Striking Signs: The Diverse Discourse of the 2018 West Virginia Teachers’ Strike

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In February 2018, teachers and other school personnel in West Virginia went on strike over persistently low salaries and a series of other defunding and deprofessionalizing legislative proposals. Over nine days, teachers created signs that argued their cause and showcased their messages on roadsides, in their own communities, en masse at the state capital, and in media outlets across the globe. In this article, we describe five themes that emerged from a discourse analysis of 50 protest signs. In response to circulating dismissive and demeaning discourses, teachers positioned themselves as professionals, content specialists, moral authority figures, valuable resources, and inheritors of cultural legacies.

Here’s the thing about the West Virginia teachers’ strike: It didn’t start out as a strike, yet it very much ended up as one. In unified action over the course of two weeks, the teachers of West Virginia rejected legislative proposals, bucked and molded public opinion, and brokered, challenged, and directed union leadership, all while taking to the streets in a movement that coalesced tens of thousands of public employees, garnered international attention, and sparked a series of statewide teacher campaigns.

The movement was literacy-rich and visually stunning; teachers and service personnel filled school yards, lined town thoroughfares, and flooded...
the state Capitol with signs that quite literally carried the message that they
would not accept substandard pay, outrageously expensive health insurance,
or lawmakers’ attempts to deprofessionalize their work. Other signs broad-
casted warnings: Legislators were reminded that teachers were a voting
bloc that would not forget its detractors, and citizens were forewarned of a
massive state brain drain. Across thousands of pieces of cardstock—inscribed
with stencil letters, permanent marker, and glitter glue—teachers articulated
their worth, their anger, and their demands. In this Provocateur Piece, we
showcase a sample of protest posters and examine how their authors mar-
shalled a wide range of culturally available discourses to enter into dialogue
with diverse readers: the public, parents, lawmakers, students, the media,
and one another.

Before we begin, it will help to have some background. The teachers’
movement started out as pushback against an app. Beginning on January 1,
2018, West Virginia public employees were expected to use a rewards-based
fitness tracking app or face financial penalties. While the governor responded
to public dismay several weeks later by making its use voluntary (Stuck, 2018),
the initial outrage over the app seemed to fuel a closer inspection of other
changes being made to the Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA) plan,
which provides health coverage to the vast majority of West Virginia’s teach-
ers and state employees across many sectors. As the 2018 legislative session
heated up, lawmakers introduced bills designed to lower teacher-certification
requirements, funnel state funds to charter schools, and eliminate teacher
seniority. And although Governor Jim Justice had vowed to make education
the “centerpiece” of his administration when he was elected in 2016, the
legislature failed to enact even a 1 percent raise for teachers and other state
employees in their 2017 session. What’s more, the legislature proposed rais-
ing state employees’ share in footing the bill for PEIA from 20 percent to 40
percent, essentially doubling everyone’s premiums (Viccaro, 2018).

On January 15, a small number of teachers attended a rally at the state
Capitol in Charleston, where word spread about the upcoming legislation
and how it would affect public education (Blanchard, 2018). These teachers
returned to their counties and took to Facebook, sharing concerns, raising
questions, and precipitating larger action. On February 2, teachers and other
school personnel from five counties in the state’s southern coalfields region
walked out of their schools and went to the state Capitol to protest proposed
changes in a movement promoted as “Fed Up Friday” (Coyne, 2018). As mo-
mentum grew, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) West Virginia and
the West Virginia Education Association (WVEA) scheduled a statewide “Day
of Action” at the state Capitol on Saturday, February 17, that drew thousands
of participants (Qualls, 2018); at the rally’s end, organizers announced that a statewide walkout would happen the following Thursday and Friday. The hashtags #55United and #55Strong were born, denoting that all 55 counties were acting as one (McElhinny, 2018). And all 55 stayed on the picket lines and out of schools for nine days.

Although many of the legislature’s proposals affected all of West Virginia’s state employees, it was primarily teachers and school personnel who put themselves on the line, quite literally, to fight these issues for the greater good. Although teachers received marching orders and talking points from the two labor associations, AFT-West Virginia and WVEA, there was remarkably little “official” signage; almost all signs teachers carried were handmade, and they were diverse, reflecting not only the multiple issues that prompted the strike but also the range of stakeholders in the battle, from bus drivers to cafeteria cooks to early-childhood specialists to high school ELA teachers. Taken together, the signs were evidence of the creativity and brainpower of West Virginia’s teachers—a visible lesson plan aimed at educating legislators, the public, and the media about their cause, about what teachers’ jobs actually entail, and what the true value of public education is, both in the present and for the state’s future.

