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Folk Narrative

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Teachers in Action, Out of Action: Narratives from West Virginia

In 2018, teachers in certain states seemed to have reached a breaking point: their priorities would no longer be put on the back burner and their careers would not be disrespected by politicians. Escalating attacks on public education over the past two decades have led to a renewed spirit of labor-related activism amongst teachers throughout the United States. It started in West Virginia and continued in a domino effect in other states such as Oklahoma, Arizona, and Kentucky. Although the public face of the teacher labor movement involves large-scale protests and walk-outs, organizing and mobilizing diverse communities of educators involves a lot of work behind the scenes. I wanted to explore the role that narrative played in the lead up to strikes and walkouts. In doing so, I uncovered a mine of narratives that retell that time. This paper investigates narratives shared with me from teachers in West Virginia who were extremely active during the 2018 walkout. These narratives illuminate the nuanced ways transformational unionization happens and dispel misunderstood conceptions of the teachers and their movement. Not much has changed since Archie Green wrote “we lack a popular garland of occupational narratives,” (1996) and I seek to add to that garland with recording the stories of these West Virginian teachers. I do offer commentary and analysis, but, in the style of Dorothy Noyes, I attempt to keep it close to the ground and the activists whose collective labor birthed these stories (2008). It is my hope that the narratives of these teachers largely speak for themselves.

The interviews I conducted are with K-12 teachers in West Virginia who worked as strikers, protesters, organizers, and online activists during the recent instances of labor unrest. They described their experiences of everyday burdens of being a teacher, the altruistic motivations behind their taking direct action, their own personal journeys toward working as organizers, their experiences within direct actions both past and present. They are retrospective reflections that both assess and create meaning within their own personal experience narratives. There were many stories and sentiments and I could not present all of them here for sake of time and paper length, so I chose the ones that I think represent important themes and details that were crucial to the success of the walkout. First, I present narratives that show the walkout was not a random response to a single piece of legislation. Then I move into narratives that show the diversity of teacher voices in West Virginia and how the walkout of the present is informed by one from the past. Next are narratives that display community support followed by ones that describe disrespect from state representatives. Lastly, I present narratives that describe evaluative sentiments of the experience and hopes for lasting impact.

Briefly, I find it relevant and important to state that few scholars of folklore have devoted their efforts to studying laborlore used in organizing transactional unionism and the few who do focus their efforts on narratives such as tales, yarns, legends, myths, sagas, parable, drollery, jokes, songs, and anecdotes (Green 1996, Leary 2013). Although the call to do so has been made (Green 1993), and there has been detailed exploration on personal narratives that arise from strikes and political demonstrations (Frandy 2013), it is still a genre largely left unexplored. Lack of critical scholarly attention to these fields stems from the historical preoccupation with people and occupations outside of the “mainstream” dominant culture. Thus, while physical jobs like lumberjacking and commercial fishing have received a great deal of

attention from scholar (as have high risk occupations, like firefighting, and police work, and racially segregated workers like Pullman Porters), white collar, middle class professional jobs have been overlooked by scholars concerned with occupational folklore (Schmidt 2013). Has the laborlore of teachers been ignored because it is less physically demanding, industrious and absent of immediate impending danger? Why is the lore of unionization of teachers considered any less important than that of ironworkers, firefighters, loggers, smiths, and the like? Teachers may not be building a literal infrastructure like the occupations just mentioned, but they are building an infrastructure of America's mental abilities in the minds of the children that they continually shape. This, although a less strenuous job of the body, is just as strenuous on the mind, and its importance is equal to that of any other job in America. From the experiences these teachers shared with me, less present are allegorical tales, folk songs, parables, and proverbs. This is not to say that folktales, songs, parables, and proverbs were completely absent during the planning of the West Virginia teacher walkout, but they were not presented to me during my interviews with the teachers.

The narratives I present were shared to me by three West Virginian teachers, Carrie Beatty, Jacob Staggers and Sandy Shaw. Each of them, loosely guided by the same set of questions, built a large narrative of how the walkout formed filled with their memorable experiences and anecdotes. Archie Green supplies a three-pronged definition for tale when tied to occupation or unionism: 1, a narrative shaped on the job or at the hall that jumps fences of time, place, skill, and belief; 2, one found in variant forms; 3, one commenting upon the experiences and aspirations of its tellers and hearers (Green 1996). It is the third prong of this definition that I use to identify and isolate the narratives that the teachers shared with me. The

following narratives are my own transcriptions of portions from the phone interviews I conducted and recorded and are attempted to be as accurate as possible.

