largest Black neighborhood at the time (550). “Women also led the child welfare, library, social, and parents’ committees, groups that were important in helping to define the TU’s social movement unionism” (556).

Taylor argues that internal political divisions within the TU intensified with McCarthyist repression of its members and contributed to its demise. Its hierarchical and patriarchal leadership’s alignment with Soviet Russia existed in contrast with forms of community-based and coalitional social movement work undertaken and led by some of its most effective women leaders and organizers. From the 1930s to the 1940s, women’s positions in executive leadership declined, yet women comprised most of the TU’s membership. Despite the decline in executive representation, Taylor argues that women sought influence, instead, via organizing committees:

They helped create alliances with parents, labor, and civil rights groups with the goal of assuring that all children receive the best education possible. Women took the lead in the fight for sufficient funding of schools, the construction of new school buildings, the reduction of class size, the elimination of racially biased textbooks, and academic freedom. Women, like their male colleagues, worked to improve the working conditions of teachers, but they also became vociferous advocates of social movement unionism” (535).

Belinda Robnett argues that TU's women leaders were not notable celebrities in the union (these were mainly men), but rather served as "bridge leaders" who "kept their pulse on the community. The goal of bridge leaders was to gain trust, to bridge the masses to the movement and to act in accord with their constituents' desires." Bridge leaders worked in the "movement's or organization's free spaces, thus, making connections that cannot be made by formal leaders" (Robnett 26-28).

Like Flacks, Citron, and Russell, the most powerful instances of feminist organizing in education arose from analyses that foregrounded the intersections of gender, race, and class. In Oklahoma, Autumn Brown's educational biography of civil rights activist, educator, OEA member, and catalyst for the national sit-in movement, Clara Luper, illuminates the commitments to building Black power, class struggle, and feminist politics that animated her classroom pedagogy and renowned activist work. For Luper, holding down picket lines for striking sanitation workers, gathering members of the NAACP Youth Council in her home to plan direct actions, and cultivating her students' voice and agency were all deeply intertwined. Brown writes that Luper, among other Black women educator activist contemporaries, has had long-lasting legacies that persist and continue to shape local movements. Most often they are remembered for their civil rights activism yet, Brown contends, their contributions to the state's histories of labor and educator movements as educator organizers are marginalized and not well understood.

These histories of gender and education labor provide a foundation from which to analyze the salience of gender in Oklahoma's strike and for cultivating a more robust intersectional analysis and organizing practice.

● Gender as a Salient Lens to Understand the 2018 Oklahoma Strike

Historical understandings of the feminization and heterosexual disciplining of educators' work and the corresponding organizational approaches and efforts on the part of rank-and-file women and queer educators provides an important analytical lens to understand the 2018 strikes. These gendered dynamics existed everywhere in their own situated, specific ways. As Gillian Russom notes in their writing on the resurgence of educator militancy, many rank-and-file women educator organizers understood the strikes as "a gendered rebellion." Russom cites Petia Edison in Kentucky, "I believe women are sick and tired of being sick and tired" (176). Emily Comer of West Virginia stated, "I know it's not just about my paycheck or my healthcare—the worse the economy gets, the harder my job jets, it's more stressful with more emotional burden on the teachers in my building who are mostly women" (178). Los Angeles teacher organizer, Rosa Jimenez: "[The fact that] teachers, mostly women (in LA many women of color), are expected to be teachers, counselors, nurses, nourishment providers, all while taking care of our own children, reflects capitalism's tendency to extract as much labor as possible from someone with the minimum compensation" (178). As

Russom contends, the 2018–2019 educator militancy must be understood within the context of a broader political climate of women-led organizing, including the Black Lives Matter movement, the Women’s March, and the emergence of the #MeToo movement.

Eric Blanc’s 2019 book-length journalistic narrative of the 2018 strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona, *Red State Revolt: The Teachers’ Strikes and Working Class Politics*, has become an influential and popular text in understanding this particular moment in educator militancy. Blanc’s writing has become a lens through which many educators and labor folks have come to understand what took place in Oklahoma. He makes the case that the strikes emerged via (and their success hinged on) a militant minority of socialist educators with political organizing experience. In his narrative of Oklahoma, he predominantly emphasizes the leadership of Alberto Morejon and Larry Cagle as the respective creators and moderators for the state’s two largest agitational Facebook pages, TTN and OTU. In twenty-two pages describing the build up to and unfolding of the strike, Morejon and Cagle are described as rank-and-file leaders up against OEA leaders. He writes that the state’s educators were “insufficiently organized to overcome the hesitancy of their union leaders [in the OEA]” (163). He goes on to write:

Nor would it be fair to pin the blame on Morejon and Cagle. As individuals lacking the benefit of any previous organizing experience, they did the best they could to push things forward, and they stuck their necks out, often at great personal cost. Morejon’s efforts, in particular, played a critical role in raising educators’ desire to fight and in forcing Republican lawmakers to grant teachers a historic pay raise. What was missing in Oklahoma was a team of like-minded grassroots militants, armed with activist know-how, class struggle politics, and an orientation toward working within the unions to push them forward. (163)

In our oral history interviews with more than fifty educators across Oklahoma’s rural, suburban, and urban contexts illuminates the complexities of the origins, motivations, and leadership activities that sustained the lead-up to the strike and the action itself. It was, perhaps, true that insufficient organization existed among educators within, on the periphery, or beyond the OEA that could have challenged the union’s dissipation of the strike before any real gains could be made, as was the case with West Virginia’s wildcat strike. However, the overemphasis on a few, mainly men, leaders can diminish the widespread distributed leadership and labor of the state’s predominantly women educators.