Inspired by the teacher’s assertive stances, their powerful protest literacies, and the state-wide effort—at once unified and diverse—as English education faculty, we sought to chronicle and understand the heteroglossic discourses teachers drew upon and responded to in order to establish their purpose, authority, and identity as professionals and protestors. We began by posting a solicitation on the public employees’ unofficial Facebook page, asking protestors to post photographs of their signs. More than a thousand protesters posted. After several passes to assess the scope of the posts, we collected 50 photos that captured the groups’ diversity. We examined the posters for their claims, warrants, and audience, as well as assessing the discourses to which the posters were responding. Discourses critical of unions and of teachers, used particularly in the early stages of the work stoppage and evidenced in the comments sections of news articles and Facebook pages, shamed teachers away from strike participation and positioned them as greedy, lazy, and selfish by denying children access to education during the strike. The strike was commonly viewed as illegal, a narrow view perpetuated by the state Attorney General (MetroNews, 2018), although one disputed by educational law experts (Fershee, 2018). And with the proposed legislation aimed at lowering teacher qualifications and opening the door for charter schools, deprofessionalizing discourses circulated in the state Capitol and beyond. Here, we outline five prominent discourses manifested in the posters.
Teacher as Professional

Responding to dismissive discourses about teachers that positioned them not as educated professionals but more akin to babysitters, many teachers crafted signs in an instructive register to articulate the variety of tasks, roles, and educational requirements embedded in teaching. One poster, structured as a “Hello, My Name Is . . .” name tag, promoted teachers’ work as a composite of other skilled professions—nurse, mediator, fundraiser, social worker, manager—as well as less formal, often nurturing roles—friend, boo-boo mender, cheerleader, encourager. In this way, the protester both accepted and expanded the notion of “teacher as babysitter,” promoting and defining the labor of caretaking, while articulating the intellectual and skilled labor of a trained professional educator.

Other posters reminded the public of teachers’ extensive education and listed the work hours and years of service as testaments to their deserved professional status and work ethic. These assertions of professional status were made all the more poignant as teachers held these signs in biting wind and frigid rain for eight-hour shifts, exactly mirroring their school day.

Teacher as Content Specialist

In many signs, teachers referenced disciplinary knowledge in crafting their arguments, simultaneously advancing their cause and broadcasting the specialized knowledge that imbued them with professional worth. Mathematical content knowledge framed claims of unity and division—“Division ÷ Belongs in Math Class #55 Strong”—and served to scold the governor for budgetary missteps: “. . . Jim, Go Back and Check Your Work so I Can Go Back to Mine . . . Math Test: F.” History provided teachers with opportunities to invoke civil rights, labor, and revolutionary movements, as one teacher
drew Benjamin Franklin’s “Join, or Die” snake, relabeling each segment a public state workforce in lieu of the British colonies. Another sign maker referenced the brain drain by threatening that teachers would be added to the list of groups who had been forced to relocate: “History Lesson: Colonists, Pioneers, Immigrants, Minority Groups, WV Teachers . . . Moved for Economic Opportunity.” There were allusions to literature—Shakespeare, Harry Potter, Dr. Seuss—using quotations, imagery, and characters along with other literacy signaling, such as a sign composed as a dictionary entry: “Stupidity: \stoo-pit-e-te\ Expecting HIGHLY QUALIFIED TEACHERS to stay in WV with LOW WAGES and Increasing Premiums!” Elementary teachers invoked their “teacher voices”—“No Recess until YOU clean up this mess!”—and leveraged children’s toys to represent elements of the conflict, such as a piggy bank symbolizing teachers’ budgetary allocation.

**Teacher as Moral Authority**

One of the most frequent discourses was that of the teacher as a moral authority figure and social agent. In these signs, teachers claimed their right to protest as an inherent part of their work as teachers. These claims often seemed to counter the discourses that teachers were abandoning their jobs and their students. On one sign, a teacher argued, “I AM teaching today’s lesson,” while another said, “I Practice What I Teach.” From such a stance, some teachers drew on Civil Rights Movement leaders to affirm their moral position. Because there were widespread beliefs, albeit inaccurate ones, that the strike was illegal, using language of the Civil Rights Movement was a relevant move to assert moral righteousness over a presumed legal barrier. One sign, depicting Rosa Parks sitting in
the front of a bus, was captioned, “This was once illegal too . . . @MorriseyWV,” directly addressing West Virginia’s attorney general, Patrick Morrisey, who had suggested the strike was illegal. Moral authority was also asserted through the use of pop culture, from which teachers positioned themselves as “woke,” rebels, and superheroes. Another sign reminded its readers of the physical hardships of caring for children, while taking a firm stand against lawmakers’ abuse: “I’ve been coughed on, sneezed on, and stepped on, but I refuse to be [poop emoji]’d on!”

