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## **Learning from Lacunae in Research: Making Sense of Teachers' Labor Activism**

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# **Learning from Lacunae in Research: Making Sense of Teachers’ Labor Activism**

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## **Abstract**

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How does educational research inform understanding of the current labor activism among U.S. teachers and illuminate teachers’ capacity when they are organized as workers to challenge neoliberal educational policies? To address these questions we examine critical research on teachers’ work and teachers unions from 2000-2019, scrutinizing knowledge production about teachers’ work and the role of teachers unions in contesting and conceding to reform, and analyzing how ideological assumptions about capitalism, labor, race, class, and gender configure the amount and nature of scholarship on teachers unions. We explain why scholarship on school reform should include attention to teacher unionism, re-conceptualizing tensions between what are understood as “social justice” struggles and defense of teachers’ professional interests, livelihoods, and working conditions.

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**Keywords:** neoliberalism, teachers’ work, teachers unions, social justice teachers unions

# Aprender de las Lagunas en la Investigación: Dar Sentido al Activismo Laboral del Profesorado

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## Resumen

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¿Cómo la investigación educativa facilita la comprensión del activismo laboral actual entre el profesorado estadounidense? Y, ¿de qué manera aporta una mayor claridad en relación a la capacidad de actuar del profesorado como trabajadores organizados para desafiar las políticas educativas neoliberales? Para abordar estas preguntas, examinamos la investigación crítica sobre el trabajo del profesorado y los sindicatos de profesorado entre 2000 y 2019, pasando por la producción de conocimientos sobre el trabajo de los profesores/as y el papel de los sindicatos en impugnar y aceptar una reforma. También analizamos como los supuestos ideológicos a propósito del capitalismo, del trabajo, de la raza, de la clase y del género configuran la cantidad y la naturaleza de la enseñanza de los sindicatos de profesores/as. Explicamos por qué la enseñanza de la reforma escolar debe incluir la atención al sindicalismo de los profesores/as, la reconceptualización de las tensiones entre lo que se entiende como luchas a favor de la "justicia social" y la defensa de los intereses profesionales, los medios de subsistencia y las condiciones de trabajo del profesorado.

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**Palabras clave:** neoliberalismo, trabajo del profesorado, sindicatos de profesorado, sindicatos de profesorado de justicia social



State-wide teacher walkouts in Spring 2018, with demands for increased school funding and political voice for teachers, changed the dominant narrative about teaching and public education in the United States (Goldstein, 2018a; Goldstein, 2018b; Morris, 2018). West Virginia began the wave of state-wide walkouts (Blanc, 2019; Morris, 2018), inspiring similar campaigns in Oklahoma, Kentucky, and Arizona (Bhattacharya, Blanc, Griffiths, & Weiner, 2018). Officers and spokespeople for the state affiliates of the two national teachers unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and National Education Association (NEA), could neither predict with accuracy or control what occurred in these mass movements of teachers and school workers (Antonucci, 2018; Friedman, 2018; Weiner, 2018). NEA and AFT affiliates counted as members only a small proportion of teachers and education workers in these “red states” that restrict collective bargaining and the right to strike for public school workers (Antonucci, 2018; Sanes & Schmitt, 2014). The movement adopted labor’s most powerful weapon – the strike, workers’ deciding to withhold labor collectively (Aronowitz, 2011; 2014). Initially cast as struggles over teachers’ economic concerns, in particular low wages, the narrative of the participants reflected in press coverage rapidly changed to an explicit defense of public schools and teaching conditions, echoed subsequently in strikes in states with collective bargaining (Richards, 2019). Although gender was subsequently named as a salient factor, it was not originally proposed as such by participants (Bhattacharya et al., 2018).

Labor unrest among teachers generated mass popular support (Hertel-Fernandez, Naidu, & Reich, 2019) reversing what critical scholars examining popular media identified as the dominant representation of teachers and their unions: a special interest group impeding needed reforms to boost student achievement and equalize educational opportunity (Goldstein, 2011; Pitzer, 2010; Shiller, 2015) associated with educational reforms advanced by advocates of privatization of public education (Ravitch, 2013). As teachers’ labor activism spread, demands about pay, working conditions, and school funding morphed into explicit challenges to many policies advocated by both Democrats and Republicans on the state and federal level, especially the creation of charter schools (Richards, 2019). In 2019, striking Denver teachers, who were the first to approve introduction of “pay for performance”

in their contract a decade earlier, demanded elimination of these provisions (Will, 2019), protesting its jettisoning teacher compensation pegged to years of experience and levels of education, a policy endorsed by both the NEA and AFT (Flannery & Jehlen, 2008).

Table 1

*Major teacher union strikes in the United States since 2012*

<i>Year</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Significance</i>
2012	Chicago	First Chicago Teachers Union strike in 25 years. Reframed education reform across the United States with contract demands that embedded union members’ economic concerns in a broad program for “schools Chicago students deserve,” centering racial and social inequalities in Chicago’s public schools.
2015	Seattle	First teacher strike in Seattle in 30 years. Addressed racial and social inequality in Seattle by demanding race and equity teams in schools to study achievement and discipline trends and 30 minutes of recess for every elementary school student.
Spring 2018	West Virginia, Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma, Colorado, North Carolina	Referred to as the Red State revolt as the strikes and protests happened in Republican-led states do not give teachers the right to bargain collectively and have “right-to-work” laws that prohibit unions from charging workers who choose not to belong to a union the costs the union incurs for bargaining contracts, pursuing grievances, legislative lobbying, legal representation, etc. Teachers unions in these states have very few members and the walkouts were organized primarily by social media.
Fall 2018	Los Angeles, Virginia, Denver, Oakland	Teachers’ job actions were responsible for the highest number of workers on strike in 2018 in the United States since 1986. Over 75 percent of the striking workers were teachers. Called the Red for Ed strikes due to educators wearing red t-shirts. Strikes occurred in both Republican and Democrat-led states/cities.
2019	Chicago	Chicago Teachers Union expands its “social justice” demands, winning supports for homeless students, protections for immigrant and refugee students, an increase in school counselors, and nurses and social workers in every school.

