

Critical Education

Volume 13 Number 4

October 15, 2022

ISSN 1920-4175

Transforming Unions, Schools and Society Education Labor Movements Across the Americas

Introduction to Part 4 of a Special Series

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Citation: Stark, L. W., Maton, R., & Dyke, E. (2022). Transforming unions, schools, and society: Education labor movement across the Americas. *Critical Education*, 13(4), 1-4.

<http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/criticaled/article/view/186728>

Abstract

This is the final issue in a four-part special series titled Contemporary Educator Movements: Transforming Unions, Schools, and Society in North America. While the previous three issues explored educator organizing in the United States, this issue expands the focus of the series to educator organizing across the Americas. The interviewees and authors in this issue offer engaged research and narratives of organizing in educator networks and unions in Canada and Chile. In doing so, they provide insights into the importance of internal organizational structures, external networks, and solidarity with and for struggles for justice in schools and society.



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This is the final issue in a four-part special series titled *Contemporary Educator Movements: Transforming Unions, Schools, and Society in North America*. While the previous three issues explored educator organizing in the United States, this issue expands the focus of the series to educator organizing across the Americas. The interviewees and authors in this issue offer engaged analyses of educator organizing in networks and unions in Canada and Chile. In doing so, they provide insights into the importance of internal organizational structures, external networks, and solidarity with struggles for justice in schools and society.

Educators in the United States led a historic upsurge of work stoppages in 2018 and 2019, which we can understand as part of ongoing educator organizing within contemporary educator movements. This upsurge was not limited to the mainland United States. Rather, educators led significant struggles across the world throughout this period, using organizing practices that share much in common with those documented within previous issues in this series. More specifically, these struggles show a “contemporary logic of resistance” (Wolfson et al., 2017, p. 397) that includes using new and traditional organizing tools, drawing on democratic and even horizontalist organizing processes, engaging in networks, and addressing multiple forms of oppression (Juris, 2008; Stark, 2019; Stark & Spreen, 2020).

In many cases, these movements build on years of militant educator organizing, drawing on lessons from these struggles to confront current education policies linked to neoliberal education reform (Stark & Spreen, 2020). In the same period of statewide anti-austerity educator organizing in the United States, there have been a series of major work stoppages and struggles in Canada and Latin America. In 2017, Argentinian educators led a general strike for several weeks, demanding and winning the continuation of national union negotiations and a 35 percent raise (Samartin, 2017). Beginning in May of 2019, over eighty thousand rank-and-file public educators in the *Colegio de Profesores de Chile* (or CPC) led a weeks-long strike for fully-funded, democratically-governed schools (Chávez, 2019).

Chile has also been the site of substantial struggles against federally-mandated standardized tests (Campos-Martínez, Corbalán, & Inzunza, 2015), struggles that can be seen in Mexico (Bocking, 2019) and other Latin American countries. Educators in Brazil likewise collaborated with other workers to organize a general strike against austerity measures implemented by reactionary president Jair Bolsonaro in June of 2019 (BBC, 2019). Educators were also instrumental in organizing a general strike in the unincorporated U.S. territory of Puerto Rico, with educators in the Puerto Rico Teachers’ Federation (*Federación de Maestros de Puerto Rico*, or FMPR) organizing first against neoliberal education reforms and then, successfully, for the resignation of Puerto Rican governor Ricardo Roselló (Martinez & Dols, 2019).

Educators have also led major strikes and struggles against neoliberal reforms and austerity in Canada. Teachers in British Columbia led a months-long strike against neoliberal education reforms in 2014, successfully negotiating a contract without concessions and furthering the influential vision for social justice unionism that the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) had been advancing for years (Steeves, 2015). Educators in elementary, secondary, French language, and Catholic schools’ unions in the province of Ontario led rotating strikes in 2020, pushing back against neoliberal education reforms and austerity measures (Feinstein, 2020). Educators in the province of Quebec also went on strike for improved working and learning conditions in 2021, pushing back against the underfunding of schools in the province (Wilton, 2021).

This issue features engaged scholarship and interviews that delve deeply into several of the examples of educator organizing reviewed above. Together, the pieces in this issue suggest the breadth and depth of contemporary educator movements in the Americas, including the ways in which these struggles relate to movements in the United States and other contexts. Moreover, as was the case in previous issues in this special series, the pieces in this issue bring together the analyses of scholar activists and practitioner scholars connected to educator movements in the Americas, focusing particularly on struggles in Canada and Chile.

In his qualitative study of educator organizing against austerity in Ontario, Paul Bocking draws on autoethnographic methods and interviews to explore how educators in the province's unions came together to push back against neoliberal reforms. In doing so, Bocking offers analyses that are relevant to scholars, organizers, and union leaders, suggesting the potential for organizers to build power across unions. This potential for cross-union solidarity and organizing is explored in further depth in Rhiannon Maton's interview with Ontario Education Workers United (OEWU) organizer Deborah Buchanan-Walford. Here, Buchanan-Walford discusses how the newly-formed network of education workers has created a space for educators to share experiences and strategies in order to coordinate their shared struggles for well-funded, high-quality public education in the province. Internal and external union organizing are also explored in a conceptual analysis of teachers unions by Nina Bascia and Sachin Maharai. In this article, Bascia and Maharaj draw on a comparative analysis of unions in Canada and Chile to explore how the organizational structures and networks of labor organizations inform their work. Lastly, in the afterword to the series that ends this issue, the series editors discuss some of the themes that emerge when connecting this issue to previous issues in the series.

Together, the articles and interviews in this issue expand our understanding of the micro- and macro-politics of organizing within contemporary educator movements. They also suggest the significance of labor struggles in the Americas outside of the United States: suggesting links between movements in various contexts, highlighting lessons that might be applied to other struggles, and signaling the potential for further solidarity networks among educators and activist scholars.

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Critical Education

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ISSN 1920-4175

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