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**CONTESTING THIS POLITICAL MOMENT:  
EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE *TEACHERS' WORK IN  
CONTENTIOUS TIMES***

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DEFENDING THE EARLY YEARS

This issue of *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* will be the first of two issues in a special series exploring the theme of *Teachers' Work in Contentious Political Times*. This series has been assembled by current and former leaders of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Special Interest Group (SIG)--Teachers' Work/Teacher Unions-- to bring together critical scholarship on current issues impacting the work of educators in this politically uncertain moment. We hope these issues can provide critical research on the work of educators that will aid in disrupting the untenable status quo of schooling in North America.

Although the work of teachers has been politically contested since the advent of compulsory schooling (Goldstein, 2015), a near constant onslaught of anti-teacher, anti-education, and anti-labor rhetoric, policy, and governance has intensified since 2020. Guided by the blueprint developed from decades neoliberal reforms that sought to erode the public good via privatization, standardization, austerity, and union-busting, this new era has consisted of the politicization of Covid-safety measures, library book collections, inclusive teaching practices, and curricular content (Asbury & Kim, 2020; Hagopian, 2025; Morgan, 2022). What's more, since 2020 there has been legislation put forth at school boards and in legislatures in nearly every state targeting everything from critical race theory (CRT), diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), socio-emotional learning (SEL), and any other approach deemed "woke" by billionaire-backed, astroturf organizations like Moms For Liberty (M4L) and Parents Defending Education (PDE), which has helped to mobilize parents and community members against schools and educators at rates not seen in modern times (Diaz, 2022; Friedman & Johnson, 2022; Salam, 2023; Sands, 2022). Kramer and Jones (2024) identified this sweeping move from pandemic politics into the focus on curriculum and policy as a wedge issue, designed to lure parents and others who were angry about mask mandates and vaccines to turn their anger against DEI, CRT, and other politicized terms in order to bring this neoliberal agenda to the doors of each district in the nation. The teaching profession was in jeopardy prior to 2020, but now many scholars fear the teacher shortage will continue to worsen.

We have seen this movement cascade into higher education as well in recent years working to undermine the goals of higher education and destroy the principles of academic freedom institutions were founded upon. Model state legislation created by the Goldwater Institute and Manhattan Institute seeks to prohibit colleges from hiring DEI officers, bans trainings about systemic racism, eliminates required employee diversity statements, and forces institutional neutrality on specific topics (Kelderman, 2023). At the time this issue went to press, 127 anti-DEI bills were introduced, with 17 gaining final legislative approval, and 15 becoming law, while 73 have been tabled, failed to pass, or vetoed (Chronicle Staff, 2025). Many of these bills seek to limit what faculty can teach or research at state institutions.

The focus of higher education has also shifted from one of general education within a liberal arts framework to a labor market approach, focusing solely on job preparation and marketability for increased funding and new program approval (O'Connell, 2024). In fact, the new approach on the horizon may be what has just passed in Utah. Dubbed the 'Higher Education Reinvestment Act,' the bill requires each public institution to cut 10% of instructional costs by evaluating programs based on set criteria, seeking to cut programs (and subsequently faculty and staff in those programs) that have not achieved these metrics and then decide which programs to reallocate this funding to (Nietzel, 2025). The Utah Board of Higher Education, Utah Higher Education Appropriations Committee, and the Executive Appropriation Committee all need to approve of the cuts and reinvestments, and if they do not meet the requirements, the institutions risk losing funding (Nietzel, 2025). The bill allows for tenured faculty in eliminated programs to be laid off without current campus policies being followed. Overall, this focus on eliminating academic freedom, job security, faculty, staff, and student free speech, and using academic capitalism to create policies that govern institutions is sure to continue without an organized movement to stop it.

These attacks have been further escalated by the second Trump administration, which has moved swiftly in an attempt to enshrine these previously local attacks at the federal level. A slew of executive orders and extra-legal actions have caused fear and confusion in educational institutions of all levels in the U.S., targeting "gender-" and "discriminatory equity-" ideology (newspeak for practices that affirm and include transgender and BIPOC learners), research and programs promoting "DEI," adherence to human rights conventions in Palestine-Israel, and the provision of equitable education through the U.S. Department of Education, which the administration has attempted to eliminate entirely at time of writing.

