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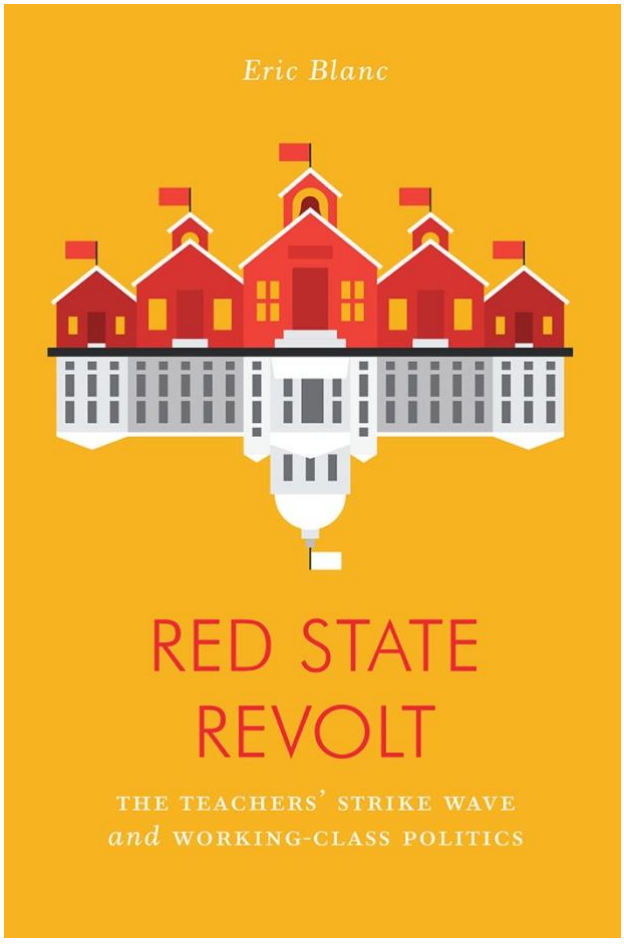
Review

Red State Revolt: The Teachers' Strikes and Working-Class Politics

Reviewed by Michael Bennett



RED STATE REVOLT: THE TEACHERS' STRIKE WAVE AND WORKING-CLASS POLITICS BY ERIC BLANC

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Radical teachers, by definition, do not only care about what happens in the classroom; we delve into the roots of classroom practices and pedagogical concerns in the political economy and social movements that underlie education. On occasion, these roots spring forth in ways that grab the attention of all teachers, administrators, students, and the general public. At such moments, radical teachers need to be able to articulate and act on our political understanding of where such moments come from and where they might lead.

Eric Blanc examines one such moment: the wave of teacher strikes that arose in three red states (West Virginia, Oklahoma, and Arizona) in 2018. He tells a compelling story about how "militant teacher-organizers—most of them young radicals inspired by the 2016 Bernie Sanders presidential campaign—initiated these illegal rank-and-file rebellions and guided them to victory in alliance with their trade unions" (3). And these victories weren't limited solely to the bread & butter issue of pay raises. Even the least militant uprising, in Oklahoma, won increases in school funding. Arizona teachers stopped proposed tax cuts, kept an ultimately successful anti-voucher referendum on the ballot, and decoupled future pay increases from concomitant decreases in other social programs. West Virginia teachers "forced the state to freeze health care costs, cancel the imposition of invasive mandatory medical trackers, and drop both pro-charter school and anti-union legislation" (7).

Blanc makes the counterintuitive argument that the Supreme Court's *Janus* decision in 2018, which made all public employee unions into open shops, and other conservative anti-union actions have actually made successful strikes more likely. He maintains that these developments have increased the militancy of workers who now challenge and often lead formerly accommodationist unions that, without closed shops, have to be much more attentive to members who can stop paying dues. Also, because of budgetary constraints, unions in "right to work" states rely more heavily on local union presidents who act like local shop stewards rather than union functionaries beholden to the national bureaucracy. This counterintuitive analysis helps explain why these militant labor actions happened in conservative red states: unions tend to be cozy with and not want to challenge their Democratic allies in blue states, while they are likely to take on blatantly anti-union politicians more directly and forcefully. This is a lesson about which radicals need to be reminded: sometimes accommodating our neoliberal "allies" drains political energy that is best directed at challenging them while taking militant actions against reactionary forces. Blanc supports a rank-and-file strategy that grooms and supports militants who are willing to take on both right-wing and blue dog Democratic legislators, as well as complacent union hierarchies.