Unlike every other state, Oklahoma educators did not gain any progress on their demands during the two-week strike. Immediately prior to the strike, in an effort to avert it, legislators conceded an average of \$6,100 wage increase for the state’s educators. While this concession was a major victory, they still fell far short of what educators felt would be necessary to adequately address the extreme disparities facing Oklahoma’s public schools after so many years of

disinvestment. In August 2017, more than five hundred teaching vacancies existed and nearly five hundred teaching positions were eliminated. In the 2017–2018 academic year, the state issued 1,975 emergency certifications, and in 2018–2019, the state issued 3,038—an increase of fifty-four percent in just one year (Eger).

In Oklahoma (and elsewhere) important networks of community relationships were mobilized for mutual aid efforts—relationships rooted in extended kinship networks, local church communities, and social movement networks. The origins of the strike are not easily rooted in the creation of either of the popular Facebook pages (Krutka et al.). Rather, agitational and organizing efforts took place within, on the periphery of (or, at least temporarily, reactivated) local unions that, since the passage of right-to-work legislation, had decreased in activity, operating mainly to negotiate contracts every few years. In smaller towns or less active locals, negotiations often only take place between the president of the local and district administration. The networks of relationships that emerged in the lead-up to and during the strike are, by and large, sustained by the care work of women, mothers, and the organizing efforts of those on the margins of Oklahoma’s evangelistic conservative governing ideology that has predominated its electoral offices in recent decades. This ideology has marked Oklahoma as one of the worst states in the US for women’s quality of life, taking into consideration women’s access to healthcare, employment and pay, violence against women, incarceration rates, among other indicators (Trotter).

A deeper examination illuminates gendered forms of organizing (and retaliation) that contributed to the tenuous organization of Oklahoma’s rank-and-file educators. As we emphasize throughout the book, our analysis (and many of our narrators’ reflections) exists with the benefit of hindsight that tens of thousands of striking Oklahoma educators did not have in the moment.

● A More Nuanced Retelling of Gendered Leadership in Oklahoma’s Strike

As the most prominently featured rank-and-file leaders, Larry Cagle and Alberto Morejon are often written together as similar actors in their social media agitational capacities with key differences in their respective demeanors: where Morejon was more often cast as polite or diplomatic, Cagle and his OTU Facebook group were considered brash and antagonistic. In practice, their approaches and activities were rooted in quite different theories of power and change—Cagle as self-described politically progressive and critical of the OEA’s conservatively professionalist approach and Morejon as a more conservative figure invested in electoral politics and ambivalent about unions altogether.

While OTU’s mode of organizing relied heavily on persuasion and lighting up the media, Morejon engaged a more conciliatory relationship with OEA (at first), and approached his work as agitator and facts provider, collaborating with OEA leaders to use TTN to communicate updates and information. While OTU had a considerable social media membership (around fourteen thousand), TTN

catapulted to nearly one hundred thousand in the lead up to and during the walkouts. Morejon's approach to organizing engaged gathering and distributing information via TTN (in ways that Arizona educators later found helpful and replicated (Garelli)), closed-door discussions with union leaders, and constructing alliances with school administrations, superintendents, and legislators. After the walkouts, Morejon created and distributed informational "grades" for lawmakers to entice TTN followers to vote for the most education-friendly lawmakers, whether Republican or Democrat, met with and endorsed political candidates, and held well-publicized meetings with the State Superintendent, Joy Hofmeister. He was sought after by such figures because of his status as a leader of the educator movement. In May 2020, Morejon lost this status after he was arrested and charged for "making lewd proposals" to a former junior high school student (Savage). With the arrest, Morejon passed the moderator duties for TTN to another educator and the page changed its name to Oklahoma Edvocates. It continues to exist as an information hub.

According to Cagle, in an interview with Erin, after the strike began, OTU continued to engage in more on-the-ground organizing. While OTU was certainly an emerging organization, it was also quite new, and events unfolded rather quickly. In the absence of a more formal organization or democratic processes for decision-making in OTU (which Arizona organizers learned from by developing a site-based liaison network and practices of democratic decision-making among all members), Cagle quickly became spokesperson and influential leader, traveling to districts across the state, especially rural Republican strongholds, to make presentations on the need for more widespread action. Cagle said he drew his organizing experience and approach primarily from his previous career as a business manager in Florida. For Cagle, results and impact were a priority over organizational structure or process. During the strike, Cagle continued to travel to places around the state to support educator organizing. In one Oklahoma City area district, one school's principal refused to shut down. Cagle and local educators used their cars to block the streets surrounding the school so cars and buses could not arrive on campus. Cagle was fiery about winning, and not just increased wages. As a person who worked an additional one or two jobs, depending on the season, Cagle and many other educators certainly needed the raise. Cagle and OTU, like many educators across the state, sought smaller class sizes, increased wages for support staff, more student supports, among other common good issues. Cagle even attempted to collaborate with the statewide employee union to join the strike (to no effect), and successfully coordinated a solidarity strike with construction workers at the state house organized with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO).