With few exceptions (Tarlau, 2019), analyses of the walkouts ignored the global footprint of the educational reforms enacted in the United States (Compton & Weiner, 2008a, 2008b), an international project to synchronize education and needs associated with the new global economy (Connell, 2009; Lipman, 1998; Robert, 2015; Robertson, 2008). Teacher activism in the “red states” preceding the walkouts was rarely acknowledged (Brickner, 2016; Dyke & Muckian-Bates, 2019; Krutka, Asino, & Haselwood, 2018; Weiner, 2018). Seldom recognized was the “red state” walkouts’ adopting language and strategies the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) had developed in its 2012 contract campaign (Brogan, 2016; Gutstein & Lipman, 2013; Uetricht, 2014), like wearing red T-shirts to boost visibility and build confidence. CTU’s pioneering framework for its contract campaign and strike to defend “the schools Chicago students deserve” and the common good (Noonan, Farmer, & Huckaby, 2014) was reflected when school workers in West Virginia demanded and won with support of parents and students an increase in pay not only for themselves but for all municipal workers in the state (Karp & Sanchez, 2018). West Virginia activists were explicit that gains for schools and teachers should not come at the expense of other workers (Weiner, 2018).

Racial inequities in education, in particular the disproportional negative impact privatization and charter schools have had on low-income communities of color noted by critical scholars of neoliberalism (Picower & Mayorga, 2015) were highlighted in strikes by the Oakland Education Association (OEA) and the United Teachers of Los Angeles (UTLA) in 2019 (Tarlau, 2019). UTLA won a contract provision to limit mandatory searches of students, reflecting teachers union activists’ work with the Black Lives Matter movement (United Teachers of Los Angeles, 2019). Increased racial justice activism among teacher unionists had begun years earlier. In 2015 Seattle teachers struck with support of Seattle Black Lives Matter, which endorsed all of the union’s demands, including the call for “Racial Equity Teams” in every school to investigate racially biased practices (Hagopian, 2015). Teacher union and social justice activists have organized, supported, and participated in the Black Lives Matter at Schools Week of Action. The campaign attempts to apply the Black Lives Matter movement’s thirteen guiding principles to organize for racial justice in schools and hold community events. The nationwide demands include ending zero tolerance

and implementing restorative justice in schools, hiring more Black teachers, a mandated Black History/Ethnic Studies curriculum in K-12 schools, and funding counselors not cops in schools. What began as one day in Seattle in 2016 became a week-long action in Philadelphia in 2017 led by rank-and-file teacher union members. By 2019, the week of action grew into a movement in over 30 cities and was formally endorsed by the NEA ([Black Lives Matter at School, 2019](#)).

Teachers' labor activism in major cities since 2012 has taken the form of official strikes called by unions as well as "wildcats," job actions organized by workers independent of and often in opposition to the union's official position. The latter occurred in Detroit teachers' 2016 "sick-out" protesting overpay and physical neglect of classrooms and schools ([French, 2016](#)). Popular support for teachers' labor activism in the past decade contrasts with the acrimony teacher union strikes generated fifty earlier, shattering the labor-liberal coalition ([Shelton, 2013](#)), widely cast as having pitted teachers unions (and white teachers) against struggles of Black civil rights activists ([D'Amico, 2016](#); [Golin, 2002](#); [Murphy, 2018](#); [Pish Harrison, 2014](#); [Taylor, 2018](#)).

The "teacher rebellion" ([Bhattacharya et al., 2018](#)) has influenced teachers, teachers' work, teachers unions, and the U.S. labor movement ([Ashby & Bruno, 2016](#); [Asselin, 2019](#); [Brogan, 2016](#); [Mann, 2015](#)). Teachers' labor activism has a strategic importance for both labor and education because teachers are embedded in communities throughout the nation. Moreover, teachers are "idea workers" who participate in reproducing or disrupting the status quo ([Hagopian & Green, 2012](#); [Weiner, 2012](#)). Indeed, the well-funded and organized political opposition to legislation granting collective bargaining for teachers, even in states that had robust labor movements ([Shelton, 2013](#)), as well as resistance to teachers using their new legal rights to win improvements in working conditions ([McCartin, 2006](#); [Murphy, 1990](#); [Schirmer, 2019](#); [Urban, 1982](#)), reflect the political and economic importance of teachers' labor activity. The two largest work stoppages among U.S. workers in 2018 were led by Arizona and Oklahoma teachers ([Division of Labor Force Statistics, 2019b](#)). One labor historian suggests not only that teachers are workers but that they are "the working-class vanguard" today in the United States ([Lichtenstein, 2019](#)). Teachers'



use of labor tactics bears on the frequently debated question among educational scholars about the nature of teachers’ work, generally posed as whether teachers are workers or professionals (Ingersoll, 2003).

### **Methodology**

We adapt the methodology for a critical meta-analysis of scholarship over an extended period used in two previous literature reviews (Weiner, 1993; 2000). We address two questions: How does educational research produced in the last two decades inform understanding of the current labor activism among U.S. teachers? How does this body of research illuminate teachers’ capacity when they are organized as workers, in unions or social movements separate from the unions, to push back on neoliberal policies that have been identified as having deleterious effects on public education? We analyze scholarship in education and the social sciences, including politics, sociology, labor, labor history, geography, and interdisciplinary social science research in critical race theory, gender studies, and social movement theory. We do not attempt a comprehensive review of material in each of these subjects but instead examine intersections of research in these areas that informs our research questions.

Vast changes in information technology required significant change in the methodology used previously for data collection (Weiner, 1993; 2000). This study used Google Scholar and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) to locate relevant material, testing descriptors and date ranges to capture phenomena relevant to the research questions. A major threat to validity is selecting materials that confirm a bias, a significant problem in any study but especially one addressing teachers unions. As McCollow (2017) observes:

Inevitably, writers about teacher unions adopt a normative position that is either sympathetic or antagonistic to these organizations (whether or not this position is explicitly acknowledged)... Analysis is often combined with advocacy, for example, in defense of teacher unions, in support of a particular model of teacher unionism, or, conversely, for greater restrictions on their activities (p. 3.).

