



Stern, M., Brown, A. E. & Hussain, K. (2016). Educate. Agitate. Organize: New and Not-So-New Teacher Movements. *Workplace*, 26, 1-4.

MARK STERN¹, AMY E. BROWN & KHURAM HUSSAIN

**EDITORS' INTRODUCTION:
EDUCATE. AGITATE. ORGANIZE:
NEW AND NOT-SO-NEW TEACHER MOVEMENTS**

In the summer of 2012, the Chicago Teachers Union, supported by students, parents, community members, and other factions of labor, engaged in a nine-day strike that made national headlines. Chicago has long been in the limelight of national politics—particularly around education—but, with President Obama's relationship to the city and his former Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel being voted into the mayor's office, the strike came to take on amplified meaning. Led by the Chicago Teachers Union's democratically elected Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators (CORE) slate, organized, as Micah Uetricht (2014) has detailed with great depth, around the relational pillars of fighting growing social inequality and fiscal austerity, and fluent in the literature exposing the corporate reform agenda in public education, the strike came to signal what philosophers might call *an event*: something unpredictable that emerges in the social fabric and whose manifestation then provides for a rethinking of what was and is possible.

Though the strike itself took place in Chicago, its effects were felt nationally and, to be sure, globally. Given the past 13+ years of federally mandated policies like high stakes standardized testing and punitive accountability measures, added to the deprofessionalization of teaching through scripted curriculum and alternative certification programs, and the Wall St.-backed public shaming of teachers and their unions, what was going on in Chicago both was and wasn't local. The material manifestations of neoliberal policies do emerge in particular ways in particular places, but the almost global systematization of a neoliberal policy playbook provided for far reaching resonance for teachers and communities all across the country. In what seemed to be almost overnight (but were in reality the result of long-term dedicated community organizing), new caucuses popped up in places like Minneapolis, Newark, Philadelphia, and New York. As such, the era of the New Teacher Movement was underway—a movement that has been gaining steam ever since.

Of course, the New Teacher Movement isn't without historical antecedent. Almost by design, teachers have long been part of movements for social justice in the United States. American exceptionalism, as Amy Stuart Wells (2009) has documented, has put the burden of rectifying the tragic amounts of social inequality in the United States on public education. Teachers and their unions have long been advocates for the students and communities they serve and are a part of, not to mention having a long lineage in the women's suffrage movement. So the *new* in New Teacher Movements calls our attention to both the long

¹ Correspondence should be addressed to: Mark Stern, Department of Educational Studies, Colgate University, 13 Oak Drive, Hamilton, NY 13346; mstern@colgate.edu.

history of activism and collective action and the historical particularities of what it is that makes the current iteration *new*.

As guest editors, we feel honored to have been a part of putting together a special issue of *Workplace* that brings the spirit of this history into contemporary focus—the not-so-new into the new. The articles collected within these virtual pages knit together intimate portraits of educators and communities from Chicago, Philadelphia, New York, Detroit, Arizona, Indiana, and North Carolina and their struggles in fighting for the democratic and, at times, revolutionary and humanizing ideals that are still to be realized within the project of public education in the United States. Though at times disparate in how and where these struggles take place—in the street, in the classroom, in the school, in the union meeting, in the home, in the courtroom—what threads these qualitative sketches together is the collective double-movement of the teachers they document. On the one hand, teachers hold radical critiques of the way things are and the shape of the river, as it were, in the direction things are going (without any kind of romanticizing of a past that never was). On the other hand, these critiques are met with intentional, organized, and informed action. Because of and despite the kinds of neoliberal policies that have made it almost impossible to engage in liberatory pedagogy and create loving and caring communities in the classroom, teachers are figuring out ways to resist, to endure, and to transform public education.