In part, he said he took up this role because he was unafraid and confident to talk to the media, and in part, because others in OTU were fearful or unwilling to speak to the media. Without the backing of the union or experience and the time to put in place organizing practices of risk mitigation, OTU members

felt they were too out in the open, as individuals, and Cagle discovered this was true the hard way. In retrospect, Cagle said he felt he blustered to the media too often, “What can they do except fire me?” he remembered thinking early on. He cringed while recalling a moment when he stated to a reporter that he “double dog dared” the state’s education leaders to fire him. Cagle suggested he did not quite understand the stakes at the time, for himself or for others. He certainly came to, later, after being transferred and demoted, “lambasted in the media,” and even faced physical attacks, like a brick smashed through his car window in Guymon, a rural town near the panhandle known for its meat packing plant. At one point, he found himself trying to find a way to explain to his students his arrest years prior for drunken driving, which had been pasted across social media and circulated widely. He described losing friends, witnessing co-organizers face retaliation in ways that severely impacted their lives and livelihoods, and, to keep his most recent position, he said he was required by his new district leadership to “promise to never do that again.”

Like Cagle, Chuck McCauley is a respected educational leader in his community of Bartlesville, Oklahoma, a town an hour or so north of Tulsa. In an oral history interview, he shared he was a teacher for nine years in rural schools outside the Bartlesville area before he became an administrator at Bartlesville High School in 2001, and later, in 2016, the superintendent of the district. In 2017, a parent advocacy group in town had come to McCauley to ask him to join them in their efforts to advocate for raising teachers’ wages in the district. McCauley had heard “rumblings” two or three years prior from educators in his community. As a former classroom teacher from a working-class background and married to a passionate educator, McCauley was supportive and recalled the important gains the state’s educators won in 1990 as he was finishing his teaching degree at Northeastern State University in Tahlequah, Oklahoma. He stated the time for action felt more important in 2018 than ever as he felt they were in a more dire position than thirty years ago, with a severe teacher shortage that was impacting the quality of educators in his district. Where he used to have dozens upon dozens of educators applying for an open position in his district, at the time of his interview in 2019, he had two or three, maybe. In September 2017, McCauley addressed the monthly meeting of Tulsa County Area Superintendents to press them to support a walkout for increased funding: “I gave a pretty impassioned plea to them, at which nobody supported. There was not one person in the room that was interested in that at that time.”

Over time and as rank-and-file educators became more agitated, witnessed the early actions of OTU and heard and contributed to the rumblings in the hallways and teachers’ lounges, McCauley had cultivated allies among administrators in various state and local professional organizations. While McCauley certainly was not a rank-and-file organizer, he played a role in ensuring superintendents supported (at least tentatively) suspending classes during the walkout. As he describes, after the April 1 passage of now legislation that conceded funding and wage increases, he imagined the first day of the walkout would be a “one

and done” endeavor: “We felt like we needed to—we already made all these plans. Our community had made plans to suspend classes where we could still make sure kids were fed and the community was taken care of that we should go ahead and do—have a walk out for a day—kind of a victory lap kind of thing.”

While the collegial relationship between Morejon and the OEA festered, especially in the aftermath of the “date debate” described in Chapter One (McCauley, Morejon, and an overwhelming number of rank-and-file educators pushed for an earlier date that threatened state testing while OEA pushed for a less confrontational post-testing date), the OEA maintained its relationships with administrators through regular meetings and debriefings. McCauley recounted,

We canceled school on Monday—suspended classes on Monday, and then sent people to the capitol, and then things went—I think there was all kinds of hope that more would be done, and there was so much distrust and misinformation that was going out for a variety of reasons. . . . I drove to Oklahoma City every day. The administrator organization, which is called CCOSA, Cooperative Council of Oklahoma School Administrators, they have an office close to where the Oklahoma Education Association office is, and they had a daily meeting at one o’clock for all superintendents that wanted to come, or they had Zoom meetings, and I didn’t know it at the time, but I went to that first one, and I ended up leading. I led every meeting. “So, Mr. McCauley, you’re the kind of the one that got this started, so, line up,” and we had people that were there from across the state just kind of talking about daily updates.

Whereas the OEA only reluctantly collaborated with Morejon and Cagle, the state union collaborated regularly and closely with the state’s superintendents throughout. In the end, predominantly men superintendents became, to use Blount’s language, gender- and militancy-regulating presences upon predominantly women educators.

