

Policy Brief

“We Acted Because it’s What Needs to be Done: An Interview with West Virginia Teachers

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In 2018, West Virginia teachers staged a statewide strike which lasted almost two weeks and included schools across all 55 countywide districts. The main reported strike issues for West Virginia teachers included cuts to their healthcare coverage by the state and relatively low salaries. Prior to the strike, West Virginia teachers ranked 48th in the nation in terms of pay. The West Virginia strike sparked a year-long wave of teacher labor protests across the country, in both predominately rural states and large urban centers. In 2019, West Virginia teachers went on strike again, bringing the movement full circle. In November, 2020, I interviewed Jay O’Neal and Sam Nelson, two teachers involved in the 2018 statewide teachers strike in West Virginia for the National Rural Education Association’s Annual Conference and Research Symposium. Jay O’Neal originated the Facebook page in 2017 that served as the hub for organizing activity prior to and during the 2018 strike. O’Neal is a middle school English and social studies teacher; Nelson is a high school English teacher.

“There’s real desperation.” Common Struggles of Teachers

EMS: When teachers in West Virginia went on strike, there was a sense of shock by media outlets, which seems to stem from a lack of knowledge about what West Virginia is like as a place to live and work. Can you describe the different sorts of communities and schools in which West Virginia teachers live and work?

O’Neal: You know, I’m not originally from West Virginia, and I’ve taught in a couple of different places. And, so I think when I moved here, I came with some preconceived notions. I’ll just say my school is, for lack of a better term, like inner city Charleston, which I know might sound funny to people that are outside of West Virginia because Charleston’s not that big. But, it’s pretty much the most urban school we have...in our city. I taught in San Francisco Public Schools, and I was pretty shocked...at some of the poverty and some of the things kids were coming from. Because we’re a county school system, our feeder areas are quite big. So, I’ve got kids that live up in the hollers along with kids that live in the housing projects in part of town. It’s a really interesting mix of students – really unlike anything I’d seen anywhere else. There’s a lot more diversity in our schools than I think people realize. ...There’s real desperation around the state.

Nelson: We tend to be considered the poor part of the state. But even within Mercer County... there’s a stark difference [across rural and urban places]. One thing that really bonds all of the schools in West Virginia and really all of the schools in the country are some of the struggles that come with teaching kids from these different backgrounds. Our communities are so wide, and we have more diversity than what people realize. Those problems and the love of teaching and love for our kids are what bring us together and bring us to common ground. People might look at us, and [think], we’re only rural; we only deal with this one type of person, and we’re content and happy in our little bubble, but it’s not the case. We were all connected in those similar struggles across our state and across the nation and knowing that there’s a need to help our students. These are the same kind of issues that teachers have faced for years, certainly since I’ve been on the job.

Competing Unions, Healthcare Cuts, and Social Media: Antecedents of an “Accidental Grassroots Movement”

EMS: Despite these common struggles and concerns, there were some real barriers to collective action in West Virginia. It’s a right-to-work state, which means teachers don’t have to pay union dues, whether or not they are part of a union. And, it has two major teachers’ unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of

Teachers, competing for membership both across and within schools. How did this environment contribute to the way teachers organized for the 2018 strike?

O’Neal: If you have two groups that are basically doing the same thing, they’re going to compete with each other. We weren’t accomplishing our goals because we [our unions] were spending too much time going back and forth, trying to recruit each other. But, really, what it turned into, was a place to organize around our healthcare cuts.

We have a health insurance plan for all state employees. It had just been cut, year after year after year because costs were going up, but the state was not increasing the funding. That year, in particular, the state announced some pretty egregious cuts, and I think people just had enough...

The nice thing about the Facebook page is that we were all able to finally talk to each other. A thing about teaching is that you can be a little isolated. Sometimes that’s good... but it’s a problem when you need to be talking to your co-workers. Teachers were in their rooms by themselves, or in their own teachers’ lounge, but they don’t realize statewide everyone else feels the same way. People were able to connect that way across the state. I think that’s when things really picked up and really shifted.

Nelson: In 2018, the whole insurance thing was all new to me – something that I didn’t really have to deal with yet. But I realized this was something that was greatly affecting other school teachers in the building, weighing on them, something they had dealt with for a long time, something that I would be dealing with very, very soon.

One thing that is unique to West Virginia, and a lot of rural communities – as conservative as they tend to be – is there’s also typically an inherent sense of community and family. What affects somebody else affects you because that’s your family. That’s your community, and you bond together to try to work on those things. You’re dealing with insurance; you’re dealing with policies, so it’s political in that way. But it’s [more about] what’s right and what’s wrong and what’s going to take care of our fellow person. So, I came into the fight. Definitely late. But, I just wanted to help everybody else.

It started with a few random conversations in the staff room and the hallway. We ended up putting together group chats. Those expanded: people started inviting other people to this Facebook group, and it just grew from there. This was kind of the epitome of an accidental grassroots movement.