In the beginning, teachers usually described to me the general sense of frustration that had been building for years before the walkout. Sandy Shaw tells me:

SS: “West Virginia has suffered a tremendous loss in education this year. They wanted to take the seniority from the teachers. They wanted to reduce standards too, for teachers. There were a lot of bills we actually avoided because they didn’t actually have time to bring them to the table. Because of the teachers strike. So now, going back to January the governor had announced this [raise] that would have added up to about 26 dollar a pay check for our raise. And so, we just started assembling and someone said the word strike. And then, someone started saying, you know this is like 1990, we’ve gotta do this. And then there was a Facebook page started for the teachers, and that went from 1 to 2 followers to a couple 1000 in just a few weeks. It just caught fire (Interview April 21st, 2018).”

This response shows that the walkout wasn’t a sudden outburst reaction to a singular issue. It had been building over the years as teachers’ benefits and rights had continually rescinded. This also introduces two themes that we see in other stories: the active memory of the teacher’s strikes from the 1990s and the important role of Facebook. Towards the end of Sandy’s interview, she told me a specific recollection that shows the collective sentiment of frustration as it manifested during a demonstration on the capital.

SS: “When the rally on February 17th was going on, I don’t know if you’ve ever been to Charleston, to see our capital, but we’ve got one of the most beautiful capital in the country. And it sits right on the Kahnawa river which is a pretty good size river. And, when we got ready to leave, we had gone early--so we either went to the early, we did the early shift or the late shift, so you saw people coming and going all day. But we left about two o’clock to go on home. One of the young teachers who was with us had to get home

to the baby-sitter, and so we crossed the bridge just, I went a different route just to get out of the traffic, so I crossed the bridge and went came down the other side of the river, and as we came down the other side of the river, I pulled off when we got across from the capital, and they were, the crowd was still on the capital steps, they were singing “We’re Not Gonna Take It Anymore” and you could hear that just like it was right beside you on this side of the river. It was just phenomenal watching that. And seeing all of those red t-shirts out there, I mean there were thousands of people out there. And there were thousands of people in Charleston for nine days. Different groups, so it was pretty cool (Interview, April 21st, 2018).”

This story, aside from showing the collective sentiment of the teacher demonstrators, reveals a number of other key details that helped this strike be as successful as it was. First, the fact that certain teachers came early and others came late is a testament to the organizational power of the collective body. Whether this was explicitly planned or an unsaid kind of strategy, I don’t know, but it shows that these teachers were not just some mob. Including the detail that these teachers were carpooling and accommodating to the “younger teacher” who needed to get back to relieve the baby sitter is another testament to their organized effort. This shows not only how married the teachers are to the cause, but also how supportive and accommodating they are of each other with the common goal of getting the walkout to enact change. The zenith of the story, when Sandy sees and hears all the teachers singing the popular song “We’re not Gonna Take It” is telling of the dynamic ways song is enacted in protest. In the past, folklorists have documented unionized demonstrators perform “traditional folk-songs” or songs written for the specific cause (Green 1993; Leary 2013). Here we see the teachers adopting a song more from the realm of what some would deem popular culture and appropriating it to display solidarity and frustration during their demonstration. This is a theme we will see pop up again in a story from Sandy.