We address the threat of bias in two ways. First, our theoretical lens acknowledges and explains our assumptions and advocacy; our normative beliefs are articulated explicitly, allowing the reader to evaluate how our ideas may have influenced the study design or interpretation of data. As Bearman (2015) observes about use of “big data” in historical social science research, “The partitions that one selects depend, of course, on the standpoint from which one starts” (p. 3). Our conceptual framework maps the “standpoint” configuring our “partitions” in data collection and analysis. Our other methodological response to the threat of bias is an iterative study design. Selection of dates and descriptors to locate and analyze data emerged from repeatedly reconfigured Google Scholar and ERIC searches. Results from reconfigured searches using different terms and dates were used as empirical tests of evolving hypotheses. Several of these are explained in our findings.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Our research and analysis are undertaken in the tradition of critical theory. We ground our work in Harvey’s (2003) understanding of neoliberalism as “utopian rhetoric masking a successful project for the restoration of ruling-class power” in capitalism (p. 203). We assume defense of workers’ dignity on the job and their rights as workers to form unions to represent them are human rights. Our thinking as scholar-activists is grounded in the tradition of reforming unions “from below,” (Early, 2004; Moody, 1997) which we see as expressing a commitment to social justice and democracy in all facets of the society’s organization – social, economic, and political (Draper, 1966).

Our conceptual framework has been informed by historical evidence about U.S. labor unions’ prominent role in political struggles resulting in economic gains for the entire society, like Social Security, and protections about wages and hours worked, that extend beyond workers in unions (Aronowitz, 2014; Lichtenstein, 2013). As Benson (2010) explains, the labor movement brings “a stability, a long-range endurance, a continuity that distinguishes it from other social movements and from the multitude of charities and worthy causes that hope to serve ailing humanity. ...It is that quality that makes the union movement so powerful a potential force for

social justice" (n.p.). Unions continue to be a force for improvements in workers’ economic well-being: In 2018, full-time and salary union members had median weekly earnings of \$1,051 compared to median weekly earnings of \$860 for nonunion members, an advantage that holds in both the private and public sectors ([Division of Labor Force Statistics, 2019a](#)).

Our framework attempts to incorporate understandings of the multidimensional experiences highlighting the interlocking nature of social oppression ([Crenshaw, 1989](#)), including race, gender, and sexuality. Work by Du Bois (1962) and James (2012) inform our thinking about the inherent moral importance of Black liberation as well as its political salience. As James writing in 1948 about what was termed “the independent Negro struggle” argued, the movement “has “a vitality and a validity of its own” and is “able to intervene with terrific force upon the general social and political life of the nation, despite the fact that it is waged under the banner of democratic rights, and is not led necessarily either by the organized labor movement” or the political party of socialists in which he was a key figure ([James & McLemee, 2012, n.p.](#)).

Teachers unions can protect academic freedom and educator creativity ([Hagopian & Green, 2012](#)), and when they are functioning as they should, teachers unions assure teachers due process and legal protections that allow for teaching ideas that may be unpopular - and organizing for student and parent rights without reprisals ([Weiner, 2012](#)). Robust teachers unions that are democratic and structure demands that defend the common good, organizing with parents, students, communities, and social movements, are an essential factor in improving public schools ([Fletcher & Gapasin, 2008](#); [Peterson, 2015](#); [Tattersall, 2010](#)). Key to teachers unions carrying out their responsibility to defend members’ economic and professional well-being is establishing alliances with parents and communities, especially those denied equal educational opportunity, improving schools and winning social, political, and educational reforms that address problems schools cannot solve ([Weiner, 2012](#)).

### **Data Collection**

This study reviewed massive amounts of literature. The narrative describing

our data collection methods is rather detailed and includes Figure 1 in order to address issues of validity and reliability. The first author conducted ERIC and Google Scholar searches from April to August 2019, adding or changing descriptors and custom date ranges to locate and analyze material published between 2000-2019. Data collection aligned Google Scholar and ERIC searches with custom date ranges based on events that might alter the quantity or focus of research on teachers' labor activism and teachers unions. Dates were drawn from news reports and research about teachers' labor activism, like the 2012 strike of the Chicago Teachers Union (Ashby & Bruno 2016; Gutstein & Lipman, 2013; Uetrict, 2014) and occupation of the Wisconsin state capitol by public employees (Aronowitz, 2014; Mann, 2014; Peterson, 2015; Sanes & Schmitt, 2014).

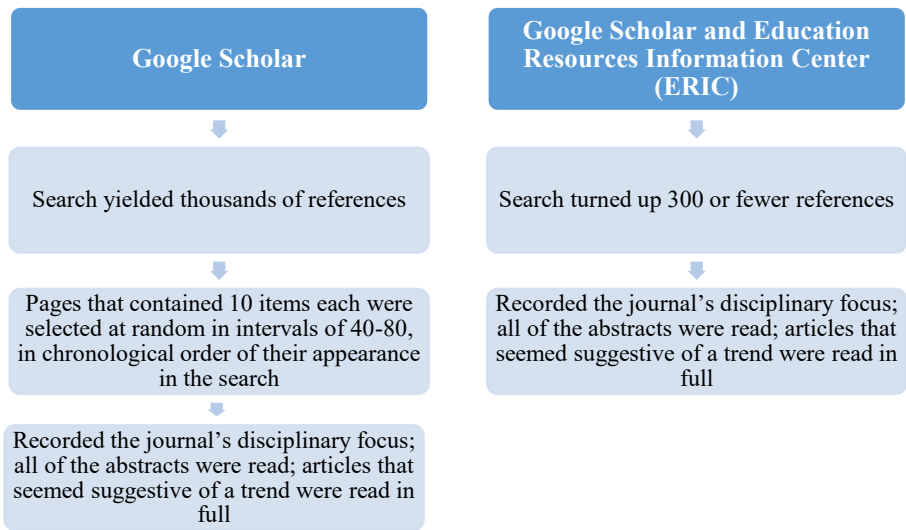


Figure 1. Data collection.

Descriptors were taken from three bodies of literature: critical research about teachers' work; the impact of neoliberal educational reforms on

teaching and schools; and the impacts of gender and racial inequality on education. We looked for intersections of scholarship to illuminate “the close and reciprocal relationships between teaching conditions and students’ opportunities to learn” (Bascia & Rottman, 2011, p. 787) and how these relationships might reflect and influence teachers’ organization and activity as workers. While our study is U.S.-centric it locates the history and context of U.S. educational policy in the global project ushering in a decline in material conditions in teachers’ work and their loss of voice on policy, negative effects on student-teacher relations, and an undermining of critical thoughtfulness (Robertson, 2008; Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid, & Shacklock, 2000). Some critics of these policies label them “corporate education reform” (Ravitch, 2013). However, as the first searches showed, “neoliberalism” is the term used most often after the first years of the century to describe the bipartisan reforms associated with passage of “No Child Left Behind” and other federal and state policies that are viewed as having had negative effects on public education and teachers’ work.