Here lies the theoretical crux of the book: How does one develop and pursue a rank-and-file strategy? Many of my comrades in the democratic socialist left are suspicious of an old-school Marxist rank-and-file strategy based on the vanguard "capturing" unions. This doesn't seem to be what Blanc is arguing for. He takes care to point out that the success of these strikes was the result of cooperation and mutual respect of militant rank-and-filers with union leadership. And, in the end, this is the goal of a rank-and-file strategy: not just to win increased teacher pay and school funds, but to make "advances toward revitalizing the trade unions and rebuilding a militant workers' movement" (8). For Blanc, the lesson of this rank-and-file strategy is not that the vanguard needs to take over unions but that "the Left needs labor just as much as labor needs the Left" (11).

After Blanc outlines his central claims in an Introduction and the first two chapters ("The Roots of Revolt" and "The Power of Strikes"), the analysis really comes alive in the long third chapter, "The Militant Minority," which makes up half the book's 212 pages. This chapter reports on Blanc's investigations of the behind-the-scenes story that challenges the corporate media's contention that these strikes were spontaneous uprisings. Blanc argues that, instead, "an indispensable ingredient in the victories of West Virginia and Arizona was the existence of a 'militant minority' of workplace activists—that is, individuals with a class struggle orientation, significant organizing experience, and a willingness to act independently of (and, if necessary, against) the top union officialdom" (104). Conversely, "the absence of a layer of militant teacher organizers in Oklahoma, for instance, goes a long way toward explaining the relative weakness of its walkout" (105).

West Virginia has a history of labor militancy, but each of the core organizers Blanc spoke with talked about the importance of Bernie Sanders's primary campaign, which led to his victory in every county in the state and "helped coalesce a new organized socialist movement in the form of a reborn Democratic Socialists of America (DSA)" (108). Blanc focuses on the story of two DSA members, Emily Comer and Jay O'Neal, who became leaders of the militant rank-and-file movement for a strike. The latter started a DSA committee on labor and education in the summer of 2017, which included studying Jane McAlevey's book *No Shortcuts*. Comer and O'Neal set up the Facebook page that helped network other union militants who ultimately joined together as West Virginia Public Employees United (WVPEU) to pressure the state's three education unions to strike. To their credit, these unions established a process for responding to the membership's democratic decisions, even when strikers later defied the unions' desires to prematurely end the strike. Blanc ends the story of the West Virginia strike with the image of the President of one of the unions, West Virginia Education Association's Dale Lee, walking up to Emily Comer and saying "*You* did this." Blanc concludes "Lee was right that the rank and file—with the hep of its most tireless and fiery activists—had made history" (139).

By contrast, Blanc traces the relative weakness of Oklahoma's teachers strike to the Sooner state's "missing militants" (139). Though the Sanders campaign helped awaken Oklahoma's long-dormant tradition of socialist activism, none of these newly energized socialists had leadership roles in the teachers unions. The leaders of Oklahoma's two separate rank-and-file groups—Oklahoma Teachers United (OTU) and Oklahoma Teacher Walkout—

The Time is Now! (TNN)—had no organizing experience, no clear ideology, and no connection to the state's main union: the Oklahoma Education Association (OEA). Though OTU and TNN were able to stoke educator militancy and mobilization, their efforts were based on social media rather than deep organizing. There were no structure tests, no mechanism for democratic exchange and decision-making (thus, no strike vote), a lack of statewide coordination, overreliance on the goodwill of superintendents, unclear school funding demands, lack of outreach to and participation by service personnel. As a result, there was no countervailing rank-and-file pressure to keep the strike going when the union prematurely called it off with few concessions beyond a pay raise and "few gains in terms of building up the collective organization or self-confidence of working people" (141). Though socialists tried to support the strikers, DSA organizer Xavier Doolittle was forced to conclude that "socialists can't effectively raise class consciousness from the outside" (163), which Blanc takes as a justification for his rank-and-file strategy.