In summary, the months-old OTU and subsequent high school student organizing played an important (but not singular) role in catalyzing the statewide strikes through effective yet quickly organized sickout and walkout actions in the state’s most populous districts. While Morejon welcomed the celebrated role of movement leader via his large social media audience and used it to make alliances with legislative allies, administrators and, tenuously, with union leaders, Cagle and OTU placed their focus and energies on engaging the rank-and-file (students, fellow education workers) to achieve their demands by any means necessary. Cagle’s risky approach was unevenly matched to other OTU members’ level of preparedness and comfort. As McCauley’s activities underscore, many superintendents were at a tipping point as well, facing severe budget shortfalls and a paltry and ever-shrinking pool of qualified educators. In spite of this, superintendents’ support for a teacher walkout was precarious as many feared a more widespread rebellion and sought to manage the walkouts on their terms and in collaboration with the OEA.

● Oklahoma's Rank-and-File Educators Building Relational, Communalistic Organization

While Morejon, Cagle, and McCauley were represented as catalysts or leaders in the media, they were far from the only or even the most significant leaders of the walkouts. In the absence of union leaders' initial interest or capacity in fomenting the action, many educators across the state played important roles in agitating, organizing actions and mutual aid, and strategizing (often on the fly) collectively.

Amy Brown and Mark Stern, in their study of the work of Philadelphia's social justice caucus, Caucus of Working Educators (WE) and the closely intertwined educator activist organization Teacher Activist Group (TAG), found that even as "the bulk of the community surrounding WE and TAG identify as women . . . they were clearly utilizing many political and historical devices that emerged as responses to sexist oppression, misogyny, and patriarchy." Even so, they "weren't quite as vocal about how and why neoliberal policies (education and otherwise) are made possible by and through gender" (178). Similarly, through examining the efforts of so many educators across the state (including many stories untold here), we seek to foreground the ways in which predominantly women's organizing utilized organizing strategies that responded to sexism, misogyny, and heteropatriarchy.

Our interviews suggest that Oklahoma educators' working conditions were the most pressing factor to inspire militancy, and that a mass action had been under informal discussion ("murmurs," "rumblings") in school buildings among rank-and-file educators for a year or more prior in at least Putnam City, Stillwater, and many other districts in and surrounding Tulsa, and Oklahoma City. As TCTA member (at the time) Kate Baker described:

It almost felt like there had just been kind of something in the air like almost that entire year. . . . I feel like the year before [November 2016 (Wendler)] when we, when the penny sales tax didn't pass like I feel like things started, at least for me, it started to kind of rumble and become like this very like disquieting experience where people went from being like, "Okay, well we're just going to keep puttering along and working this way," to this feeling of like, "We're not getting anything. We're not like, we've tried to get raises this way. It's not happening. We're trying to get more funding this way. It's not happening. Like now is the time to act."

For Baker and many others, witnessing West Virginia educators go out on strike was an important catalyst:

I think seeing West Virginia go out, everybody was like, "Oh my God, like this, we can do this. Like this is actually a thing that we can do." And I know that it had already been kind of in the works, and like the

talking and the rumbling was there, but I think watching them do it really empowered our teachers to be like, and maybe some of the people who would maybe be a little bit more like hesitant to do it, like seeing them do it was really big.

For the previous two years, many union educators participating in their locals and state unions had undertaken coordinated advocacy trips and some larger rallies to the capitol to speak with legislators, without response or movement. Many of our narrators noted the February 2018 rally at the capitol, co-organized by the state unions to unsuccessfully push forward a bill to raise educators' wages by five thousand dollars as a tipping point that shifted educators' dispositions toward more confrontational action.

For many educators in Oklahoma, and elsewhere, a culture of personal sacrifice for work is commonplace. As one forty-six-year veteran Stillwater teacher, Sue Hoffman, described of the 1990 strike: "It was so against everything that as a teacher you did. You know, you were in your classroom, you did this, you didn't, no matter whether you had the money for stuff, you did it. And, you know . . . it was so, it was hard." Another veteran educator of twenty-four years, Jody Webber described feeling "selfish" in the lead up to the most recent strike: "I want my kids to have great teachers, but if you don't pay us, they're not going to have great teachers. . . . And I feel a little selfish feeling this because it's not what we're supposed to do as teachers." Even though educators experienced unprecedented public and community support, striking educators described non-educator family members, friends, and online commentators questioning their motives in ways that made them feel defensive or guilty for wanting better wages or working conditions. Stillwater educator Allison Dierlam recalled such questions: "Are they just in it for the money as opposed to for our children,' or when we'd say we're in it to get fully funded in education, they're like, 'what does that mean?'"

The disciplining narrative of the uncomplaining educator who spends her own paltry salary on school supplies and makes do with what she's provided was made more powerful by prevalent fears of retaliation by administrators. Even in a serious teacher shortage, Oklahoma educators knew they would face consequences for supporting or becoming involved in organizing the strike, and many fears were justified as educators faced repercussions upon their return to their classrooms, including increased surveillance, threats to job security, and online harassment from some parents. In places, especially where educators struck without the support of their school boards or administrators, some educators were fired or experienced increasingly hostile working conditions, as with Cagle in Tulsa Public Schools.

