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**RECLAIMING TEACHERS' AGENCY IN THIS POLITICAL MOMENT:
EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL ISSUE #2 *TEACHERS' WORK IN
CONTENTIOUS POLITICAL TIMES***

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ABSTRACT

This issue of Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor is the second of two issues in a special series exploring the theme of teachers' work in contentious political times. This series has been assembled by 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 contentious moment. The second issue extends our understanding of teachers' work in these times with a series of astute empirical and conceptual studies, an interview, and a book review that, collectively, underscore the significance of reclaiming teachers' collective agency in the face of the intensified forces of authoritarian political clampdowns and critical pedagogical disempowerment.

Keywords: teachers' work, teacher agency



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This issue of *Workplace: A Journal for Academic Labor* is the second of two issues in a special series exploring the theme of teachers' work in contentious political times. This series has been assembled by 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 contentious moment. The first issue (Vol. 36, Issue 1) provided critical analyses of school finance (Backer, 2025), educational policy in Oklahoma (Harris & Blum, 2025), the gendered cultural dimensions of the teacher “shortage” (Wheeler, 2025), and the early childhood education policy ecosystem in North Carolina (West, 2025). The first issue also highlighted the crucial community-building and organizing efforts of teachers of color (Nash & Cottman, 2025), social movement pedagogies (Wilson & Posey, 2025), and the urgent need for democratic and justice-oriented teachers' union movements (Emerson & Weiner, 2025).

The second issue extends our understanding of teachers' work in these times with a series of astute empirical and conceptual studies, an interview, and a book review that, collectively, underscore the significance of reclaiming teachers' collective agency in the face of the intensified forces of authoritarian political clampdowns and critical pedagogical disempowerment. The issue provides evidence, analysis, and crucial conceptual resources to understand why and how teachers and social workers *resist* the ways in which “professionalism” is wielded as a cudgel to dilute democratic, political inquiry and lash curricula and programs ever more tightly to technical skills rather than engaged citizenship.

In the relatively short time since we composed the introduction to the first issue, state legislators, emboldened and/or pressured by moneyed, imperial interests and fear of retaliation by the Trump administration, have continued to try to drastically reconfigure K12 and higher education in the U.S. toward workforce development (Weiner, 2026). Laws, executive orders, and policies have aimed to restrict, surveil, and punish educators' critical pedagogical autonomy in their classrooms, schools, and colleges/universities – these forms of inquiry are not useful for producing compliance. At Texas A&M University, senior lecturer and literacy teacher educator, Melissa McCoul, was dismissed in 2025 by the university with pressure from Texas Governor Greg Abbott when a student recorded her lecture teaching how differences in gender, identity, and sexuality are approached in children's literature. In the recording, the student can be heard saying that she's “not sure this is legal to be teaching” (Priest et al., 2025). Texas State faculty member Thomas Alter was accused of inciting violence for comments he made at a conference on socialism, was fired, and his tenure was revoked. Despite a lawsuit and being reinstated while an investigation was conducted, his termination was upheld by the Texas State Board of Regents (Knott, 2025). In 2022, an Oklahoma high school teacher was targeted by then-state superintendent of public instruction, Ryan Walters (now leader of the Teachers Freedom Alliance, an anti-union teachers' union) for forthrightly talking with her students about efforts to ban literature and sharing the Brooklyn Public Library's free online access to banned books (Goldstein, 2026). These instances are a few among many.

At the same time, educators and students are fighting against the quickly shrinking circle drawn around what is appropriate, respectable, and professional to think and inquire about within schools and universities. Educators in the St. Paul Federation of Educators and the Minneapolis Federation of Educators, with support from their state union, have been on the frontlines protecting their students and families from intensified ICE raids during Operation Metro Surge, co-organized a historic one-day general strike across the state, and continue to organize mutual aid for groceries and rental assistance while the cities remain under siege (Zirin, 2026). McCoul's union, the American Association of University Professors-TAMU chapter and higher ed unions across the U.S., have been organizing to sustain and expand academic freedom for all higher education instructors and researchers (AAUP-TAMU, 2025). High school students have been walking out in protest across the state of Oklahoma to expand sanctuary spaces, causing state legislators to attempt to sanction teachers and districts for the successful disruptions (Wallis, 2026). Educators and students across the U.S. are looking toward one another, their unions, professional associations, and community-based organizations to reclaim their pedagogical agency and educational self-determination.