Even though the walkout was a result of years of building frustration, the catalyst to the whole movement overwhelmingly was attributed to the enforcement of the teacher's health insurance to be co-opted with a health app called *Go365*. Jacob Staggers explains it:

JS: "As recently as coming out of Christmas break this year there wasn't any talk of a strike. Or a walkout or any kind of organized action. You know, we were unhappy that once again there was no raise on the horizon we could only assume that things were gonna go downhill with our health insurance, but there was nothing really specifically being said in regard to any organized action. And then the legislative session was starting. And then in mid-January things began to pick up speed. We, in the--there were several, and I'm sure you were aware of this, there were several different pieces of legislation that were coming out, that were directed at teachers, they were trying to take away our seniority, they were trying to find new ways to divert public education into other forms of education, that would you know limit what we could do with our already underfunded schools. And so, there were other things too. The straw that broke the camel's back was the--there was not gonna be any funding for our health insurance, and now there was this app. And it was that *Go365*. And what really was so bad about the *Go365* app was--first of all it was incredibly patronizing. They presented it to us like it was this gift, but we were all signed up for it like we never knew it existed. Suddenly this app is being mentioned, and it wasn't some big roll out, like some big press conference was being held that everyone knew. It was like this back door roll out where suddenly we got a piece of mail saying hey you're signed up for this app and if you don't use it your insurance is gonna be even worse that it already is (Interview, April 18th 2018)."

Sandy Shaw tells a similar story

SS: "Well oddly enough it started with a new program that PEA started with a health and wellness program called *Go365* or, I don't even really know... something like that. But it was really intrusive into our privacy, it was going to force, there were a lot of components in there that I just was going to refuse to do. And if we didn't do it, it was a system where we wore a fit bit and recorded different things and earned points. And the way PEA introduced it to us, it was like a motivation program, that you could earn gift

cards and that kind of thing. Then when you read the fine print, if you didn't reach so many points, your premium went up 25 dollars, or your deductible went up 25 dollars a month. That coupled with a more, really severe changes to our insurance. One being they went from 70—see the legislator used to pay 100% of our insurance, then it went to 80/20, last year it to 70/30. So, this year the change was going to be 60/40 plus they were going to count total household income, which really hurt people who held two jobs, or were married and had spousal income. In some cases, it was causing peoples premiums to double. That with the 365Go, we just started rumbling, we can't let this happen. We can just not let this happen (Interview April 21, 2018).”

In these two accounts, there are minor details about the health insurance and the mandatory app change, but the important details are the consistent sentiments; that it was intrusive, and it was one step too far. My review of news articles did not include reference to stories about the app. The motif of workers being lead to “radicalization” because of one step too far, is something seen in memoirs written by working-class organizers in the past (Lynd 1973). The term “radicalization” is not to suggest that these teachers are radicals but is a merely a term used by labor workers in the past to signal that they will no longer passively stand by as their work conditions deteriorate.

As the walkout was covered in national news, something I did notice was that it depicted all West Virginian teachers as a single voiced front. However, I discovered from my interviews that the voices and opinions were varied and diverse among the teachers in West Virginia. Jacob Stagers describes:

JS: “The communication in the school was tense even from the beginning. Just because, that 1990s strike, everyone knows someone who was there, or they are someone who was there. And so, the memories of the 1990s strike, even though that was a successful strike it created a lot of tension in staffs across the state where some people chose to go out and some people didn't. I grew up with several friends whose parents were teachers and I

remember them talk about that situation and how painful the division was when you came back to work after the strike and some people had crossed the picket line. So as this began picking up steam in January, that was something that was actually really concerning is that we heard some people kinda saying that they weren't sure they were willing to do any organized action. They definitely weren't gonna strike. I had a lot of colleagues that basically said they would not walk out, they would not strike. And you know these are some of my closest friends at work who I love dearly, and they are one of the things I like best about my job. They were one of the ones saying that. And there were a lot of heated conversations, not quite arguments, they didn't sort of lean in to argument. You know, about what to do, and saying well if you don't wanna strike you need to be taking action and calling our representatives and take action now to try and avoid it. It got kinda tense. Like I said, our unions, by the time that that app was introduced, they really began to be more organized so even though we were having these little quiet conversations amongst ourselves even occasionally in an empty classrooms or teacher's lounge some people who have an argument where they would say, well I'm not going out. And other people saying well if we do have to do that you're really hanging us out to dry and it was getting tense and everything. The unions were working behind the scenes really at that point and the ball was already rolling (Interview, April 18th, 2018)."

When prompted, Jacob told me a specific instance when this tension boiled over.