What also seems significant about this volume is a similar double-movement that the authors are engaged with. Though materializing in a variety of different institutional formations, neoliberal principles of accountability and a dogmatic kind of positivism are also afflicting cultural workers in higher education. Whether graduate students, adjuncts, or full faculty members from a variety of disciplines, the contributors to this volume write from a place of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) as scholars who, both because of and despite the symptoms of neoliberal pressures felt in their own institutional and communal worlds, engage in activist research in order to document and be a part of resistance and, therefore, possibility. Indeed, as Hyatt, Shear and Wright (2015) assert in their introduction to a recent volume on neoliberalism in higher education, “The profound impacts of neoliberal restructurings at the university...offer a particular moment of opportunity for teaching and learning. The ascension of the knowledge economy as discourse and performative practice has, perhaps, thrown universities—and the people in them—more fully into the centre of political struggle” (p. 12). In this way, then, scholars who work on neoliberalism, including those who contributed to this volume, are personally involved and implicated both in their research and in their day-to-day lives. Though the articles that follow in this issue focus directly on K-12 education, the authors write from a place of not only solidarity, but also of preemption, knowing full well that the kinds of policies that have been afflicting elementary and secondary education have been and most certainly will continue to creep into the realm of higher education.

Insofar as neoliberalism does not manifest in unified or coherent ways, and insofar as these manifestations attend to regional contours, organized resistance to neoliberalism is better understood as “movements,” rather than a single, unified struggle. As such, and in seeing how these differences engender different forms of resistance, there exists an urgent need to create knowledge that both reveals the operation of neoliberalism on the ground, and illustrates the multiple platforms of resistance that are possible there. Thus, when we created the call for papers in this volume, we stipulated that authors’ research on K-12 education focus both on neoliberalism *and* resistance *and* make use of some form of qualitative research. In responding to this call, each author takes a nuanced and useful approach to demonstrating articulations of neoliberalisms while revealing the complex and creative force of resistance at the grassroots. These unique stories of resistance necessitate an embedded scholarship, situated in the lived realities of educators and communities.

Maton, McWilliams, Crawford-Garrett and Riley, Rodriguez, Behrent, and Convertino analyze the ways that teachers grapple with neoliberal reforms in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania; Chicago, Illinois; New York City; and “Sun City”, Arizona. In McWilliams’, Rodriguez’s, Crawford-Garrett and Riley’s, and Convertino’s cases, teachers cleverly utilize education policy mandates that are typically viewed as neoliberal in order to organize *against* neoliberalism. While Crawford-Garrett and Riley describe the ways that teachers draw on *counter mandates* in order to resist neoliberalism, Convertino demonstrates the ways

in which teachers use charter legislation to their advantage, leading to a more paradoxical form of resistance. McWilliams' ethnographic account of a high school in a rapidly changing neighborhood shows with great care the ways that teachers' complicity in neoliberal processes can also be utilized for transgressive purposes, while Rodriguez explores that ways that the Chicago Teachers Strike created conditions for teachers to find new forms of critical consciousness and reimagine their roles in their students' lives. How, she asks, do teachers conceptualize these reforms and how have they been useful for rethinking relationship and democracy in the classroom? Maton's piece focuses on how a group of activist teachers form a social movement caucus within their union, the Caucus of Working Educators in Philadelphia, resist both racism and neoliberalism, while Behrent focuses on the galvanization of the Opt Out movement in New York City, examining both the destructive impact of corporate education reform and the potential of a nascent movement of test resisters to challenge neoliberal education reform.

While the authors we cite above focus their qualitative work on teachers, both Van Houten and Martinez, Cantrell and Beilke examine neoliberalism and resistance at the school and policy levels. Van Houten's work, situated in Detroit, examines the development of the James and Grace Lee Boggs School out of a city summer program. This piece looks at the school's place-based critical pedagogy, its resistance to the reform movement in K-12 education, as well as its support for academic labor and public sector workers. Martinez, Cantrell and Beilke focus on electoral politics in Indiana, analyzing the grassroots movement that led to Glenda Ritz winning the election for Superintendent of Public Instruction.