The term “teachers’ work,” used by the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Special Interest Group (SIG) on “Teachers’ Work and Teachers Unions” to represent teaching as a labor process and teachers as workers (AERA, n.d.) is not used as widely in the United States as it is elsewhere, but a significant body of research in Australia (Connell, 1995), the United Kingdom (Acker, 1999; Stevenson, 2017), Canada (Bascia & Rottman, 2011) and the United States (Freedman, 1987; Gitlin, 2001) supports use of “teachers’ work.” Descriptors used in searches that produced the most robust results were these terms or variants of them: neoliberalism; teachers unions; teachers’ work; teaching conditions; Chicago Teachers Union; social justice; social justice unionism; social movement unionism; gender; race; and capitalism.

Smyth et al. (2000) describe “the control of the labour process of teachers” under capitalism as “both a classed and a gendered phenomenon” (p. 36) and we added “race” to this typology. Considerable research about the salience of systemic racism in education (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Leonardo, 2009; Picower & Mayorga, 2015) and historic conflicts between teachers unions and the Black community (D’Amico, 2016; Murphy, 2018; Pish Harrison, 2014) support inclusion of this descriptor.

While the search focused on critical research, it also examined scholarship that reflected negative assumptions about teachers unions associated with neoliberal education policy, for example that teachers unions are “rent-seekers, looking to gain from their involvement in public education through increases in salaries and in working conditions, exhibited through provisions such as class size (smaller classes are easier for teachers to manage, but also provide greater membership for unions), longer planning periods, shorter work days and school years, and the like” (Cowen & Strunk, 2014, p. 3). Not infrequently news reports and research that explicitly supported policies that weaken teachers unions proved a useful source of information about union positions.

The most powerful search results were generated with Google Scholar. ERIC was of limited usefulness. For example, a search with “teaching conditions” and “neoliberalism” in ERIC since 2000 yielded 22 references, only half about U.S. teachers unions in the K-12 sector. The same search in Google Scholar yielded 454 references. Often a preliminary Google Scholar search yielded many thousands of references. When this occurred, pages that contained ten items each were selected at random in intervals of 40-80, in chronological order of their appearance in the search. All the abstracts on the page were read and the disciplinary focus of the journal recorded, for example music education, comparative education, literacy, technology, gender studies, history, labor studies, and philosophy of education. Articles that seemed representative of an emerging trend were read in full if available in electronic databases from two research universities and a major metropolitan public library online research catalog.

When a search turned up 300 or fewer references, all of the abstracts were read; articles that seemed suggestive of a trend were read in full if sources were designated as “peer-reviewed.” Because research often lags by several months or years in analyzing events reported on social media or in the press, blogs and newspaper accounts were used as informational sources (Murphy et al., 2017).

ERIC’s paucity of relevant research merits attention that takes us beyond the scope of this article. A rich discussion located in Google Scholar was often not captured in ERIC, for example scholarship exploring opposition to linking teacher pay to teacher evaluation. ERIC’s descriptors often do not

address the policy issues that are debated in research on teachers unions. ERIC has no descriptor for “teachers unions” and requires that searches be done with the wider terms “union” or “teachers organizations.”

## **Findings**

Because of space limitations, we report only on the major findings, and citations are representative of a particular finding. Limitations of space do not permit discussion or even citations for everything identified, read, and analyzed.

### **Teachers’ Work and Neoliberal Educational Reforms**

The body of research about teachers’ work as it has been negatively impacted by neoliberal reforms, mostly about effects of standardized testing in altering curriculum and instruction, is huge and its growth has accelerated. Google searches for “teachers’ work” and “neoliberalism” from 2000 to 2015, fifteen years, yielded 3410 references; from 2015 to 2019, four years, 3210 references. Much of this material is produced by education faculty, publishing in social foundations, policy, and administration (Caughlan & Beach, , 2007), as well as journals specific to grade and subject, for instance English (Brass, 2014); early childhood (Salazar Perez & Cannell, 2011); mathematics (Povey, Adams, & Everley, 2017); and music (Georgii-Hemming, 2017).

However, little educational scholarship done by U.S. researchers examines teaching as a labor process (Gitlin, 2011). Teaching conditions are seldom analyzed in relationship to teachers unions: A search using “teachers’ work” and “neoliberalism” from 2016 to 2019 yielded about 2560 references. With “teacher/teachers unions” added the number of references shrinks to 257. Many of these 257 articles examine the correlations between collective bargaining and students’ scores on standardized tests, addressing claims that teachers unions, through the exercise of collective bargaining agreements, depress student achievement (Carr Steelman, Powell, & Carini, 2000; Cowen & Strunk, 2015). During the period of this study, most scholarship on possible effects of teachers’ pay, collective bargaining agreements, and contractual issues on student learning used outcomes from standardized tests.

Critical scholarship identifies many limitations of these tests, including “the faulty logics that lay at their foundations, . . . the White supremacist history of such tests, and . . . the racist outcomes of testing today” (Au, 2015, p. 38). A key contestation with teachers unions has been the extent to which the unions should allow student, teacher, school, and district level academic performance to be measured by tests over which students, teachers, and parents have no voice (Taylor & Rich, 2015). The question of how best to measure student learning and teachers’ performance, and how material conditions affect student outcomes remains contested.