JS: "There was a day, it was after we had done the informational picket, I think it was actually the day we were in the purple shirts. Like I said, we would, at my school, it seemed like 75, 80% of the staff, wore the colors on the day we were wearing the colors, and so we would go down in the lobby and take our picture, and then we would share it on social media, saying you know, South Middle School in Morgan town is supporting, ya know, the unions and the possibility that we might take action or whatever... But we are all walking around in purple shirts and my one co-worker, who I love dearly, she is one of my closest friends, but she had been saying she wasn't sure if she would wanna participate in anything like organized action. And so, she saw us all in our purple shirts and we saw her, and she was wearing, well it was really more of a maroon color, but it was very close to purple. We all kinda joked, 'oh my god you're participating' and she

got really defensive about it, and that turned into—we're such a close-knit group that at first, we all thought we were having just one of our normal conversations. We are all like joking and teasing, each other and stuff like that, and it was just myself and two other coworkers that were very on board with everything that is going on, and we're all in purple, and then this one coworker who we all love, she is sitting there, and she is getting angry and she was getting upset. And she felt like we were ganging up on her and she kept asking questions like 'what does the union want to do, what does the union think is gonna happen, what's the possible timeline for all of this, how long would we be out, would we lose pay?' And she was asking these questions and every time we would try to answer her question she would talk over us and try to ask another question. And it got more and more heated, more tense. We weren't able to share a whole lot of information with her. And I will say, one of the problems she was facing was she's not a part of either of the main unions, she's a part of this third union that was not really well represented, in any of the actions that we took. I don't even know what's its called because there's not very many people that belong to it. And so, she wasn't getting a lot of information in an organized way. So, she was kinda defensive about that, kinda defensive about the idea that we thought she was participating in the colored picture thing that we were gonna be doing that day. Eventually it got to the point that we were yelling, and we had to leave, we were in the room prior to the kids getting there that day and we had to leave the room. Now, a couple days go by, we all calm down, and she apologizes, we apologize. We all felt really bad about it because we are not that kind of staff, we don't get mad at each other like that usually—knock on wood. But you know it was just because it was such a scary prospect to think about because if we do this we might go without pay, we might risk losing seniority within the county, it was a scary thing. Because those are things they can do to you if you illegally leave the job. And so, she had valid concerns, its just that she wouldn't listen to any of the answers that we would give, not that they were that great of an answer at that point.

And then I think it was maybe two weeks later, where we had like really treaded lightly around her, and around some of our other coworkers, that the vote to authorize action actually happened. And that was a really tense moment as well. We knew we had to have this vote. All union leaders from all 55 counties had gone to Flatwoods and had a

meeting. It was all the county AFT presidents, and all the county WEA presidents. They had gone there, and they had a meeting to find out what they need to do... Without the vote to authorize action the unions were not going to take action the way that we thought they needed to at this point. Because by this point, the legislature is starting to get rolling on some of these bills that would have been terrible for education. And so we had this vote, and so there was a lot of concern about what percentage it would be, we were told that the magic number that every county needed to reach was 70%, we needed 70% of the staff in each county to say they were willing to have the unions represent them even if they weren't a part of the union, they needed the union to represent them in that moment and take action. And what we found out was that I think Mon county, the percentage in the end was really high it was like 89% percent. It was high, don't quote me on that, but it was really high. And I do know my school was I think like 82%. It was a really high number as well, well above what we needed. It was kind of an interesting moment when we took that vote, even though it was anonymous, it was interesting finding out after the fact that oh, well my friend who had been so defensive, she voted in favor of the action. By that time, things had gotten so bad in Charleston around the legislative session, that people had started to turn around a little bit (Interview, April 18th, 2018)."

It was challenging for the various groups to reach a consensus about taking action.

Worker parties found it difficult to obtain voiced unity in individual schools and even more challenging for that unity to span an entire state. The media tends to have an essentializing picture of the teachers during times of unrest and strike that doesn't speak to the nuanced ways in which these kinds of things happen. Our job as cultural workers, among other things, is to recognize the internal diversity of voices within a given occupational group (McCarl 2006). The essentializing of groups in general, especially notions of local, is something folklorists have also been guilty of in the past for reasons of convenience or ignorance (Shuman 1993). If we are to really understand these groups and, specifically, how transformative unionization happened among West Virginian teachers, a variety of these kinds of stories must be studied.