O’Neal: Sam makes a really good point about teachers being rooted in the communities, especially in rural communities. Everybody knows the teachers at the school, especially in some of these smaller towns and counties...

Before the strike we were a little bit worried. Is the public going to support us? But, it was very clear, very quickly, that they were. I also think health insurance is a particularly unifying thing because everybody has had frustrations with their health insurance. It’s not a left or right issue. Everybody’s generally angry when you ask them about their health. That was really the basis of action.

“They’re Fighting for Me:” Garnering Public Support

EMS: Strikes can be risky endeavors for teachers; there is no guarantee that teachers can garner public support when they go on strike. As my previous district-level strike research in Pennsylvania shows, the inability to gain public support can result in negative outcomes for teachers, both professionally and personally. But, it seems like support for teachers was pretty universal in West Virginia. Did you perceive widespread support, and how did you go about winning that support?

Nelson: I would say that individual and small group actions brought along support that wasn’t already there. A lot of these people – they know us personally – they see us every day. All of these families know each other in these smaller communities, especially, so they want to support you. They want to help you out.

Occasionally, you’d see people that were like, “Why aren’t my kids in school? Why are teachers complaining?” We just took to phone calls, to text messages, to social media, not trying to necessarily argue with people, but educate. You don’t really know what somebody is going through ever, but you can understand it to a fuller extent if you actually speak with them and have a conversation. Every teacher that I knew, rather than meeting people with adversity, would try to just educate in the best way that they could, or at least try to get them to understand where we were coming from. Even if we didn’t agree.

We set clear goals of what we wanted. We also let them know how that would affect their kids. For the most part, people care about what happens to everybody else. But sometimes, it’s more about them and their families. If you can make that relevant to

them, that helps garner support, as well. If we aren't keeping good quality teachers in West Virginia, if we're not growing our population or jobs in West Virginia, that affects our students and their livelihoods as they grow up and as they hopefully graduate. I think that brought things home for a lot of people. We invited them to be part of the conversation and a part of the cause.

O'Neal: I'm thinking about your example in Pennsylvania, and I'm wondering if part of it is that we don't have collective bargaining here. (I would love to have it here; it would be so much better in a lot of ways.) So, the community hasn't faced the issue of "their contracts are up; they say they might strike." They haven't had anything like that for years.

Another thing, I think, is our health insurance covered over 200,000 people. We only have 1.8 million people in the state; one out of every nine people are under that health insurance. There's only about 20,000 teachers and about 10-13,000 service personnel, so the people involved with the strike were a small fraction of the people covered by the health insurance. So that was part of the support, too, this feeling of "they're fighting for me."

The other thing that really made a difference was that we declared the strike on Saturday, but we weren't striking until that coming Thursday. So, there were four or five days in between. Teachers worked really hard to make sure their students would be provided for during the strike. They made lunches, sent backpacks home full of food. They reached out, contacted churches, community centers, to see if they could have feeding places for students when the schools weren't open. I heard about retired teachers who were doing daycare in certain places. I think people saw that, and it really made an impact.

The cool thing was that it was not a union-initiated thing. Union members were a part of it, but there wasn't some leader at the top saying, "Do this." It just kind of happened. It was the beauty of the Facebook thing. We would just all see stuff people were doing in other places, and we'd think, we can do that here. People just did it. There were a lot of organic things popping up. I think when people saw that in their communities, and how much teachers were caring about the kids, they realized, "Okay, this is not just some greedy teacher grab; this is a real thing."

Coming Full Circle

EMS: The 2018 West Virginia strike was focused on issues like healthcare and salary. And, it sparked this wave of teacher strikes across the country. Over the

course of the year, teachers strikes shifted in their focus – from traditional union issues like pay and healthcare – to policy issues, including privatization schemes. In 2019, the wave of strikes came full circle. Can you talk about the decision to strike again in 2019?

O'Neal: It felt like things came back full circle. I believe Los Angeles went on strike right before we did again in 2019, and a lot of the issues they went on strike over suddenly were becoming real to us here. We had never really dealt with a lot of the privatization things and charter schools. Suddenly, they popped up in that legislative session. A lot of people felt like this was a direct retaliation for what happened the year before. I think that helped our case because it just made teachers matter again. ... We'd been so lucky to avoid charters and privatization and vouchers, and then, suddenly, it all came at once towards us.

A lot of the communication platforms that we had left from the first strike like Facebook and all the local groups and messaging groups really helped.

Nelson: I would agree. Having all that communication infrastructure made it a lot easier to move quickly and send out that information. We also knew to keep an eye on the legislation because, of course, the task force [to fix the state health insurance] that we were promised would meet and form [after the first strike] basically disintegrated. So, we were watching. We were waiting. We were ready. Our profession has one of the lowest retention rates because of all the things we have to deal with – the disrespect. You have to have heart to be in a job like this, and it's hard to have heart because you see those things happen, and you have to fight against them daily.