Table 2.  
*Google Scholar Search Findings*

<i>Google Scholar Search Terms</i> (conducted April-August 2019)	<i>Date Range</i>	<i>References Yielded</i>	<i>Fields of Study</i>
“teachers’ work” “neoliberalism”	2000 to 2015	3410	Educational studies
“teachers’ work” “neoliberalism”	2015 to 2019	3210	Educational studies
“teachers’ work” “neoliberalism” “teachers unions”	2016 to 2019	257	Educational studies
“teachers unions” “teachers’ work” “neoliberalism” “gender”	2016 to 2019	157	Historical studies and labor studies
“teachers unions” “teachers’ work” “neoliberalism” “racism”	2016 to 2019	80	Historical studies
“social movement unionism” “teachers”	2000 to 2019	1830	Labor studies, economics, and politics focusing on unions outside the United States



In the first years of the 21st century, before the term “neoliberalism” was widely adopted, research about negative effects of accountability often focused on adverse effects of standardized testing and mandated curricula (Au, 2007; Booher-Jennings, 2005; Kauffman et al., 2002; McNeil, 2000; Solano-Flores & Trumbull, 2003); teachers’ disempowerment (Achinstein, Ogawa, & Speiglman, 2004; Ingersoll, 2003); and the impact on achievement related to re-segregation (Smith & Mickelson, 2000). Relatively few U.S. scholars writing in the first years of the decade noted how the accountability agenda operationalized privatization of public education (Bartlett, Frederick, Gulbrandsen, & Murillo, 2002), with educational reform replacing economic policy to ameliorate economic inequality (Anyon & Greene, 2007). Fewer still mentioned capitalism (Giroux, 2004; Lipman, 2000; Saltman, 2015) or racism’s intersection with capitalism (Lipman, 2011). By 2010, critical research began to focus on “neoliberalism” as an attack on public education itself, including its “transformation of teacher education” through “competition, economic rationalization, increased surveillance, and attacks on diversity” (Zeichner, 2010); the “swindle” of methods of financing schools (Saltman, 2018); negative media representations of teachers (Goldstein, 2011); and the need for teacher resistance (Picower, 2011). Still “neoliberalism” was seldom conceptualized or named as a stage or project of capitalism in U.S. research on teaching conditions.

While the effects of reforms like standardized testing in narrowing the curriculum – and teachers’ resistance to it – might be understood as teachers union issues (Bascia, 1998; 1999; Behrent, 2016; McCollow, 2017), for the most part, they are not cast this way in educational research in the United States, even scholarship documenting teachers’ resistance to compliance (Picower, 2011). The absence of attention to teachers unions might reflect how state laws establishing collective bargaining restrict what issues unions may bring to negotiations, excluding curricular issues (Moore Johnson, 2004). Yet teachers unions generally negotiate over conditions often described as professional concerns teachers consider essential to their work, like class size and time for preparation (Bascia, 1997).

### **Teachers' Work, Neoliberal Educational Reforms, Gender, and Race**

Less than half of the research produced by U.S. scholars in searches about neoliberalism, teachers' work, and teachers unions addresses gender; Herr and Arms (2004) and Robert (2015) illustrate the exceptions. Substituting "racism" for "gender" in searches diminishes the quantity of research even more dramatically. Using "teachers unions" "teachers' work" "neoliberalism" "racism" in a search produced 80 references. Historical studies consistently stand out as rare exceptions in examining the intersection of teacher unionism, race, and gender (Golin, 2002; Rousmaniere, 2001; Smith, 2014). History and labor studies generated significantly more research on teachers' work and teachers unions than women's and gender studies, which seldom mention teachers or teaching, even when describing how "women shape the labor market" (McDonald, 2008). Exceptions are noteworthy because of their clustered characteristics: Schirmer's (2017) historical analysis of a teachers union strike, published in "Gender and Education," a journal with an international editorial board and perspective, integrates teachers' work, gender, and draws on educational research, a contrast in all three regards to other scholarship on the same event (Collins & Carlson, 2018).

### **Teacher Resistance to Neoliberal Educational Reform**

Though a fair amount of research since 2005 identifies the intense negative political pressure on teachers unions (Boyd, Plank, & Sykes, 2000; Cowen & Strunk, 2014), little critical scholarship examines, as does Stevenson (2010), how teachers unions have pushed back on the neoliberal reforms. Only a handful of studies explore what some researchers in labor studies (Ashby & Bruno, 2016) and social movements (Mann, 2014) consider a seminal event in U.S. labor relations: the victory of reformers in the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) in the Chicago Teachers Unions (CTU) and the CTU's subsequent strike in 2012 (Brogan, 2016; Gutstein & Lipman, 2013; Nuñez, Michie, & Konkol, 2015; Uetricht, 2014). Critical research on teachers' work and teachers unions that examines the neoliberal project is primarily found in educational journals, produced by faculty who work in departments or colleges of education. Some research, but far less, appears in journals of labor studies, history, geography, and political science and is

produced by faculty in arts and sciences. Work of educational researchers about teachers’ work, neoliberalism in education, and teachers unions is rarely cited by critical scholars in the social sciences, even when using illustrations from education, for example the Vergara and Friedrichs cases challenging collective bargaining (Peck, 2016).

The term “social movement unionism” paired with “teachers” yielded 1830 references, a vast majority appearing in journals of labor studies, economics, and politics focusing on unions outside the U.S. “Social movement unionism” is often used interchangeably with “social justice unionism” (Bass, 2017) although they have different meanings (Gautreaux, 2019; Ross, 2007; Weiner, 2012), an important topic that takes us beyond the scope of this article. Dandala’s (2019) review of research on social justice teacher unionism in “traditional industrial relations journals” confirms the paucity of research on social justice teacher unionism but also illustrates exclusion of educational research from labor studies. The review categorizes “Workplace: A Journal of Academic Labor,” which we found as one of the major sources of writing about teachers unions in the U.S., as being outside the purview of “traditional industrial relations journals.”

In summary, though we have a great deal of scholarship, primarily from educational researchers, about negative alterations in teaching conditions as a result of neoliberal policies, we have very little research that addresses teacher unionism as vehicle for altering those conditions, as a possibility or reality, except in history.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Given evidence about alterations in teachers’ working conditions and teachers union militancy in resisting neoliberal policies, why is there so little research addressing the reality and possibility of teachers’ organizing as workers?

We suggest these lacunae in research emerge from two sets of related factors. One is tacit and explicit ideological assumptions about class, race, gender, and capitalism in educational research about neoliberalism, teachers’ work, and teachers unions. Another is teachers unions’ political response to the neoliberal project.

### **Ideological Assumptions about Race, Class, Gender, and Capitalism**

Each political assumption we explore is debated widely and deserves far more discussion than we can provide in an article. Hence, we limit analysis to how educational research on teachers unions reflects and at times influences larger political debates that address our research questions.

