

Book Review: Red State Revolt – Part I

The DSA's dishonest and self-serving account of the US teachers' strikes

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PART ONE | PART TWO

Red State Revolt, written by New York University doctoral student and member of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) Eric Blanc, was published by Verso and Jacobin in late April. It purports to be a “behind-the-scenes” explanation of the causes and outcomes of the 2018 teacher strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona.

The topic is a critical one, as teacher strikes have become a growing feature of an increasingly militant working class the world over. During the last year, teachers have walked out in virtually every country opposing governments’ decades-long policies of eviscerating public education while enriching “edu-businesses” and school privatizers. Broad sections of society rightly see the ongoing destruction of public schooling as part of a social counterrevolution by the financial elite and political establishment, which includes the gutting of healthcare services, proliferation of low-paid part-time labor and the devastating growth of social inequality.

Teachers have been in the forefront of the rising resistance of the working class. In the last six months, teachers have walked out in Morocco, Algeria, Zimbabwe, Germany, Portugal, France, Brazil, the Netherlands, Poland, Chile, Mexico, New Zealand and Australia. In 2019, US strikes also expanded to Los Angeles, Oakland, West Virginia, Chicago and Denver, with mass protests occurring in Virginia, Indianapolis, Louisville, Annapolis and more.

Remarkably, *Red State Revolt* ignores all this. Despite the author’s stated aims, Blanc is unable to point to, let alone explain, the fundamental origins of this movement. This is because the struggle of teachers did not emerge as a limited rebellion against Republican-controlled (“Red State”) governments. Instead, the strikes were part of an international resurgence of the class struggle against relentless austerity and the historic transfer of wealth to the rich, which governments around the world escalated after the 2008 global financial crash.

Red State Revolt is not a scholarly work, which strives for objectivity, but a political brief. Virtually every page contains distortions, key omissions or outright lies that flow from the DSA’s role as a faction of the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucracy.

The book’s touchstone is the claim of an unbroken string of teacher “victories” from West Virginia onward. This false claim is designed to burnish the image of the increasingly-discredited unions and boost the fortunes of the Democrats, and in particular presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders in 2020. The author is a DSA member, a former supporter of the now-defunct International Socialist Organization (ISO), and the son of the former president of the teachers union, United Educators of San Francisco.

Addressing the purported origin of the teacher strikes, Blanc says, “These struggles were initiated by militant teacher-organizers—most of

them young radicals inspired by the 2016 Bernie Sanders presidential campaign.” The author points to a handful of DSA members sitting down in Charleston, West Virginia and forming a reading group, later a Facebook group and finally adopting tactics like “walk-ins” and “Red4Ed” days. Blanc evinces an insufferable condescension toward teachers and other school employees, claiming local DSA actions on the ground were instrumental because they instructed teachers “that they deserve better” and provided them the “courage to fight.”

A decisive new element

Such individuals were indeed involved. But the West Virginia struggle brought onto the scene a decisive new element: workers organizing independently and in opposition to the unions. This emerged largely in the southern coal mining regions that are rich in the militant traditions of the working class, including the opposition of rank-and-file coal miners to the bitter betrayals of the United Mine Workers union.

The teachers’ strikes began independently of the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) and American Federation of Teachers–West Virginia (AFT-WV) on February 2, 2018. Protests and walkouts, which involved both unionized and non-union teachers and school employees, escalated into seven counties by February 16. After 5,000-10,000 educators flooded the Capitol the next day, the unions reluctantly called a two-day walkout. The union sanction was designed to limit the spreading strike and politically emasculate school employees by limiting them to impotent lobbying efforts aimed at winning support from the corporate-controlled state legislature and the governor—billionaire coal baron Jim Justice, a long-time Democrat turned Republican.

The DSA gave its whole-hearted support to the unions’ maneuver and *Red State Revolt* endorses it, even in retrospect. “By taking responsibility for the authorization votes and strike, West Virginia’s union officials had **finally** placed themselves at the head of the upsurge [emphasis added],” Blanc writes. In truth, the unions—which had sought to suppress the struggle from its onset—were not seeking to “head an upsurge,” but to head it off. Once again teachers, together with thousands of other school workers, took matters into their own hands and turned the two-day walkout into an extended strike by workers in all 55 counties.

Blanc’s “behind the scenes” narrative provides direct evidence of the back-stabbing collusion of the DSA with the unions over an extended period. Early on, DSA member and Charleston middle school teacher Jay O’Neal had been called into the WVEA headquarters by “top officials,” and instructed to keep posts on his Facebook page limited to “work[ing]

within the union,” while DSA member Matt McCormick was warned to halt talk about a strike. Dutifully, they insisted that teachers toe the union line.

By February 27, the unions had ordered teachers to take a “cooling off day” and return to work by March 1. Declaring the strike over, the DSA publication *Jacobin*, Socialist Alternative and the ISO justified the back-to-work order and portrayed the rotten back-door deal with Democratic legislators for a 2 percent wage hike as a victory. Teachers, however, declared “cooling-off is heating us up,” defied the order, ignoring threats from the media, legislature and the unions, and continued the strike.

A worried *New York Times* article observed that West Virginia teachers had “found ways to organize and act outside the usual parameters of traditional unionism.” It said that the teachers’ defiance of their own union’s back-to-work order was “a crucial turning point, and a telling one” inasmuch as “the rank and file, not union leaders, came to call the shots.”

In fact, Blanc documents, “[t]hreats to stop paying union dues were common, as were arguments that it was a waste of time trying to work within these bodies. In response, [DSA members] the McCormicks, O’Neal and Comer insisted over and over that unions were only as strong as their activated membership.”