Yet just as the work of teachers has been politically contested from the beginning, educators have also historically engaged in efforts to defend their work, their schools, and their students at each juncture. Throughout the attacks of the last five years, teachers, staff, their unions, and communities have fought against policies that sought to erase BIPOC and LGBTQ+ representation from curricula, force unsafe school reopenings, and ban critical, inclusive teaching practices that challenge the unjust status quo. Under the first Trump administration, in fact, educator organizing and work stoppages were at all-time high, with hundreds of thousands of teachers walking off the job between 2017-2020 to demand everything from better working conditions to better health care and pay to funding for common good necessities like more school counselors, affordable community housing, and smaller class sizes.

In the issue that follows, contributors provide essential interventions that contest this political moment. The first several articles take on critical policy analyses that we believe will aid education workers in framing/reframing their analyses of the current reality in ways that emphasize the need for worker solidarity, democratic transparency, and collective organizing. In the first article of this issue, Reid Harris and Denise Blum examine the influence of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) in Oklahoma, revealing the organization's covert power over school choice and vouchers policies as well as more current efforts to eliminate diversity, equity, and inclusion work from public schools. In the second contribution, David I. Backer provides an analysis of "weak-link policies" that govern school finance (and teachers' working conditions), but are unexplored, missed opportunities for teachers' unions and other grassroots organizations to organize around.

In the third article, Erin West utilizes critical discourse analysis to examine the early childhood ecosystem of North Carolina and demonstrate how the rhetoric surrounding "quality" is actively contested by the sociopolitical

landscape in ways that undermine educators' definitions that emphasize care and inclusivity. The fourth article of this issue, by Amelia Wheeler, traces the historical and economic forces that have contributed to the current teacher shortage, specifically the tradition of low pay, increasingly demanding working conditions, and the myth of the self-sacrificing "martyr teacher." Wheeler not only identifies these foundations of contemporary teacher working conditions, but also provides an essential reconceptualization of teachers' work that emphasizes universal care rather than martyrdom.

The second set of articles in this issue pivot from broader analyses to offer in-depth looks at the possibilities for contesting the current reality. Asif Wilson and Stephanie Posey explore the learning opportunities that arise when educators draw on social movement pedagogies in their work. The authors provide a careful portrait of a high school social studies teacher who integrated social movements into her classroom by connecting with her students' and her own "social movement networks" to construct curricular experiences that centered justice. In the next article, Amira Nash and Monique Cottman share essential reflections on how these contentious political times have uniquely impacted educators of Color. Recognizing the need for community and professional support, the authors created a conference in partnership with a teacher education program, the state teachers' union, and a local school district that celebrated educators of Color and built relationships to sustain them through attacks on their work.

Nash and Cottman's analysis of the importance of creating spaces for conversations about teachers' work is echoed in the final contribution to this issue, an interview with long-time educator, union activist, and scholar, Lois Weiner. Abby Emerson et al., engage in a dialogue with Weiner that emphasizes the importance of democratic teacher unions and political education in the fight against an ongoing, but continually morphing, project of privatization.

We view this collection of articles, and the interview with Lois Weiner in particular, as a call to solidarity and action for educators and working people everywhere. As articulated by Weiner:

People face circumstances that they can't transcend, and the moral question for us as educators and for teachers is: What are we going to demand of the school in terms of supporting the students and supporting *us* in helping them to succeed? What's our moral responsibility here?

With an unabashed fascist regime in the United States threatening curriculum and funding as well as the physical and mental well-being of students, educators, and communities both at home and abroad, we believe that it is our moral responsibility to act decisively and collectively, as teachers, citizens, and workers to save our schools. In other countries, educators have successfully defended schools and other crucial democratic institutions by organizing alongside their fellow workers and community members. As U.K. leftist politician Jeremy Corbyn (2022) argues in a reflection on the ousting of authoritarian Bolsonaro in Brazil, the greatest force against fascism is a nonviolent popular front: a "coalition of political parties, trade unions, and social movements—parties, unions, and movements that [bring] millions of workers, Indigenous people, and marginalised communities together." Reflecting on the lessons of this victory for U.S. organizers, scholar activist and ethnographer Rebecca Tarlau notes that activists used an "inside" and "outside" strategy in Brazil: organizing within and through a range of labor, grassroots, and political organizations (Engler & Engler, 2022).