Most critical educational research in the United States, even when using the term “neoliberalism,” analyzes education without reference to capitalism’s refashioning of the global economy and implications of this transformation for U.S. education and teachers’ work. Yet an international lens illuminates the legacy of imperialist relations, clarifying aims of reforms often unacknowledged in the global North (Compton & Weiner, 2008a; 2008b, 2008; Connell & Dados, 2014; Kuehn, 2004; Robertson, 2000; 2008), and illuminating reasons for their racialized impact (Hagopian & Green, 2012; Lipman, 1998; 2017; Zeichner, 2010).

At the same time, political contestations about the primacy of race, class, and gender as factors explaining inequality are apparent in critical research about the economic, social, and political role of education in the United States that names schools as “site[s] of struggle and compromise...one of the major arenas in which resources, power, and ideology” are contested (Apple, 2005, p. 272). On one pole is research in which teachers are unable to make significant choices because schools overwhelmingly reproduce economic and social inequality under capitalism, creating a “new nobility” based on spurious notions of meritocracy (Bourdieu, 1998). On the other side is research focusing on teachers as agents of change acting to “reinvent rather than reproduce society” (Catone, 2016, p. 17). Within this latter body of research about educational reform, U.S. society was generally not named as capitalist in the period we studied.

Yet, researchers’ normative beliefs about capitalism underlie their analyses about teachers’ work (Connell, 1995) and debate about whether teachers are workers or professionals, reflected in Anderson and Cohen’s (2018) argument for teachers being “democratic professionals.” The omission of capitalism as the explicit frame for social oppression is noteworthy because feminist scholarship in the 1990s often challenged classical Marxism’s gendered binary of labor as production or reproduction. This body of research explored

the nature of “women’s work,” paid and done outside the home (Acker, 1999; Biklen, 1995; Blackwell, 2000; Connell, 1995; Grumet, 1995), as well as its presumptions of heteronormativity (Blount, 2005). Universalist assumptions of feminists were upended by researchers documenting how communities of color and teachers of color often value teachers’ work as contributing to children’s moral and social development and the advancement of the community (Foster, 1994; Gordon, 2000).

Much critical educational research about social inequality and educational reform has mirrored the discourse of “rights” in legal battles about social equality, which configures rights as “universal and individual, which means employers and individual members of management enjoy them just as much as workers” and are exercised as rights in the same way, as individuals (Lichtenstein, 2013, p. 150). In contrast, critical research in labor studies contends what makes the exercise of workers’ rights unique is that they are powerful only when they are operationalized through collective organization and collective action at the workplace. Workers’ collective organization and the principle of solidarity contradict capitalism’s ideological premise that individualism and competition drive economic advancement, for the individual worker and the society (Aronowitz, 2014). Mann (2014) links the marginalization of the labor movement in social movement research to the ascendance of post-modern theories that challenged the salience of class, adding to this explanation the decline of unions as vehicles for struggle after their protracted battles to win collective bargaining, which in teachers unions paralleled what occurred in the U.S. labor movement generally (Hagopian & Green, 2012). Mann argues unionism’s decline in militancy parallels the personal biographies of researchers, who relate best to movements that embody their political values and experiences. Anyon (2014) notes the demise of the Marxist and socialist- feminist lens in critical scholarship and its replacement by other social theories, the same phenomenon Mann (2014) identifies.

Roediger (2006) contends the problem may not be decline of Marxist analysis per se but rather the Marxists separating the process of class formation from racism, that is, the ideology of white supremacy. He identifies this problem in one Marxist analysis of race and class in education as a “retreat from both race and class,” an illustration of “raceless liberalism and social

theory” (n.p.). Roediger contends that omitting racism’s brake on working class struggle under capitalism ends up missing the importance of both race and class, being “against race but not for class” (n.p.). Roediger’s critique suggests that in separating and subordinating racism’s role in working class formation and struggle to class identity, Marxists have misunderstood class, an explanation illustrated by critical scholarship that proposes revolutionary, anti-capitalist multiculturalism but doesn’t name teachers as workers (McLaren, 1997).

Understanding racism and class formation under capitalism as being reciprocal and inseparable suggests re-thinking educational research about white privilege in white teachers’ work and identities (D’Amico, 2016; Henze et al., 1998; McIntyre, 1997; Maher & Thompson Tetreault, 1997). Another insight about this body of scholarship comes from Ted Allen, a life-long union activist and one-time Communist who developed and helped popularize the concept of “white privilege” among white workers. (Perry, 2010). Allen insisted successful struggle against white privilege required rejection of the belief that white supremacy is “innate” and the presumption that “European American workers benefit from ‘white race’ privileges and that the privileges are in their class interest” (Perry, 2010, p. 78). Allen’s idea that white workers – teachers – are harmed by white privilege because it hampers their self-organization of workers is all but missing from educational research. In contrast, Jones’ (2015) focus on Black teachers models synthesis of race and class analysis under capitalism, a rejection of the norm of making these binary and dichotomous. He identifies two paradoxes about the way race is constructed in neoliberal educational policy:

The first paradox is that the “antiracism” of education reform actually reduces the wealth and power of Black people. The second paradox is that White teachers...who are ostensibly the winners in this scenario, may actually be losers in the long run, since the erosion of union strength will make it harder for them to make a living, raise families, and retire as teachers. The main beneficiaries of weakened teacher unions will ultimately be social elites for whom union power is a threat. Thus, the fate of African American teachers should be a central concern to all who wish to defend and improve both public schools and teacher unions (p. 82).

### **Teacher Unionism’s Response to the Neoliberal Project**

State, national, and local teachers unions faced intense economic and political attacks in the 1990s as the assault on labor rights deepened (Aronowitz, 2014; Moody, 1997). The NEA and AFT were also attacked for impeding educational reforms required to educate U.S. workers to the new “basic skills” (Murnane & Levy, 1996), a shift in education advanced to make the nation more economically competitive. In response to these political “hard times” for teachers unions (Boyd et al., 2000), the NEA and AFT rejected what they and some researchers termed an “industrial union” model, signifying militant unionism associated with labor relations in manufacturing. The unions endorsed a shift, collaboration with government, school boards, and administration, a turn endorsed by some local leaders (Urbanski, 1998) and researchers (Kerchner et al., 1997; Koppich, 1993; Moore Johnson & Kardos, 2000), as well as by social justice activists (Peterson & Charney, 1999). Jordan’s (2002) warning about dangers in rejecting a union’s obligation to protect teachers’ work was an outlier in political debate and educational research, with few exceptions, mostly from scholars outside the U.S. (Bascia, 1997).