So, I think every teacher had their students in mind in the last strike, as well. Charter schools were going to directly affect our students. We got a lot bolder; we knew it could be done. We'd already done it once, why shouldn't it work again? We knew we should be able to see the changes we wanted to see. Unfortunately, we are still in some ways, fighting that same battle. We wanted to make it very clear to the public, to our legislators, that you're not coming after our kids. You're not messing up their education. The beauty of public education is that it's free to everyone; it's equal for everyone. We have public tax dollars going to aid all students and all communities the same way. And we really, really, really saw an urgency to protect that.

Winning Support Again: Striking on behalf of Communities

EMS: It was amazing to see how effectively, in 2018 and 2019, teachers were able to control the narrative about the strike and use that to gain support. Do you have any sense about what it was that enabled you to control that narrative?

Nelson: We acted because it's what needs to be done. I think ultimately having your heart in the right place and the right motives and that willingness to bring everyone into the narrative and let everyone know we're on the same team here [results in support]. We're doing what's best for our communities. That's how you get that genuine support. You make everyone feel like they are a part of making their own history because they are.

O'Neal: I also think we rode some of the good will from the first strike. It was such a positive and powerful statement, and West Virginia was known for something good. ... After that first strike, people were so thrilled to see West Virginia mentioned nationwide in a really positive way because we're always at the bottom of every list, for everything. It was nice to see something positive...

It was really clear here that these reforms were widely unpopular. They just got forced through, but they were not popular at all. Our Department of Education put out a survey and held town halls across the state and something like 80% of people were against charters and education saving accounts. The broader community didn't want this either. And, so, I'm trying to stay hopeful about the future with things.

The Power to Improve Education in West Virginia

EMS: Imagine for a moment that you have the power to make some significant changes to what it means to teach in a state like West Virginia. What would you change about the conditions for teaching or policies that affect the ways teacher experience the classroom?

Nelson: Having more internet access. I would love to see that be universal at some point in the future. All of our students have their own personal devices now, whether they be laptops or iPads, some sort of device that they can take with them to and from school. I think that has given our kids advantages that they haven't always had compared to other schools in bigger cities and more populous states.

O'Neal: We're dealing with a lot of poverty statewide and also dealing with the effects of the opioid crisis. One thing that I'd really like to see is just a lot more help in schools for that – more social workers, more school psychologists, more counselors at school, a nurse in every school. I know these are things teachers across the country want because, unfortunately, it doesn't seem like any place has a full-time nurse. All those things would be huge in our schools.

We need to be paid better. We're still 47th or 48th in the country for pay. We need health insurance that we don't have to worry will be cut every year. I would love to see collective bargaining for teachers here. I think that would change some of the conditions I just talked about.

What Scholars Should Know

EMS: What should researchers and policymakers know about teaching in a state context like West Virginia?

Nelson: Just understanding what the job actually entails and the challenges our kids face. There's one thing between saying that our students live in poverty and then actually seeing it when you see kids come in, and they haven't showered in who knows how long. A lot of times it's not because they're negligent with their hygiene. It can be their water. It could be they're living out of their car. You've got kids that – for lunch, if anybody has any leftovers – you're not supposed to give them any, but they need those things because they really might not know when they're going to get food again when they go home on Friday. Hearing about it is one thing, but seeing it or hearing the specific stories behind that are really eye opening to the kind of challenges that our kids in particular face, but kids face all over the country. And then teachers – we really do wear 50 hats, and it seems like there's a new one added every day, just at whim. Our profession, in general, isn't as respected as it should be, considering that we're essentially in charge of all other professions.

I think that has a lot to do with the conditions that we're teaching in, the conditions that our students are having to deal with in some schools without our efforts to push and fight for them. They assume it's okay from the outside.

O'Neal: I think Sam's right. Poverty is different in a rural setting. There's just fewer resources. If you're living out of your car in a city, that's one thing, but if

you're living out of your car in a really rural community, that's very different. You have a lot fewer options. That would be something I think people need to recognize.

We have county school systems. Some of our counties are pretty big. There may only be one high school in the entire county. So, you've got kids that ride the bus for 45 minutes or an hour each way to get to school. I don't think people always realize that. There's some challenges that come with that.

Another issue is internet access. I talked to some teachers this spring, when we everything first shut down and went remote, and they said, "It's not even that my kids and their families can't afford it, there's just no one offering internet in this area of the county where they live. It's just not an option." You really notice it right now when everybody's trying to do remote learning. You have to make paper packets for these kids, and they have to pick them up, because

there's just no other option. Rural teaching has some challenges that you don't have everywhere else.

Nelson: We've had a lot of time where kids in certain schools can't make it to school due to road conditions or where they live up on the side of a mountain, it snows, or it floods in a ravine they can't get past. In some places there isn't just a gas station or a Taco Bell or Walmart you can walk to to even get internet for a minute. It would take some of these kids an hour to walk somewhere that could give the that access. It's a unique challenge.

EMS: Thank you for talking with me. Your work shows the importance and the challenges of rural teachers coming together for collective action. We can learn a lot from your work. Understanding these unique challenges is part of our responsibility as scholars and practitioners.

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