It is vital that education workers at all levels contribute to building this popular front in the United States and other nations tilting toward authoritarianism. We must hold the line not only in our classrooms, but also in our state houses, in our unions, and in the streets, so that one day we can live up to the long-held bargaining slogan from the Chicago Teachers' Union (CTU), and win *the schools that our kids deserve*. The articles provided in this issue offer essential components to inform that work.

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## AUTHORS

Dr. Dana Morrison holds a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Delaware, specializing in Sociocultural and Community-Based Approaches. Her scholarship has focused on teacher activism, critical teacher education theory and practice, and the financialization of public higher education. She is faculty co-advisor to the WCU

Chapter of the Student Pennsylvania Education Association (SPSEA) and the current Secretary of ASPCUF-WCU. Dr. Morrison also co-chairs the Teachers' Work/ Teachers Union SIG for the American Education Research Association (AERA). Dr. Morrison teaches courses in the Social Foundations of Education both at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Her principal specializations include: Philosophy and History of education, educational policy (K-Higher Education), and qualitative research methods in education.

Brianne Kramer, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of Education in the College of Education and Human Development at Southern Utah University where she teaches Social Foundations of Education courses. Additionally, she coordinates the Educational Foundations and Policy major for the Master's of Education and Master's of Interdisciplinary Studies programs. She earned a Ph.D. in Social Foundations of Education from the University of Toledo, and her research focuses on teacher workforce issues, diversity, equity, and inclusion, educational policy, and teacher activism. She co-edited the 2022 book *Children and Trauma: Critical Perspectives for Meeting the Needs of Diverse Educational Communities*. She also currently serves on the ACLU Utah Board of Directors and is a Contributing Scholar for the Policy Research-to-Policy Collaboration housed at Pennsylvania State University.

Lauren Ware Stark is an assistant professor of education at the Université de Sherbrooke. Her research explores the work of social justice educators inside and outside of the classroom. She completed her PhD in the social foundations of education at the University of Virginia after spending nine years teaching secondary English, ELL, French, and Humanities in public schools in Delaware, Texas, and Washington. Her research interests include critical race theory and whiteness studies, critical multicultural education, the social foundations of education, critical pedagogy and social justice education, teachers' work and teachers' unions, and teacher and student engagement in social movements.

Erin Dyke is an associate professor of curriculum studies at Oklahoma State University. Her primary line of research examines the pedagogies, organizing, and impacts of contemporary educator movements on educational practice and policy. Dyke has published work in this area in the *Berkeley Review of Education*, the edited volume *Walkout: Teacher Militancy, Activism, and School Reform*, and she co-edited a four-part special issue series for *Critical Education* highlighting empirical studies of and organizer interviews with educator movements from across North America. With support from the Spencer Foundation, Dyke undertook a two-year community-based oral history study of the 2018 Oklahoma Education Walkouts with a team of teacher-researchers, with whom she co-authored an article in *Critical Education* to address underrepresented narratives and perspectives in public accounting of the event. She and her research team curated a public collection of educators' oral history narratives of their strike experiences, preserved and published with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at OSU. This research informs her 2023 book, co-authored with Brendan Muckian-Bates, *Rank-and-File Rebels: Theories of Power and Change in the 2018 Education Strikes* with WAC Clearinghouse and the University Press of Colorado. Dyke has published ethnographic studies of liberatory curriculum and pedagogy with K-12 students and teachers in *Educational Studies*, *International Journal of Multicultural Education*, and *Journal of Education Human Resources*. In 2022, Dyke received the American Education Research Association's Critical Educators for Social Justice Revolutionary Mentor Award.