○ Stillwater Educators Organizing Via "Extra PLC Meetings"

In Stillwater, while Morejon created the TTN Facebook page and gained a lot of recognition from this, as a relatively new teacher, the local effort in his home city

began in earnest with a group of his rank-and-file colleagues at Stillwater Junior High School (SJHS). A fellow teacher at the time, Heather Anderson, described the emergence of this informal group early in the academic year:

There had been a lot of tensions with some new mandates that administrators had been passing down, paperwork that we had not been previously made to do, common assessments. And so people were frustrated. And we met in PLCs [professional learning communities] to talk about things that we were frustrated with. And sometimes these PLC meetings were very driven by administration and so we were very frustrated with that. It didn't feel like a true PLC community. And so we started having extra meetings, if you will, after school and during our planning periods throughout the week.

While the movement for PLCs arose as a means for in-service teachers in grade-level or departmental teams to meet to grow their pedagogical practice, institutionally implemented PLCs have become, more often, mandated spaces where teachers review and discuss student data (Cochran-Smith). As Anderson described, administrators were unaware of these “extra” PLC meetings. Morejon attended these meetings, which served as a space to air SJHS-specific grievances among young and veteran teachers alike. Eventually these “extra PLC meetings” among the English department grew “organically” to encompass more departments in the school and eventually, teachers from the high school, which shared space with the junior high. As state-level talks of the strike became louder in the early spring, the group grew to include educators from other schools in the district and eventually began meeting at a local Methodist church. Building representatives from the Stillwater Education Association (SEA) stepped up to facilitate the meetings, in communication with the OEA and to coordinate logistics as the strike date loomed.

Anderson explained that the “extra PLC meetings” began with a focus on site-specific grievances and then, “we started to delve into the bigger picture. Like, I, as a teacher, am working way more overtime than any other profession, and I don't have much to show for it. And we've been asked to do these extra duties, and it's really taking time away from my family. And so, when those talks started bubbling, it really started to get more organized and [we started] saying we need to do something about this and now is the time.”

Searcy Crow was also a part of these early efforts. A veteran teacher at Stillwater Junior High School (a former colleague of Morejon and Anderson), Crow was born and raised in Stillwater, her father worked for the local newspaper and her mother was a thirty-five-year veteran special education teacher in the district. Her mother, an active unionist, inspired her to become a teacher: “I watched her really, truly enjoy her students and being involved in her students' lives and going to their prom and their games.” Her mother's involvement in the union inspired Crow's own political involvement: “She was very involved with OEA. She was very involved in SEA.” In 1990, Crow was eleven years old when

her mother struck alongside her fellow Oklahoma educators for smaller class sizes, increased funding, and wage increases:

I do remember that one day she let my sister and I come with her, and we stood in front of the high school and walked back and forth right there at the intersection of Boomer [Ave] and we, you know, held signs and chanted with everybody. And I remember her talking a lot about her hope for [House Bill] 1017 was just smaller class sizes. She had several hopes about 1017 of course, but the biggest one was class sizes.

In 2018, Crow found herself helping to organize many of the same activities, now with her own young daughter in tow. Crow teaches in a “very politically active” building, where many of the teachers are “pretty involved and definitely more aware than a lot of schools about what’s going down at the capitol.” The issues that motivated Crow to become involved in her local area in the lead up to and during the strike were teacher retention and increased education funding “as a teacher and as a parent, honestly.”

As part of our oral history project, Crow was interviewed by another veteran educator, Kristy Self, both English teachers at the junior high and high school, respectively. Self and Crow graduated high school in the same class. Growing up, Self also knew and was influenced by Crow’s mother, a person who Self acknowledged “many people have had a chance to look up to,” and both recognized the “special bond” they experienced with their teachers as students in the district. While Crow was active in the OEA, Self has spent much of her teaching career working to create educational spaces to ensure that LGBTQ+ students in her small town and across the state could survive and thrive. Self has been instrumental in mentoring educators and students in her school and across the state to form gender and sexuality alliances (GSAs) and, with other LGBTQ+ activists, organized an annual statewide GSA summit.

Crow’s and Self’s decisions to become educators via the influences of community elders, teachers-as-mentors, and parents is commonplace across our oral history interviews. Like Crow and many others, their parents’ (often mothers’) union organizing activities and participation inspired them to step up their activities in the 2017–2018 academic year. In Stillwater, Crow, Self, Anderson, Webber, and many other community-rooted educators played pivotal interdependent roles in building up pressure to ensure the support of the school board and superintendent, organizing a network of community organizations to provide child-care and nutritional services to Stillwater students, organizing local picket lines and rallies, recruiting and coordinating donations for food to rally-goers in town and at the capitol, arranging transportation and carpool schedules, and more. For many, their year-round caregiving and community-oriented labor in their church communities, LGBTQ+ activist networks, and their webs of relationships with alum, students, and families served as the basis for their capacity to do so.

