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Analysis of the Recent Teacher Strikes

 You may have recently seen the odd spectacle in the news of many teachers across the nation refusing to enter their classrooms. This was because they were on a strike (yes, teachers can in fact go on strikes). The present essay will consider this issue in greater depth, and it will be organized into three main parts. The first part will describe the nature of a strike in general. Then, the second part will consider the circumstances surrounding the present rash of teacher strikes. Finally, the third part will reflect on the political implications of the strikes. A key conclusion that will emerge here is that relative to the work that they do, teachers probably have a legitimate grievance regarding levels of compensation, and that this may reflect a flaw with in the way the economy tends to devalue certain forms of labor.

**The Nature of a Strike**

A strike is a collective bargaining action that is usually carried out through labor unions. As the League of Education Voters has put it: "A strike is an organized refusal to work by employees as a means of protest. It is a tactic that may be used during contract negotiations if employees and employers cannot agree on terms of employment" (paragraph 2). When a single employee does not like the terms of a contract, that employee could choose to leave, but he may not have adequate leverage with his employer in order to actually get the employer to reconsider the terms themselves (unless he is a uniquely valuable employee). A strike is a way in which the entire *body* of employees agree to not work for the employer until the employer demonstrates willingness to reconsider the terms of the contract and make specified concessions to the body of employees.

 For example, a body of employees may believe that they should be paid 20 percent more for their services. The employer may refuse to accept that demand, and the body of employees may then go on strike. This puts pressure on both the employer, since if the whole body of employees has agreed to the strike, then the employer would not be able to hire new employees to take the vacant places, since the whole pool has refused to work. This could of course be very bad for the employer, and the strike could thus cause the employer to re-evaluate the relative costs and benefits of agreeing the demands made by the body of employees. Of course, there is some pressure on the body of employees as well, insofar as the employees will be out of a job as long as the strike continues. The strike could thus be broken if the employer holds out longer than the employees, in which case the employees may come back to work on the employer's terms. The idea of the strike, though, is to put pressure on the employer to take the employees' demands seriously.

**The Present Circumstances**

According to Turner, Lombardo, and Logan, teacher strikes have recently occurred in several states, including Arizona, Oklahoma, Kentucky, and West Virginia. They were not coordinated, but the strike in West Virginia happened first and seems to have acted as catalyst and inspiration for teachers in other states to also take similar action. The reasons behind the strikes are primarily financial in nature. As Dionne has reported: the strikes are "a response to the decimation of state spending on education since the 2008 recession. The economy has recovered, but state support for education has not" (paragraph 3). The numbers indicate that in several states, the net spending per student has markedly declined over the year, with the decrease in spending affecting not only teachers' salaries but also the resources they have available to them in order to actually carry out their work.

 One of the unique things about teachers going on strike is that the teachers are often paid even while they are on strike. This is partly because teachers are public employees, meaning that they are paid by state governments; and it is partly also because schools are generally closed when the teachers walk out. This means that the days that teachers are on strike are essentially treated as snow days, with the same requirement that the missed days be made up at the end of the school year. Since teachers have summer vacations, it is feasible to continue paying teachers while they are on strike and then expect the teachers to make up the work later, which of course would not be possible with jobs that involve year-round work (which is most of them). This puts even further pressure on the employer (that is, the state government) to take the demands of the teachers seriously, since the teachers are essentially being paid their current amount not to work as opposed to being paid somewhat more in order to work. Unlike a private employer, then, the state government has this additional incentive to resolve the problem.

 This is also true because of the simple fact that teachers going on strike is majorly disruptive to many communities. For example, both parents in a household may work and thus depend on their child being able to be safe at school during the day; but a teacher strike means that the schools will be closed, and the child will thus have nowhere to go. Schools being open and functional are a major part of the life of any community, which means that a teacher strike can be disruptive at a scale that strikes in many other lines of work may not. This puts considerable pressure on the state governments to resolve the problem, since one of the fundamental purposes of the government is to keep its people happy. The other way around, though, many teachers may also feel pressure from the community to call off the strike. In fact, they may even feel moral qualms about continuing to strike on the basis of the perception that they are hurting the children of their own communities.

**Political Implications**

The fact that the recent round of teacher strikes started in West Virginia of all places has been read as having political implications due to the fact that West Virginia is a significantly red state, with President Trump having carried over two-thirds of the vote within the state in the last presidential election. The other states that have been listed above are also quite conservative. This is relevant because strikes, and the organized labor unions that generally carry them out, are most often associated with the anti-capitalist Left. This is because in broad terms, the Right has been historically known to favor the cause of employers, whereas the Left has been more inclined to favor the cause of labor. The fact that teacher strikes began in a deep red state can thus be read as an indication that the situation must be *really* bad, to the point that teachers in communities that identify as very conservative have nevertheless been compelled by circumstances to take drastic action.

 As Levitz has commented: "It took the fortitude of West Virginia teachers to get this strike wave started—but it required the political *weakness* of the GOP's prevailing ideology to keep it rolling" (paragraph 4). In other words, the suggestion here is that the free market ideology that characterizes the Republican Party has utterly failed to provide teachers with just compensation and resources, and that this failure has been so serious that even teachers in states that lean Republican have felt compelled to do something as drastic as go on strike. This suggests that there really is a problem and that the strikes are not ideological in nature, insofar as the very concept of a strike would probably go against the professed ideologies of many of the teachers who have been engaged in them. The implication could thus be drawn that the sheer economic problem is a very serious one, such that the teachers are pursuing not an ideologically driven but rather an eminently pragmatic course of action.

 The key political implication here, then, may be that the natural functioning of the current economy tends to fail teachers. According to the traditional Republican ideology, free markets should solve economic problems, and everyone should end up getting paid the accurate market value for their work. Teachers, though, are primarily employed by state governments. Most people probably agree that teachers should be paid more. In fact, according to a poll conducted by PBS, an overwhelming 78 percent of Americans believe that teachers are not getting paid enough, and 52 percent of them—a majority—believe that teachers are right to go on strike in pursuit of higher salaries. The economy, though, in which sports stars are paid millions of dollars, somehow finds itself unable to provide adequate pay to professionals who do a job as essential to society as teaching children. This suggests that there is a basic flaw in the way that the current political economy identifies priorities, and that radical action such as a strike may in fact be in order to remedy the situation.

**Conclusion**

In summary, the present essay has analyzed the recent wave of teacher strikes. It has considered the general nature of a strike, the current circumstances of the teacher strikes, and the political implications of the strikes. An important point that has been made here is that the states where the strikes have erupted are actually red states, which is significant because one would imagine that people in red states would be averse to adopting an essentially Leftist tactic such as the strike. This suggests that the grievances of the teachers must be legitimate and serious, and that the relevant state governments should take action in order to ensure that teachers receive fair compensation for their hard work.

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