Though used to signify union militancy, “industrial unionism” has a more specific meaning. It was the strategy adopted after the Great Depression by the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO) for unionizing all workers in a plant and industry, to replace organizing workers by craft, the practice of the CIO’s rival, the American Federation of Labor (AFL). In representing better paid craft workers, the AFL ignored manufacturing workers in the lower paid occupations within an industry, a higher percentage of whom were Black, and encouraged employers to divide workers (Aronowitz, 2014). Activists responsible for the 2018 and 2019 West Virginia walkouts also argued for “wall-to-wall” organizing of all employees of school districts to build wider popular support and undercut efforts to pit teachers against other school employees, generally employed in jobs that require less education and are lower paid (Blanc, 2019). Though not referring to the historic antecedents, “red state” walkout organizers adopted the CIO’s definition of “industrial unionism.” In so doing, they rejected the political compromise teachers unions

and social justice education activists had made twenty years before with neoliberal reforms.

By 2010 an activist movement of teachers and parents opposed to the role of standardized testing and creation of a privatized school system of charter schools, free of teachers unions (Ravitch, 2013), had gathered strength and publicity. However the NEA and AFT continued the previous decade's collaboration (Hagopian & Green, 2012; Weiner, 2012), accepting, even advocating, "pay for performance" linked to student test scores and bonuses to replace the traditional salary schedule based on years of experience and educational credentials (Flannery & Jehlen, 2008; Weiner, 2012; Will, 2012).

CORE's 2010 election victory in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) and its subsequent transformation of the union's internal operations and political agenda were the background to its stunning 2012 strike against Mayor Rahm Emanuel, who was closely connected to the Obama White House and its embrace of neoliberal educational policies (Brogan, 2016; Gutstein & Lipman, 2013; Uetricht, 2014). One aspect of CORE's story often obscured is the racial context of Chicago's resistance to neoliberal policies, especially long-standing organizing by parents of color and community organizations against school closures (Lipman, 2017). The CTU's strike became a model for teacher union activists nationally and the U.S. labor movement (Bradbury et al., 2014), not only because of the union's frontal challenge to the Democratic Party but also because its contract demands framed the Chicago Public Schools (CPS) as an "apartheid" educational system. CORE and the CTU consciously worked on strengthening alliances with parents and community groups, and its contract demands identified improvements in teachers' wages and working conditions as helping to create the "schools Chicago students deserved" (Caref & Jankov, 2012).

One indicator of the strike's impact on teachers' perceptions about the progressive potential of teachers unions is Michie's (2005) description of being a CPS teacher committed to social justice compared with a subsequent book he co-authored (Nuñez et al., 2015). Michie's first book, written for teachers committed to social justice teaching, describes his work in Chicago and doesn't discuss teacher unionism or the CTU. The second book explains ideas "worth striking for," alerting teachers to their ability to act as a powerful force for social justice when their union is mobilized. Indeed, activist social



justice teachers who a decade previously argued against the “industrial union” model (Peterson & Charney, 1999), that is, unions that see as their purpose defending teachers’ economic interests as workers and their rights as workers on the job, began to champion a different model, one that echoed the CTU’s ideas, building “on the strengths of traditional ‘bread and butter’ unionism” as well as adhering to a commitment to social justice that extends the union’s reach beyond contract battles (Peterson, 2015, n.p.).

Given the excitement engendered among teacher activists and the labor movement, what explains the paucity of educational research about the CTU, except insofar as it directly affected Chicago (Gutierrez & Waitoller, 2017)? We suggest one factor is the powerful ideological assumptions we have previously analyzed exert in configuring research. These assumptions similarly underlie the dearth of research about reform within teachers unions that CORE inspired, including a network of reform caucuses (Friedman, 2018; Gunderson, 2015; Stark, 2019), many of which have built alliances on racial justice issues (Johnson, 2017; Marshall et al., 2017).

Rottman’s (2013) study documenting the role of the caucus in revitalizing teachers unions is indicative of the dominance of Canadian researchers in studying teacher union reform. Still Sondel’s (2017) study about tensions in relationships between teachers in navigating union reform illustrates the emergence of new research, some in dissertations (Asselin, 2019; Maton, 2016; Stark, 2019), some attempting to address needs of teacher union leaders as they try to shift their unions to be part of the urban communities they serve (Benson & Weiner, 2013). The Caucus of Working Educators (CWE) in the Philadelphia teachers union is the site of a significant amount of existing union reform research, examining CWE’s use of book groups (Riley, 2015); anti-racism work (Maton, 2016); and gender as a factor in its participants’ activity (Brown & Stern, 2018). “Workplace: A Journal of Academic Research” and “Critical Education” publish much of this cutting-edge work.

An important consideration rarely addressed in empirical research conducted about social justice work in teachers unions is how the labor-specific context configures teachers’ social justice activism. This is understandable because educational researchers are seldom equally familiar with material in labor studies as they are education. Still, a reform caucus in a union is, by definition, an organization independent of the union that wants

to alter union policy and/or organization (Asselin, 2019), and this context influences debates and strategy. Unlike advocacy groups that are based on shared values, unions that have collective bargaining have a legal responsibility to represent all members (Hagopian & Green, 2012; Weiner, 2012). This is an especially important issue in social justice caucuses in teachers unions because they must mediate divergent political perspectives of members, in particular as the caucuses attempt to center racial justice (Asselin, 2019). One formidable challenge for educational researchers studying teachers' labor activism is transcending the dominant dichotomous frames of social justice/ economic issues in making sense of shifts in teacher activists' thinking and strategies. Jones' (2015) study of Black teachers, privatization, and the future of teacher unions models a more dynamic framing of the tensions in reconciling what can be cast as separate or perhaps contradictory frames of "neoliberalism" and "racism" (Maton, 2018).