Teacher as a Valuable Resource

A central goal of the teacher strike was increased teacher salaries, an important objective given that West Virginia’s average teacher salaries ranked at 48th in the country at the time of the strike, and the low pay contributed to the loss of teachers to higher-paying neighboring states. Underlying the issue of undercompensation, however, was the general undervaluing of teachers and education. Responsively, many teachers asserted their social value. One was a simple statement, “We’re Valuable,” in bold, shining letters. Others positioned teachers as having social value based on their role relative to children and their role as teachers: “How can our students be 1st, if our teachers are last?”

One corrected the cliché, “If you can read this, thank a teacher,” to read “If you can read this, PAY a teacher,” highlighting the need for the public to tie their appreciation to a call for increased compensation.

Another way teachers marked their value was to position themselves relative to lauded university sportsball coaches, the highest paid public employees in the state. Several signs called attention to the public’s expectation for the state’s high-ranking athletic teams, and particularly that of the coaches, juxtaposed with the state’s low-ranking teacher salaries. In doing so, these posters implicitly called out the need for a social expectation
of high-performing educational systems and well-compensated professional teachers.

In addition to explicitly marking their social value, teachers also implied their worth as a social resource, but one that is mobile. Defying the Appalachian cultural discourse of loyalty to place above all else, a significant discourse marked on the posters was that of the “brain drain”: talented teachers were leaving the state because of low pay or expensive insurance. Some posters marked the brain drain as an already established reality (e.g., “Stop our brain drain; Fund PEIA”), while others marked the threat of it for them personally (e.g., “Fix PEIA, or WV Employees will be gone in a Flash”).

In addition to teachers as socially important, some signs cited teachers as intellectual resources insofar as they sponsor the natural resources, such as intelligence, within students. One such poster, as described in the section below, created a parallel between coal as a resource that “keeps the lights on” and teachers “keeping the lights on” in the students.

**Teachers as Inheritors of Cultural Legacies**

Other signs drew on the complex cultural and economic history of the United States broadly and of West Virginia specifically. One sign quoted Rosa Parks, saying, “You must never be fearful about what you are doing when it’s right,” while another quoted a popular slogan from the 2017 Women’s March, “They tried to bury us. They didn’t know we were seeds.” Posters such as these connected the strike to earlier protest movements, thus lending the teachers’ action continuity and gravitas, while the “Unite or Die” poster mentioned above echoed Benjamin Franklin’s revolutionary call for unity in the face of oppression. The state’s coal and labor histories were evoked in a number of signs, such as one reading “WV miners fought to keep the lights on. WV teachers are, too”: The sign suggested,
both verbally and visually, a direct connection between miners’ work and historical labor struggles with the current work and labor struggles of teachers. Several also connected the current crisis both to historical and more recent incidents: the “redneck” poster refers to the red-bandana-wearing miners whose 1921 uprising culminated in the Battle of Blair Mountain (Appalachian Magazine, 2016).

During a February 26 town-hall meeting in Wheeling, Governor Justice responded to a teacher’s comment by saying that he, too, could be the “town redneck”; this sign transforms that term from an insult into a marker of the movement’s legitimacy and its historical precedent (Quinlan, 2018). Not all of the “legacy” signs reached so far back in history, however; one referred to a piece of political theater from April 2017, when Governor Justice vetoed the legislature’s budget bill, saying in a news conference, “What we have is nothing more than bunch of political bull you-know-what,” while lifting the lid of a silver platter with a pile of literal bullshit underneath (Jenkins, 2017). Together, these signs serve to align the teachers’ demands with historically significant labor and social movements, and against the more recent “movement” on a platter.

In the weeks after the West Virginia strike ended, teachers in Kentucky and Oklahoma followed suit, walking out of their schools and occupying their state capitolls to demand fair wages and adequate school funding (Goldstein, 2018). Notably, photos and videos of these movements also featured clever handmade signs, including signs in both Kentucky and Oklahoma warning legislators not to make teachers “go all West Virginia on you.” The multiple rhetorics we discuss in this article have been adopted by teachers in other states, and we sincerely hope that they work as effectively to maintain public support, express criticism, and articulate demands as the teachers’ signs in the West Virginia strike did.

As teacher educators in West Virginia, we were awed by the ways in which our school partners and our former students, now teachers, displayed courage, enthusiasm, and wit as they took on the contentious and highly politicized charge of leading a statewide strike to demand respect. These teachers now offer a legacy to a new generation of teachers, and their signs
are but one artifact of this historic lesson. As researchers and allies, we are
eager to support our state’s teachers, and teachers in other states, as they
continue to be provocateurs acting as political agents for change. In part,
we have taken up this charge by documenting, examining, sharing, and
amplifying our colleagues’ carefully composed messages with new audi-
ences—and the fact that teachers across the country have been inspired by
our state’s actions suggests that West Virginia teachers’ messages have been
heard loud and clear.

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