Jacob Staggers describes the teachers' strikes in the '90s as one source of tension amongst teachers. Carrie Beatty, when asked about how the memories of the '90s strikes resurfaced, describes them:

CB: "Scary. The biggest comfort, because we were all very uncertain, because we knew we didn't have the legal right to strike. Although that doesn't somewhat stop people from striking. No one gives you anything for saying please from the government. I think the most powerful thing, was the veteran teachers that was there from the 90s strike started sharing their stories, what kept them going. Because they didn't have the support that we had together from the Facebook page. They didn't have that. They just had their buildings. And some of the buildings maybe even half of them, didn't support walking out. So, it was reassuring to know that even though they were they faced bigger odds against them they were still successful. They went from 49th in pay to 36th. So, and their stories, the comradery that would happen on that line. Stories of picketing and kind of things that happen on the line (Interview, April 18th, 2018)."

Carrie retells one specific story.

CB: "Well, one of them was told by one of our science teachers at University High. Chuck Bran. He tells the story of when they were occupying the capital and they put in a giant box of chocolates their list of demands as a Valentine's Day gift and then was escorted out the building. Just like we were, before any walkouts, occupying the capital, just trying to be seen by these delegates, who are making outrageous remarks against teachers. And just letting them know that we are paying attention and we are here and our numbers are growing. They did the same thing (Interview, April 18th, 2018)."

The sharing of these stories played a role in building confidence and support among teachers as they planned and demonstrated in the weeks leading up to the strike. Stories of the previous strike provided a model for the current one, giving opportunity to follow in the footsteps of the teachers in the '90s and make appropriate improvements. Sandy Shaw says about the '90s strike:

SS: “Well that’s what was so phenomenal, the difference between that one and this one. In the 90’s there were only--and you can check out this specific numbers on it--there were about 10 counties that chose not to participate, and it was a straight-up strike. The schools remained open and teachers, they crossed the picket line, and people still hold hard feelings today, teachers can still tell you what teachers crossed the picket line, and there is still hard feeling over that after 20 years. That surprised me (Interview, April 21th, 2018).”

The importance that the 2018 walkout include all 55 counties of West Virginia, and that it would be a walkout as opposed to a strike is seen as a crucial detail to the movement’s success. Because of this, teachers were able to focus less on what was regrettable about the past movement and more on the cause in the present. This was in part due to the power of Facebook as a tool to share information, facilitate debate, and generally organize. Even when not explicitly stated as a personal opinion or a moral lesson, stories contain evaluative commentary intended to persuade the listener to accept a particular interpretation of what happened (Shuman 2003). It was never explicitly stated to me, but I suspect stories of the ‘90s strike helped inform the strategy of the 2018 walkout.

A lot of the stories described to me from teachers detailed the ways in which their local community did or didn’t support them leading up to and during the strike. Throughout national coverage, there seemed to be a cultural trope of whiney and ungrateful teachers and an expectation for them to be martyrs. On the other hand, there were also many news stories of specific displays of community support. This was something I wanted to get clarity on from my interviewees and something they had numerous memories of. Carrie Beatty recollected:

CB: “Our informational pickets I think were huge. I helped organize the mountaineer march. So, we helped pick the Kansas game for WVU to have our signs out, to have our flyers out, this is what we are fighting for, this is what we are upset about, about that we

are trying to do. And the amount of support, I think that was the turning point for a lot of us. They weren't really sure how much the community was gonna be behind us, we were out there for about four hours total. And I don't think—for maybe the one person that would flip you off, there were 20 honks of support. And the number of cars supporting us, and the number of people stopping and asking questions the conversations that started about that, that was really powerful for us, empowering you know. They wanted to know. And it felt for once people were actually listening. They wanted to know, 'why are all these teachers out here? What is happening?' And a lot of people had no idea about the insurance. I think that was probably the most mind boggling and eye-opening thing (Interview, April 18th, 2018).”