For Anderson, her involvement in the early organic emergence of the “extra PLC meetings” helped to ease her fears: “There were some worries about could

I lose my job, that kind of thing. But eventually, whenever I realized that this is a big picture, big movement, I wasn't afraid to jump in anymore and I felt very comfortable speaking up for my profession." Anderson was not new to experiences of risk for taking a stand on the job. For years, she navigated pushback from parents and questions from administrators for teaching about issues of race, Whiteness, and social justice themes. As an illustrative example, Anderson often paired district-required "canon" texts written by, as she stated, "old dead White guys," with literature that challenged such texts as universal perspectives (e.g., pairing Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* with Brendan Keily's and Jason Reynold's *All American Boys* to critically engage tropes of White saviorism). Self also pushed the boundaries of expectations for pedagogical neutrality, teaching units that, for example, explored the work of water protectors at Standing Rock and LGBTQ+ people in the military. A year or two prior to the walkouts, Anderson experienced coordinated online harassment from a parent group for organizing a basic White privilege discussion exercise with her grade level team that had created an overwhelming amount of emotional labor on top of her already-intense workload.

According to Anderson, in the immediate aftermath of the strike, many of the Stillwater Junior High School teachers "said, no. You [OEA leadership] don't dictate when it ends, the teachers do. I mean it's not the union that speaks for all of us." Educators used sick days to continue to rally at the capitol the Monday after OEA had called off the strike. Yet, Anderson described what felt like a "threatening" environment on the part of her administration. "You need to be in the classroom or else, that kind of a situation." Stillwater educators felt intensely defeated, exhausted yet required to prep students for standardized testing, and, overall, ready for an end to the school year. While SEA continued to hold meetings at the local church after the strike ended, participation dropped significantly in the immediate aftermath. The justified animosity toward OEA, threatening atmosphere on the part of administration, and educators' feelings of mental and physical exhaustion contributed to the decline of Stillwater educators' organic grassroots organization in the months and years following.

In an interview in early 2021, Self, however, felt that the experiences of educators getting organized and politically active during the 2018 strike led to more robust involvement in SEA in the longer term, and gave them a stronger position from which to advocate for safer and better working conditions during the pandemic that they wouldn't have had otherwise.

○ Moore Rank-and-File Educators' Efforts to Wildcat

Like Stillwater, Moore, a city on the outskirts of Oklahoma City, educators attempted to continue to walkout after OEA called off the strike. While Stillwater, along with other major districts in the state, continued to walkout until the OEA officially called the strike to an end on Thursday, April 12, Moore Public Schools Superintendent Robert Romines called educators back to class the day prior to its

official end. As the state's third largest district (behind Tulsa and Oklahoma City), many have speculated that Moore's return kicked off a domino effect that contributed to OEA's decision and the decisions of subsequent districts to follow suit.

While the SEA in Stillwater was largely inactive except for contract negotiations, Moore's NEA local, TEAM, was more robust, in part due to the regular activities of its racial justice caucus, CREM, discussed in the previous chapter. TEAM also has its own union hall with a large meeting space. Angel Worth was a second-year educator during the walkouts, a natural organizer and keenly attuned to state and local politics. Growing up in a military and union family, Worth had always been a union person and, with talk of the strike emerging, became active in TEAM and in her building. She attended the capitol rallies every day, and with a group of colleagues, hunkered down in her state representative's offices for much of the two week-strike.

Initially, like many of our interviewees, she felt the walkouts were disorganized and was unsure of the plan once educators arrived at the capitol. After the excitement of the first day or two wore off, she wanted an informed, effective plan of action. She soon realized that she and her colleagues would be responsible for their own activities, and no one would tell them what to do. So, she and her co-workers began to get organized, working with other educators to form a local secret Facebook group for Moore to share information and create talking points. Worth was not the only person to step up, others in their network organized pickets and daily marches from a different school site each day of the strike.

From the start, Worth could sense the superficial charm in her and colleagues' conversations with legislators. Then, things shifted as her group began to become more confrontational and specific in their demands on officials:

And so, it went from real feel-good, like, "I'm here for education," to, "When are you going to leave?" Like, it almost feels like when you're invited over to somebody's house, and you can tell that they don't want you there anymore. That's kind of what it felt like. There was just this tension that nobody wanted to address that we were past the feel-good emotions and to the point, "Okay. But, are you going to do anything? Is anything going to change?" That's kind of where that shift happened.

Into the middle of the second week, Worth needed a break from the daily slog of occupying her unwilling representative's office space. She decided to attend a legislative session that heard a bill which would legalize discrimination against LGBTQ+ parental adoption. As an educator with strong commitments to LGBTQ+ and intersecting justice issues, Worth described feeling distraught. It was in that moment she learned of her superintendent's call to end the strike:

And so, I walked into my representative's office because it had been kind of a place of refuge to that point, like despite the fact that I didn't agree with a lot of things that he said and didn't feel like he was doing very much. His [legislative assistant] was amazing, like, love her. And then

that's just where a lot of people from Moore would be. And actually, the [TEAM] union president was in there. So, I remember going in there being like, "[Hey], this thing just happened. I'm so sad." I just remember crying or whatever.

Then within half an hour of being in his office, we got the email that Moore was done. So, I was already in a pretty emotional kind of emotionally fragile state of mind, and then that happened, and then our [state] representative was out of the building on a meeting, which felt really suspicious because our representative has a really close connection with our superintendent. So, a lot of people started saying, "Do you think that he pressured [Moore Superintendent] Romines to pull the plug?" 'cause he wasn't there for us to be like, "What's happening? Why did this happen?"