Concealing the repudiation of the union’s policies by the wilccatting teachers, *Jacobin* lyingly wrote that the “strike is actively making the teachers’ unions more democratic.” Incredibly, it tried to claim that the lack of funding for the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA) in the union-backed deal was “not necessarily a bad thing” because “there is an election between now and 2019...” The demand for a fully funded PEIA was one of the strikers’ major demands, because of the starving of the fund due to years of tax cuts to the coal companies and energy giants—had led to impossibly high out-of-pocket healthcare costs for public employees.

Red State Revolt quotes DSA member Emily Comer justifying her party’s endorsement of this betrayal. “Staying out on strike for a PEIA fix would have meant a simultaneous fight versus the union leadership and the state, and honestly we didn’t feel we were strong enough for that,” she said. If Comer were *actually* honest, she would have said, “the teachers were demanding a simultaneous fight against the union and the state, but we worked hard to prevent that.”

In other words, as workers struggled to break free of the union straitjacket, the DSA did everything it could to reinforce the authority of these rotten organizations, and through the unions, the domination of the two big business parties and dictates of the giant corporations.

The initial defiance of the unions by teachers and lower-paid school bus drivers, cafeteria workers and other support staff was like a breath of fresh air for educators and workers the world over. It inspired statements of support from teachers in Ghana and Australia, and sparked a wide discussion on the fundamental causes of the attacks on education and social rights, the complicity of the Democrats, the class character of the assault on public education, and the need for a fundamental restructuring of society in the US and internationally.

The fight for an independent socialist program of struggle

The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site Teacher Newsletter*, which had encouraged the rebellion of the educators, advanced an independent program to take the struggle forward. The SEP urged educators to create new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file workplace committees, independent of the unions or the politicians, to fight for the broadest mobilization of the working class. Such a struggle,

the WSWWS said, must demand full funding of public education, wrap-around services, generous wages and benefits—that is, it must be based on what school employees and students need, regardless of what the corporate-controlled parties, media and union officials said was affordable.

In opposition to the efforts of the unions to isolate the teachers struggle from other sections of the working class and end it as quickly as possible, the Socialist Equality Party fought to strengthen the struggle by uniting educators with striking Frontier telecommunication workers, autoworkers, UPS workers, students, parents, and the entire working class.

Hundreds of teachers signed up for the WSWWS *Teacher Newsletter*. Members of the International Youth and Students for Socialist Equality were invited to speak to thousands of youth and workers at the state capital, winning widespread support for the call for a general strike, a political counter-offensive against both big business parties and the socialist reorganization of society to meet human needs, not private profit.

The WSWWS, through its dozens of articles, statements and on-the-ground discussions examined the role of the Democrat-turned-Republican governor Jim Justice, Democratic state senator Richard Ojeda (a right-wing Trump supporter and militarist whom the DSA and unions heralded as the savior of teachers), and the record of the NEA/AFT in the context of the national and international assault on public education. We explained that the struggle of teachers placed them in direct conflict with the whole economic and political order, drawing out that inasmuch as the Democrats and unions defend capitalism, they are unequivocally opposed to the anti-capitalist strivings of the working class.

The struggle over the defense of public education, the SEP explained, raised the fundamental issue of which class decides how society’s resources are to be allocated: the ruling class or the workers. The logic of the decades of attacks on public schools, we said, points to the need for a radical redistribution of wealth that could only be realized through the fight for a socialist alternative to the capitalist system and the control of society by the giant energy conglomerates and banks. We called for the preparation of a political general strike against the root cause of social inequality, the capitalist system. These demands increasingly came into line with the thoughts and feelings of workers in struggle.

The pseudo-left works to trap workers

This brings us to the value of *Red State Revolt*. The book provides a textbook example of how the pseudo-left organizations block workers from considering the objective logic of their experiences and drawing the necessary conclusions. We see, in blow-by-blow fashion, how the DSA works to freeze workers in their initial stage of political radicalization, discourage the independent initiative of the working class, and throw workers back into the clutches of the pro-capitalist unions and the Democratic Party.

Red State Revolt promises it will “extract the main political lessons of the 2018 upsurge” in order to “build an effective alternative to Trump and the Far Right.” Essentially, they say, the lesson of the teacher strikes is the need to elect Sanders, but, then again, any Democrat will do. Assisting in *Red State Revolt* production was *Jacobin* editor (and former vice chair of the Democratic Socialists of America) Bhaskar Sunkara, who has already stated he will back Elizabeth Warren or even Joe Biden “to get rid of Trump.”

To promote the narrative that the Democratic Party can be made amenable to improving public education, if not enacting “socialism” itself, Blanc’s volume conveniently omits the teachers’ struggles in the “blue” states, i.e., those states like California, Washington and Colorado,

which are controlled by the Democratic Party. In those states, the sellouts of teacher strikes were pushed through by unions and Democratic politicians in many cases directly allied with the DSA.

In the January 2019 strike of 33,000 Los Angeles teachers, the United Teachers Los Angeles worked with Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom to betray educators' major demands, including reduced class sizes, additional support staff, and decent wages. Just months before, the DSA had endorsed the longtime Democratic Party hack with the words "Plug your nose and vote for Newsom." After the fact, the DSA had the temerity to justify the deal between the union and the Democrats by advising teachers that reducing classes below 39 students was "very expensive."

In Oakland, California, another Democratic Party stronghold, the abrupt shutdown of the seven-day strike by the union opened the door to the district's demand for brutal austerity, including closure or merger of one-third of the district, \$22 million in budget cuts and the layoff of 257 educators.

From the misleading claim that the teacher strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona ended in victories, Blanc and the DSA draw an even more deceitful conclusion—that these outcomes "clearly show the potential for the revitalization of trade unions."

To be continued



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