Because teachers aren't the only constituents that legislators listen to when deciding laws and bills, the teachers knew they would need the public support and understanding if this walkout was to be successful. This story describes a moment when they were able to see through a sample of the population how many were in support and how many weren't. Jacob Staggars shared a particularly powerful memory for him:

JS: “One of the last couple days of the work stoppage I was down in Charleston, in front of the senate door, helping lead the chants and cheers that we were doing there. And I heard a kid say ‘it's Mr. Staggars’ and that's my name. So, I turned around and there were two of my students and they were watching as I was leading this very large crowd. It was the biggest day at the capital, it was the day that they actually had to, like, stop letting people in. And there they were, their parents had brought them down. And their parents said, ‘we wanted our kids to see this. We wanted our kids to observe what was happening. Because this isn't just a small thing that's happening.’ They called it historic, and I feel kind of cheesy calling it that because I was part of it. But they called it historic and actually something they wanted their kids to see in person. And you know they were actually—‘we want the kids to get a picture with you.’ So, I took a picture with these two kids, who I love. They're my students. But they certainly have never been like ‘Mr. Staggars I wanna take a picture with you.’ So, there was sort of this funny moment like alright, you know, they were looking at it like this really cool thing that they brought their

kids to see, but I know that my students were like, ya, here in a day or two, we are gonna be back in class and I'm gonna make them write essays. But I took a picture with them and the parents thanked me for what we were doing. And so that was a really cool moment for me. It made me so proud that some of my students actually saw what I had done (Interview April 18th, 2018).”

It was only through this frame that Jacob revealed exactly how involved he was with and the level of energy he put into the walkout and demonstrations. It displays the level of support that parents had, not only before the walkout but, during it and the gravitas they associated with it. For them it was “history.” Interestingly, Jacob prefers not to think about it as history. Maybe this is because it is a personal experience narrative, something he lived through and remembers and is therefore to be excluded from the genre of history perhaps. This story speaks to the sentiment of teachers investing more in the wellbeing of their students than their own wellbeing. This was a sentiment I saw being cited in news reports and online posts that teachers used to justify their walkout. Maybe Jacob was thrilled that his students saw him because at the end of the day it was just as much for them as it was for him.

A story from Sandy is insightful about this topic through other details:

SS: “Looking back on the strike, the fact that our state board of education closed the schools and didn't make us cross picket lines, allowed us to feed the children while the strike was going on, and just supported us. And they, by closing the schools, stood up to the legislature as well. That was one of the things that made this so successful. Parents would go by in cars and honk and wave, and say “Stand strong teachers, we support you, we love you” parents would bring us food on the picket lines. I had a student walk up behind me one day when I was local here in Beckly, and he had four pizzas in his hands that he was bringing to feed us for lunch (Interview, April 21st, 2018).”

Aside from describing the level of support the teachers had from their higher-ups and the public, this story reiterates that the teachers did not stop thinking about their kids or the

consequences the walkout would have on them. Providing food for the students when the schools were shut down was something every teacher mentioned to me as being important. This is even more evidence that they were not just acting for themselves, that they were acting for the benefit of their schools and their communities at large.

The teachers described general appreciation for their communities. They did not however, feel appreciated by state legislators during the demonstrations in Charleston. Carrie Beatty described:

CB: “It’s one thing to think that the general public is against what you’re doing, but when the people that you vote to represent you and make laws and policies and hopefully taxes that are supposed to support the things that, solely to your core, will lead to a better society and a stronger state economy, openly mock you, it was a disrespect, I think that was really the tipping point for a lot of us (Interview, April 18th, 2018).”

The lack of respect shown to teachers by politicians fueled the fire and widened the gap that had already existed between the state and the workers. The teachers listened intently as legislators filled their speeches with phrases that describe teachers as not enough and frame them as ungrateful. Sandy Shaw remembers:

SS: “I teach in one of the biggest schools in the county, I’m at Woodrow Wilson high school, and my school is a pretty conservative school. I’m one of the more progressive teachers at the school. That first, there was a day in February, three counties went out, and our county voted not to go out on that day. We ended up having a snow day on that day so some of us loaded up at 7:00 and went to Charleston with those three other counties. I think it was Wyoming, Mingo, and Logan maybe? I’m not sure. I know Wyoming did because that’s our neighboring county. And so, we went down there that day, and there were a couple thousand teachers that day from the other three counties. And we were treated so rudely by some of the legislators that it only increased our resolve to do this. We sat in the gallery, during the senate session. And I watched the

disrespect and the attitude that some of the legislators had towards us. And then after that day they got on Facebook and talked about how rude the teachers were, how one of the senators got hit in the head with a sign, which was so totally not true. Tried to make us out to be really low class, monstrous mob type people. And so with the things they were trying to do legally, coupled with their overall attitude towards us, you know one senator basically said, you know, we're working on getting this state back in the black and you just need to be thankful for the things you've gotten, and be patient while we work on the rest of it. Well that got a lot of, it really made us bristle. And I thought, by golly, I'm not sitting back. I'm not gonna take this (Interview, April 21st, 2018)."