The authors of this issue provide analyses of the pressures facing teachers' and social workers' agency to collectively determine the knowledge and practices at the center of their craft. The first set of articles elucidate teachers' experiences of their work amidst legislation that ascribes certain people, histories, and ways of knowing as dangerous. Brittany Aronson, Haniyeh Kheirkhah, Mildred Boveda, and Karla Hernandez-Mats (2026) draw on Black feminist theories to study the experiences of members of the United Teachers of Dade in Miami-Dade County Public Schools, Florida, where teachers are majority culturally, linguistically, and ethnically diverse. The authors analyze how teachers are collectively enacting, resisting, and subverting the intentions of state legislation aimed at criminalizing critical

thought in the classroom. The authors point to the significance of union support, social movement connections and knowledge, and intergenerational spaces of teacher-led learning and relationship-building for resisting the chilling effect curriculum censorship laws have on classrooms.

Esa Syeed (2026) shares an in-depth interview with Lupe, a queer, Latinx teacher with precarious legal residency status and who relied on the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) Act for work authorization. Lupe's testimony describes the hyper-precarity and economic instability she faces alongside her conceptualization of teaching as community work. In their mixed methods study, Brianne Kramer, Denisha Jones, and Clint Broadbent (2026) theorize teachers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic as moral injury. Such a conceptualization offers possibilities for analyses that extend beyond burnout and turn our gaze to the source of injury: teachers' loss of autonomy amidst the politicization, intensification, and surveillance of their work. While Syeed (2026) and Kramer et al. (2026) explore teachers' experiences of their work in politically contentious times, Laura Shelton (2026) does so in the context of pre-service elementary teacher education. Undertaking a critical discourse analysis of pre-service teachers (PSTs), diverse along the lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality, in a conservatively-governed southwestern state, Shelton demonstrates how PSTs came to understand professionalism as teachers' political disempowerment. The study underscores the need for teacher education classrooms to confront the ways in which diverse PSTs disproportionately experience the consequences of transgressing the shrinking borders of what counts as professionalism in their work.

In the next set of studies, authors zoom in on the significance and enactments of teachers' and school social workers' pedagogical agency. Neven Holland and Keara Williams (2026) engage Givens' (2021) fugitive pedagogy to illustrate the ways in which Black teachers and communities sustained their teaching practices under slavery and through the Jim Crow era, in spite of great risk and threats of White supremacist violence. Their conceptual study offers important resources and recommendations for mobilizing these covert traditions of pedagogical resistance in our contemporary moment. Bree Alexander-Richardson and Kayte Thomas (2026) complement Holland's and Williams' study by offering an account of the ways in which social workers, like teachers, have mobilized to grapple with and reconfigure the profession's historical complicity with social oppression. The authors narrate their experiences alongside key practices in the field that offer resources for reclaimed pedagogical and relational agency in schools and classrooms. Alyssa Dunn, Ellie Friedman, Mariah Kornbluh, and Kristina Brezicha (2026) undertook a critical discourse analysis to understand how teachers pedagogically addressed the attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021 in the days following the event. The authors reveal the ways in which teachers who addressed the event in their classrooms did so by recruiting resources and support from co-workers and largely without administrative guidance or support. Dunn et al (2026) analyze how White supremacy culture is reproduced in classrooms in which teachers comply with political neutrality. In all three studies, teachers' pedagogical work is a contested site with possibilities for collective agency and connection to social movement traditions and knowledge.

We end the issue with Jacob Goodwin's (2026) review of Eric Blanc's (2025) *We Are the Union: How Worker-to-Worker Organizing is Revitalizing Labor and Winning Big*. Within the context of the issue, the review aids readers in understanding the significance of educators' organizing within their unions for reclaiming pedagogical agency and collectively self-determining the purpose and practice of their work.

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