So, our union president went into [our state representative's] office and shut the door, and he was in there with a couple of other union people, which I understand them wanting their privacy, but it did feel like there was *literally a barrier in division and communication*. This has happened. You have all these teachers out here in this room. You all are in there. We don't know what to do next. And then they opened the door, and then they left, and they didn't talk to us [teachers] or anything (emphasis added).

Immediately afterward, Worth walked to her car and made a Facebook Live video to post to Moore's secret Facebook group calling on educators to continue to walkout the next day, which quickly went viral. Worth and her fellow workers organized a march from Moore to the capitol building with hundreds of educators, parents, and students.

Marches from surrounding districts had been taking place throughout the strike, including in Moore, and these provide an important glimpse into the amount of organizing labor and learning that took place during the strike. The largest was a one hundred ten-mile multi-day march from Tulsa to Oklahoma City, and its organizers underscored the labor necessary to coordinate such an event. Heather Cody and Kate Baker had been active members of TCTA, and through participating in a leadership training, were recruited by TCTA's then-president, Patti Ferguson, to lead an action during the strike—as Baker put it, the "brainchild" of Ferguson and TPS superintendent Deborah Gist—a one hundred ten-mile march from Tulsa to the capitol in Oklahoma City. In the lead-up to the march, Cody took on the bulk of the organizing work: identifying food, lodging, first aid support, and other resources to make the march happen. They held daily assemblies, created group processes for decision-making and information sharing among the hundreds of participants, navigated both outpourings of community support and one evening emergency when a rural community school administration disallowed their group to spend the night in

its gymnasium. Another evening, they navigated handling an unknown man who showed up to a group assembly and attempted to take it over. Together, they learned to manage national and international press requests after reporters ignored them initially, in which Cody felt gender played a role in relation to the ease with which Cagle and Morejon had access to media representation. Of the experience, Baker and Cody described forming strong and lasting emotional bonds with their fellow marchers.

Yet, unlike the Tulsa march and others, Moore's was unsanctioned and unsupported by the union or the district administration. Fellow Moore educator, Stephanie Price, recalled the march as a "powerful" moment: "It was a huge group of people. I mean I have this picture saved somewhere of tons of educators and support professionals and parents from Moore all standing on the steps of the building across the street from the capitol. It was just a beautiful protest, and it was very powerful." Worth understood it as, "a really pivotal moment because everybody knew that Moore wasn't supposed to be there. Everybody knew that Moore had pulled the plug and yet here are all these people back the next day." Then, the weekend came and went, and the momentum did not continue as fewer and fewer Moore educators returned the next week. After the OEA pulled the plug soon after, other districts followed Moore to re-open schools and morale and energy dissipated.

On one of the unsanctioned days at the capitol, Worth decided, with the support and prompting of colleagues impressed with her organizing skills and political knowledge, to run against her state representative. Recounting the experience, she described a tense moment when she spontaneously announced to the incumbent her campaign to unseat him in front of an audience of fellow teachers, after she had had enough of his empty rhetoric. He immediately stormed out, and Worth's colleague told her, crying, that she had overheard his angry conversation with TEAM's president in the hallway:

She's like, she overheard a conversation—this is hearsay, but she overheard a conversation between [Worth's state representative] and our union president, and allegedly, [the state representative] said, "I told you to keep teachers like that out of my office. I don't have to deal with that grandstanding witch."

Many other educators described legislators' talk and tone as inappropriate. In Karly Eden's interview study with Oklahoma educators, she reported that legislators made "derogatory remarks like, 'How come your math scores are so low?'" cussed and flung papers at teachers, and generally acted angrily and aggressive toward the predominantly women educators (77).

As Worth shifted her energies to focus on the campaign, she began to realize how much work and effort she would have to put in to push her campaign forward, and the severe disadvantage she experienced as a working-class educator in comparison to wealthier candidates like her opponent. She was campaigning, teaching, and, on top of this, she worked as a grocery store clerk on evenings

and weekends. She came to understand in a very real way that the game was rigged. In addition to her union president's collaborationism with the superintendent and legislators during the walkout, he also provided TEAM's union hall for her opponent's campaign event that summer—the same representative who had previously (allegedly) called her a grandstanding witch. These experiences caused her to cut ties with her local union and join the AFT, even as it had no real presence in her district. Worth has only grown into her role as an organizer and leader, later becoming active in a short-lived effort among educators across the state affiliated with NEU to push for safe school re-openings during the pandemic. Her activities culminated in the organization of a community protest at a school board meeting determining safety protocols where she delivered a petition with a few thousand parent and educator signatures. Like Anderson and many others, Worth continued to feel a sense of defeat by the culture of fear in her district, the lack of respect, and the constant uphill battle to fight for safe and equitable working conditions.