Framing a union force as "low class" is not something new even to West Virginia. Coal miners who were striking in West Virginia in the 1930s had the term "red neck" coined for them by oppositional forces (Huber 2006). These attacks on union demonstrators, intended to tear down moral, often have to opposite effect in creating what's commonly considered an "oppositional identity" (Abrahams 2003). This is clearly the case with teachers demonstrating in the Charleston capital. Jacob Stagers recounts a pivotal moment:

JS: "The really interesting moment was that Friday, when the superintendents went down to Charleston, and all 55 counties were represented, and they had a meeting on their own, because Mitch Carmichael, the senate president, kept them waiting for hours, and you know, really truly, Mitch Carmichael, that was such a mistake on his part, to allow them to sit there and almost organize amongst themselves, and realize they all felt the same way, because when he walked into that room, I don't know if you've seen the video, of that meeting, have you seen the video of that meeting?"

JC: "I haven't. Do you know where I could find it?"

JS: "When I saw it, it was on Facebook, I may have the link saved, I can look into it. And if I do I can send it to you. But it shows all the different county super intendents sitting around and there's the republican leadership for the senate addressing them, and they're saying to them, you know, 'really we can't do what the Governor promised and that was a mistake, and you're gonna have to get your teachers back to work.' And one by one,

superintendents, or in a couple cases, superintendents aren't able to attend themselves, so they sent like a deputy superintendent or some kind of representative. One by one the representatives or superintendent of each county stood up and said, 'give the teachers what was agreed to, give them the 5 % raise across the board for all state employees, or we will continue to close schools.' And then Mitch Carmichael would respond with more justification and the superintendents would continue to respond it (Interview, April 18th, 2018)."

Jacob's account seems to express that Mitch Carmichael's disrespect eventually comes back to work against him in karmic fashion. His story is also an example of how a video shared on Facebook constitutes as a narrative for Jacob's memory. This underscores the importance Facebook had in the sharing of narratives leading up to and during the walkout. Facebook allowed teachers to work together to solidify their opposition against the state representatives working against them.

All of the teachers towards the end of telling me about their experiences added some kind of coda explaining the lasting impacts of the 2018 teachers' walkout. They all explained that despite its success, this would not be the end of the struggle, but just the beginning. Carrie Beatty stated:

CB: "So yeah, we're not done, were hoping that a lot of changes are gonna be made when we do the voting and it will be a different legislature in the fall. But if not. That's been the biggest message, we will go right back out and we won't come back in as easily this time (Interview, April 18th, 2018)."

In a related sentiment Jacob said:

JS: "I hope what we did will have more of a lasting impact, than just a 5% raise and a task force for our insurance, but that remains to be seen. And that will be the true measure of how victorious we were really. If real change can come about here in West Virginia and in these other states and even nationally, based on this labor movement that

seems to be happening right now. If real change can happen we really would have won something whether we got 5% or nothing at all (Interview, 18th, 2018).”

Sandy sums it all up in a story from the Capital:

SS: “I’m quite an activist, and I went to the women’s march in DC last January, I went to both of Obamas inaugurations, and one of the things that really energizes me is when I see people come together, to participate, in democracy. I think that’s one of the real treasures we have in the United States. One of the moments that stands out to me. Is when we stood on the steps of the capital, singing Country Roads. Everybody was singing Country Roads, and that moment really brought me to tears. It was an extremely emotional moment for me. And I looked around and I saw, black, white, gay, straight, little kids, old kids, I saw teachers, I saw miners that had come wearing their reflective mining outfits to come and support us. You know with 5000 people holding hands and just singing Country Roads. That one was like the real pivotal moment for me. That we all came together like that. And I think that everyone had that feeling (Interview, April 21st, 2018).”