Though the obstacles to a successful strike were even greater in anti-union, pro-privatization, conservative Republican Arizona than they were in Oklahoma, the rank-and-file Arizona Educators United (AEU) led the way to victory for the Arizona Education Association (AEA), a union that represented only 25 percent of the workforce in a state where the legislature is practically in the back pocket of the Charles Koch Institute and the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC). Blanc argues that the "most important differentiating factor" between Arizona and Oklahoma was the "orientation and experience of grassroots leaders" (165). He focuses on three AEU leaders: Noah Karvelis, Dylan Wegela, and Rebecca Garelli. The first two were radicalized by the Sanders campaign; the latter by her experience with the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). According to Blanc, the organizing tools employed by Arizona's militant minority included collectively formulating demands through a democratic, deliberative process; building a site liaison network through deep organizing to coordinate and promote actions; utilizing social media adeptly; developing a close relationship with a union (the AEA) interested in collaborating with the rank and file; attending the 2018 Labor Notes Conference, where they engaged with democratic socialist and radical unionist ideas (such as those presented in the Labor Notes book *How to Jump Start Your Union*). When the union was reluctant to strike, this deep organizing by the militant minority who led the AEU persuaded the AEA to change course, resulting in one of the most successful teacher strikes in recent memory. One of the leaders and the center of the upsurge, Noah Karvelis, concluded that "radicals and anti-capitalists have a big role to play—if you look at history, you see that those folks are often at the forefront of labor struggles" (203-204).

Red State Revolt comes to a quick stop with a "Conclusion" of a few pages and an equally short Epilogue. As indicated by this abrupt ending after a huge chapter that jams together the lessons of all three strikes, the book is oddly organized. Blanc has important lessons to relate, but they are somewhat randomly strewn throughout the text, all the more difficult to find because there is no index. However, these lessons are worthy of being collected together and repeated:

- Mass strikes are workers' most powerful weapon.
- To win an illegal strike requires strong internal unity and external support.
- A successful strike movement must extend beyond teachers to staff, public employees, other working people, community organizations, churches, civic groups, media, parents, students, the general public, politicians, local celebrities—in short, any and all possible allies.
- Strikes are important not only for the concessions they win, but also for empowering and politicizing the working class.
- Rank-and-file movements led by a militant minority are needed to overcome the accommodationist tendencies of union leadership.
- Union leadership that is responsive to its membership plays a crucial role in providing infrastructure for and magnifying the impact of rank-and-file movements.
- The Sanders campaigns have been major catalysts for militant labor actions, chiefly through energizing a young, dedicated core of socialist activists.
- Radical unionists and socialists can provide the class struggle perspectives and political organizing skills needed to build militant labor actions.
- Social media is important in building militant action, but only if it is paired with on-the-ground organizing.
- The revival or organized labor is inseparable from the project of rebuilding a militant minority.

These lessons are important for radical teachers working to transform the conditions of their labor for their own sake and the sake of their students and profession. I can imagine this book, or parts of it, also being a component of interesting lesson plans in college classrooms, or even for advanced secondary school students. For instance, the section on the West Virginia strike includes references to the history of labor militancy in that state. History teachers could make interesting connections with the 1921 Battle of Blair Mountain. English and film professors could teach this section in conjunction with John Sayles's film *Matewan*. The section on Oklahoma could be brought into dialogue with narratives about how the state that once had the strongest Socialist Party in the country turned into a right-wing stronghold. The answer has a lot do with "vicious repression" that sought to eradicate the Left, including replacing the red state flag "because it was too associated with working-class radicalism. Only the state motto 'Labor conquers all,'

remained as an artifact of Oklahoma's radical roots" (142). *Red State Revolt* might usefully be taught in conjunction with texts that shaped the analysis of Blanc and the activists he wrote about, including *No Shortcuts*, *How to Jump Start Your Union*, and Micah Uetricht's *Strike for America*.

McAlevey's *No Shortcuts*, in particular, pairs well with *Red State Revolt* to provide crucial analyses of the differences between advocacy and organizing; between class struggle and class snuggle (accommodationist union leadership); and between spontaneous action and necessary structure tests. Her book also offers an insightful chapter on the Chicago strike, which (along with other Blue State strikes in Washington, California, and elsewhere) takes us beyond the purview of Blanc's book. Blanc points to this broader horizon of future red and blue state revolts in the book's epilogue, where he quotes a discussion he had with McAlevey in the pages of *Jacobin* magazine. They reject the idea that we should be looking for the next "wave" of teacher activism because a wave is a natural force that advances and recedes no matter what we do. Instead, McAlevey and Blanc advocate for a model based the next "struggle" we can organize to build worker agency and powerful movements right now.

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