We are also fortunate to have a few pieces in a section that we are calling "Voices from the Ground." Here, scholars and artists break a bit from academic conventions in order to tell their own and others' stories about resistance to the current attack on public education. Erica Meiners and Therese Quinn offer a visually rich account of what the Chicago Teachers Strike looked like and how the aesthetic of the event related to the kinds of political feelings of empowerment and community reported by cultural workers in the struggle. Anita Fernández offers an intimate history of the development of the Xican@ Institute for Teaching and Organizing (XITO) that emerged out of Tucson Unified School District's elimination of the Mexican American Studies Program from the curriculum. In a different kind of introspection, Sheryl Lieb offers some thoughts about what the kind of existential philosophy of the likes of Maxine Greene might offer classroom teachers in what Greene once called *dark times*. Riffing on the idea of things left behind, Philadelphia-based photographer Austincx04 documents the slow death of public schools closed during the summer of 2013 in Philadelphia in this photo essay, "Things Left Behind." And, last, high school English teacher Rich Bernstein's poem, "No Sermons in Stone," provides one of the most insightful and satirical critiques of the current reform paradigm and how it rubs up against some core elements of humanity.

In implicit and explicit ways, the authors in this issue direct our attention to how—to borrow Ioanide's (2015) language—the "emotional politics" of unchecked capitalism operate to break the will of cultural workers that teach with joy and for justice. Alternately, the authors illustrate the capacity of collective teacher activism to produce new conditions for affirming and empowering teachers whose labor has been systemically strip-mined of an inner life. It is in this light that we offer these well-researched, intimate portraits of teacher collectives, not as a patchwork of regional reactions, but as an array of creative movements forward. They draw our attention beyond the devastation of neoliberalism towards critical inquiries into the paradoxes and possibilities of interracial, interclass, and intercommunal grassroots alliances that are practical, political, and humane.

REFERENCES

- Haraway, D. (1988). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective. *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), 575-599.
- Hyatt, S. B., Shear, B. W., & Wright, S. (Eds.). (2015). *Learning under neoliberalism: Ethnographies of governance in higher education*. New York, NY: Berghahn.

- Ioanide, P. (2015). *The emotional politics of racism: How feelings trump facts in an era of colorblindness*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Uetricht, M. (2014). *Strike for America: Chicago teachers against austerity*. New York, NY: Verso.
- Wells, A. S. (2009). Our children's burden: A history of federal education policies that ask (now require) our public schools to solve societal inequality. In M. A. Rebell & J. Wolff (Eds.), *NCLB at the crossroads: Re-examining America's commitment to closing our nation's achievement gaps* (pp. 1-42). New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

AFFILIATIONS

Mark Stern is an assistant professor in the Department of Educational Studies at Colgate University where he teaches classes on education policy and social theory. His current research focuses on the political and cultural economy of public education in the United States. He holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Foundations of Education from Syracuse University and recent publications can be found in *Race Ethnicity and Education* and *Educational Policy*.

Amy E. Brown is an educational anthropologist and a faculty member in the Critical Writing Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Her work focuses on race, gender and the impacts of privatization on public institutions. She brings not only her postsecondary teaching experience, but also five years of experience as a teacher in New York City public secondary schools to her scholarship. Her book, *A Good Investment? Philanthropy and the Marketing of Race in an Urban Public School*, is published with the University of Minnesota Press. Dr. Brown holds a Ph.D. in social anthropology from the University of Texas at Austin.

Khuram Hussain is a former New York City schoolteacher and currently serves as an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Hobart and William Smith Colleges. He completed his Ph.D. in the Cultural Foundations of Education at Syracuse University. His current scholarship explores the radical origins of multicultural education and contemporary grassroots anti-racist movements that resist to neoliberal school reform. His book, *Imaging the Black Freedom Struggle: Political Cartoons of Muhammad Speaks, 1960 – 1975*, is under contract with Johns Hopkins University Press.