Again, the more traditional labor songs have been somewhat replaced by more mainstreamed songs with identifiable authors. We saw with “We’re Not Gonna Take It,” and now here with “Country Roads.” Tim Frandy describes the Wisconsin Uprising stating “metaphorically, the people of Wisconsin became an extended family living under the roof of the people’s house, singing songs of brotherhood and sisterhood” (2013). I would argue that this sentiment is true for Sandy’s story as well. More than that, it also sums up Sandy’s, and others’, feelings about the lasting impact of the walkout in an event that happened on the steps of the Capital. They are not just doing this for themselves. They are doing it because they feel they should. Sandy goes on a little later:

SS: “Looking back on it. What this accomplished for me was so much bigger than the pay raise that we got, because, our tag now is #RememberinNovember. Because people learned during that time that they have a voice and that their voice can be

heard. They learned that they have the right and the responsibility to knock on their senator's door and say 'I wanna have a conversation about this, you work for me.' They learned that they can go to the secretary of state website and look at the voting record of the people that represent them. And if they don't like the way that representative is voting, then they have the voice through their vote to get a new representative. That's huge. Because I think people have become so complacent we, we were asleep--people had been asleep for many years. That's how we got trump, that's how we got all this mess in the first place, and I think the people are awake now (Interview, 21st, 2018)."

I hope by presenting these narratives I have shed light on the nuanced ways in which different forms of narrative played a role in the the West Virginian 2018 teacher walkout and its retelling. As Amy Shuman has shown, storytelling promises to make meaning out of raw experiences; to offer warnings, advice, and other guidance; to provide a means for traveling beyond the per; and to provide inspiration, entertainment, and new frames of reference to both tellers and listeners (2003). All these promises apply to the stories above, and there are several take-aways I think are important to list here in my final analysis and conclusion.

First, these narratives show that the walkout was not a random reaction caused by one legislative change. It was the build up of general frustration over the years that reached its limit when the state went one step too far under the noses of the teachers. The walkout proceeded in part because of the disrespect shown to the teachers by various state representatives. The teachers did not act as a wild mob trampling over the gate but rather a calculated task force that spent considerable time and energy educating their communities and gaining confidence from granted support. The '90s teachers strike had a lasting and considerable impact on how the 2018 strike turned out. One of these impacts was the initial unity of the West Virginian teachers. Contrary to media coverage, these teachers did not all form unity overnight but rather through a

slow fashion of conversation and negotiation that happened in the work space and in online space. Facebook proved to be a tremendous tool in the spread of information and the facilitating of organization that eventually led to unity 55 counties strong. Lastly, the teachers did not engage in this transformational unionization simply for themselves. In addition to their own wellbeing, they were motivated by several reasons including their students, their communities, and their democratic responsibility. Likewise, the walkout and subsequent demonstrations awakened a new feeling of vigorous activism not only in the spirit of the individual teachers themselves, but on a state and national level not seen in years.

Further research is needed with the continuation of documenting teacher's stories, not just from West Virginia, but other states where this is happening in such as Oklahoma, Arizona, and Kentucky. We can better understand the role narrative plays in not only the planning of such events, but the remembrance. Storytelling imposes order on events by establishing a chronology that then becomes a way of framing and understanding experience so that not only do already identified patterns to some extent precede and inform our narrative, but narratives also identify and impose pattern on experience (Shuman 2003). I am interested to see how these narratives of 2018, just like those of the 1990s, will continue to shape narratives of movements in the future. Better understanding this discourse between teachers and states could be useful for activist communities of all shapes and sizes to create more effective social movements in trying social and political times.

There are few of us interested in this type of work which makes it even more important to reckon our positioning within and outside of our trade. If occupational folklore is to survive, it must be continually honed, sharpened and re-animated within the daily lives of working people (McCarl 2006). I hope that in addition to the goals of this paper already stated, that this serves as

a step in the direction of honing and re-animating the study of the lives of working people. To quote Archie Green, because he states it better than I could, “tasks in demystifying workers tropes, antique or emergent, will never cease, for work itself never ends” (1993).

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