● Conclusion

While many educators across Oklahoma contributed to sparking the seeds of rank-and-file rebellion in the year or more leading up to the strike, they faced an uphill battle against a collaborationist state union, weakened and centralized in the decades following the 1990 strike by right-to-work legislation and ever-increasing austerity policies that continue to contribute to an exodus of educators from dismal and oppressive working conditions. In OEA's press conference calling off the strike, they were clear about their plan to return to their focus on lobbying (Wendler and LaCroix). While Worth had become disillusioned with her local and the OEA for their undemocratic collaboration with superintendents and legislators, the organizers of TCTA's one hundred ten-mile march, Cody and Baker, were recruited to become staff members for the OEA. The OEA's efforts turned from building the kind of relational and emotionally powerful horizontal modes of organizing (i.e., daily democratic assemblies) that fueled activities like the one hundred ten-mile march and toward "get out the vote" efforts, which became only partially successful that following November, with sixteen of sixty-five educator political candidates elected to the state legislature (Williams and Hosseini).

Rank-and-file Oklahoma educator organizers who undertook much of the relational labor to spark and sustain the strike did not see Cagle or Morejon as their leaders and most felt the OEA and their locals were disconnected from their grievances and patronizing of their efforts. In Oklahoma, many women educators who stepped up to organize in tangible ways in their local areas were often parents worried for their children's educational experiences. Many of the educators we interviewed, like Anderson, Self, Torres, Price, Worth, Waters, and others across the state were agitated and stepped up to organize because they were committed to social justice pedagogies and witnessed, firsthand, the

race, class, and gender inequities experienced by their students and families in school and society. They knew, in mundane, everyday ways, how it felt to take a stand for their pedagogical commitments. In Oklahoma, it was largely rank-and-file women's militancy that created the conditions for the strike. Of Morejon's politicking in the months that followed the strike (i.e., photo-ops with education-friendly politicians who sought his endorsement, publicized meetings with the state superintendent), Cody stated, "I don't see them out organizing any effort to make a difference. None of them came and walked with me. Just because you have a large social media presence doesn't mean much." Educators had ample experience being under the thumb of administrators and legislators and were uninterested in Morejon or other social media celebrities taking up the role of spokesperson for the movement.

Like Oklahoma, in West Virginia, no single person or group of revolutionaries oversaw the 55 United movement or mutual aid activities like the food distribution networks that sprang up in the lead-up to the walkouts. In a state with the fourth highest rate of poverty in the nation, food—from distribution to consumption—is political. Education workers inherently understood this political dynamic and developed ad hoc networks to ensure students were well-fed throughout the duration of the walkouts. Teachers at Beckley Elementary, for example, had around three hundred students on free and reduced lunches. Educators there pooled together their funds to set up free lunch at a local grocery store for their students during the walkouts. When businesses heard about this gesture, they donated food and gift cards to offset the cost. At Horace Mann Middle School in Charleston, bagged lunches were sent home in advance of the walkouts, funded and packed by parents and teachers. Those who couldn't donate worked at local food pantries and drove food drop-offs to students' houses. When asked about this outpouring of support, one teacher, unsurprised by these gestures, stated that giving "is basically a fact of life for teachers every day."

As we discuss in more depth in the next chapter, while West Virginia's organization sustained into the following years, Oklahoma's militancy dissipated, in practice, yet not in spirit. Cagle's experience of intense retaliation caused him and other OTU members to shift gears, working via alliances with legislators to push policy changes and efforts to push for a change in union leadership. In 2020, Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt attempted to appoint an anti-public education, anti-vaccinations homeschooling mother (with little to no public education experience) to the state school board (Brown and Palmer). OTU members composed a strongly-worded open letter implicating superintendents in the state for their unwillingness to advocate for education. After receiving a call from his district administration, Cagle scrambled to remove the open letter from the internet, not realizing the extent of the edits that had been made by other OTU members. "I have kids in college," he said, "I can't lose my job."

Even as many educators experienced retaliation or threats of retaliation, most of our interviewees expressed that they knew they would have to mobilize again, if anything were to change. Putnam City educator, Crystal Watkins, hoped

for a way forward that would not have to rely on statewide action, noting the scales of retaliation experienced across rural, urban, and suburban districts meted out by the legislature in the aftermath: “So, the backlash after the walkout, the grab for control of the school districts. We’re losing local control, I feel.” In contrast to appealing to state legislators on behalf of public education and educators across the state, Watkins expressed a desire for local union power: “So, we lost—we’re starting to lose some of our rights as individual districts. I would like to see that go back even further the other direction where we do have the ability to say as a district, here’s what we want to fight for, and we’re not going to have to wait for everyone else.” For Watkins, local union power might be the antidote to the state OEA’s co-optation she felt took place: “[S]ome other authority kind of just took away our morale at the end. It was so wonderful, and then someone just swept in and said it was over.”

In Oklahoma and elsewhere, educators’ work is cast as women’s work, and politicians and legislators made clear what they thought about women stepping out of line via their infantilizing and misogynistic comments. In many places, feminist modes of organizing via relationships of mutual care, distributed leadership, and diva citizens comprised the most powerful and generative instances of rebellion in the context of fomenting and sustaining the strike yet were not necessarily narrated as such in media and scholarly analyses.