Goodman's (2000) analysis of anti-racism work among people from privileged social groups provides a useful corrective to the dichotomous framing of race and economic issues. Goodman contrasts two definitions of "self-interest," one the common, negative connotation of "self-interest" tied to an "individualistic...short-sighted and short-term perspective... concerned with immediate benefits, most often material in nature" (p. 1073). Goodman notes "work on behalf of others is simultaneously work on behalf of oneself...since our lives and fates are intertwined" (p. 1074). Unions organized on the "business" or "service" model, which CTU upended, rely on what the definition of "self-interest" Goodman labels a "short-sighted and short-term perspective." As Ross (2007) explains, "the 'business' or 'service model' of unionism emphasize[s] the role of 'expert', full-time, elected or appointed leaders, acting on behalf of and in the place of members" (p. 16), "exclusive and conservative," because it accepts "the terrain of capitalism" to improve economic conditions of its members through workplace bargaining and "legalistic industrial relations processes" (p. 16-17). Ross observes "declines in union density, the atrophy of working class capacities, and the inability of unions to develop effective strategies for countering neoliberal globalization" are attributable in part to the business union model (p. 17). Echoing the debate between the CIO and AFL, Singh (1999) contends business unionism has failed to address the condition of "underpaid and

exploited workers long outside union protection” who are “historic casualties of a segmented labor market divided by gender, ethnicity, race, and nationality” (p. 34), and he further notes “issues of internal diversity and internationalism are integrally linked” (p. 37).

CTU’s contract campaign in 2012, its alternative to the business/service model, illustrated Goodman’s second definition of “self-interest,” embedding demands about economic improvements for union members, including proposals to reduce class size and naming racism as an impediment to teachers’ winning professional gains and economic improvements as workers. CTU defined teachers’ self-interest as overlapping with the struggle against the effects of racism in Chicago’s schools, identifying parents and communities as needed partners at the school and in the city.

We suggest Goodman’s work implies the need to re-define teachers’ self-interest, rather than broaden a union’s program to include social justice issues that may not appear to be matters on which members’ well-being depends. What seems a slight rhetorical difference actually carries important strategic and political implications because re-defining teachers’ self-interest as union members clarifies that tensions that emerge in union work in reconciling teachers’ political differences about race and class reflect members’ varying understandings of contradictions in social relations in capitalism, rather than conflicts in teachers’ self-interest per se. In other words, the differences are in how teachers make sense of their self-interest amidst scarcity and inequality in capitalism. Goodman’s re-definition of self-interest reinforces the labor principle of solidarity, summarized in the idea “an injury to one is an injury to all.” Applying this new definition of teachers’ self-interest suggests the challenge of caucus and union reform work is in examining how the full-range of teachers’ needs as workers, including their professional obligations, requires challenge to inequalities in capitalist social relations as reflected and reinforced in schools and classrooms. As Asselin’s (2019) empirical study of two union reform caucuses engaging with tensions over race and class observes, this process requires democratic space for members to arrive at new understandings.

The ideological assumptions we have identified shape not only perceptions of teachers’ work in the society but also construction of work in higher education, which in turn influences knowledge production. Feminist

scholarship illuminates how the devaluation of teachers' work in K-12 schools is reflected in colleges and universities, "notorious for their lack of attention to teaching and academic advising, especially the schools that are striving for or have achieved a level of prestige within the competitive work of academia" (Freedman, 1990, p. 254). Higher education's class and racial stratification, as well as the gender divide, are seldom analyzed in allocation of resources to colleges of education (Allen, 1998; The Holmes Group, 1995). Yet unequal resource allocation reflects the low status of education in the university (Zeichner, 1999) and, we suggest, of educational research, evidenced in its omission in scholarship of researchers in social sciences studying educational policy under neoliberalism and teachers' work.

The profound social and political turmoil in U.S. society after Donald Trump's 2016 election as President is essential to understand the conditions that have influenced the emergence of teachers' labor activism since 2018 and new research on it. However, the topic is too new and too massive for us to address it fully in this article. Nonetheless, one aspect of this changed political context requires mention: heightened consciousness and debate about economic pain experienced by workers, with Donald Trump and Bernie Sanders, both presenting themselves as championing interests of the working class (Gusterson, 2017). The Sanders' campaign's explicit critique of capitalism and calls for class struggle as well as popular outrage about Trump's embrace of white supremacy, misogyny, and xenophobia and the growth of social movements resisting Trump's policies may have altered ideological assumptions that have contributed to lacunae we have identified in research about teachers' labor activism.

### **Conclusions**

How might research illuminate the potential of teachers unions and teachers' labor activism to support successful resistance to neoliberal policies? Though the study of teachers unions has no single disciplinary home, we urge the study of teachers' work and by extension of teachers unions be claimed by educational researchers. One urgent focus for empirical research is the burgeoning movement of teachers who are not members of unions and lack the legal right of collective bargaining but are using labor tactics to press for

improvements to teachers’ work and schools. A related topic is on-going work among teacher activists to resolve tensions between what are typically understood as “social justice” needs and the defense of teachers’ professional interests, livelihoods, and working conditions, in the context of their challenge to transform the unions.

We need theory and empirical studies of how racialized capitalism, that is racism’s historical embeddedness in capitalism, functions; how race and class are mutually determining under capitalism (Du Bois, 1962). New efforts to develop Marxist critical reproduction theory analyzing how social oppression might be understood as co-constituted in capitalist social and economic relations and definitions of work (Bhattacharya, 2017) is one promising start. Contrasting understandings of racialized capitalism with theories of intersectionality, McNally (2017) contends “relations do not need to be brought into intersection because each is already inside the other, co-constituting one another to their very core” (p. 108); however much gender and racism are “differentiated relations, they constitute an integral system” (p. 110). We find McNally’s work echoes Goodman’s relational definition of “self-interest” operationalized in social justice teacher unionism. It also addresses the limitation of current Marxist theoretical work that poses class as being primary or “central” (Blanc & Gong, 2018), which recapitulates what Roediger (2006) characterizes as a retreat from both race and class.

Still critical reproduction theory lacks attention to teaching as “idea work,” its ideological function under capitalism, and in describing teachers’ work, critical reproduction theory needs to intersect with theories of racialized capitalism to better capture the complexity of being a teacher in the neoliberal era, negotiating the role of systemic racism in education. Contributions by educational researchers are needed to develop a theory that is more robust and better able to capture the complexities of teachers’ work.

Classroom teachers have used their power as workers to teach U.S. society a lesson in valuing teachers and their work. In so doing they have challenged researchers to correct theoretical and ideological omissions that have marginalized attention to teachers unions and organization of teachers as workers in capitalism, obscuring the potential of transformed teachers unions to alter the landscape of educational policy.

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