

Public education is a public good

State governments have been cutting funding for schools. Many teachers have had enough.

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The vast majority of American children attend public school, and for many it's the only viable option. Maybe they can't afford private school, even with the help of a voucher. Maybe they have a disability that nearby charter schools aren't equipped to accommodate or a behavioral issue they aren't willing to. There is one kind of school that by definition neither charges tuition nor turns people away: traditional public schools.

Public education is a public good. It embodies the public's interest in having an informed citizenry. It is accountable to public oversight. Its successes and failures are defined by how well it serves the public, not by any profits it generates. And in a culture that's broadly deferential to private ownership and control, in which inequality tends to be taken for granted, public schools stand out by taking all

comers and striving to treat them as equals. Whatever its shortcomings, public education remains a major achievement, singular among American public institutions in ambition, reach, and scale.

Naturally it is often under fire. A significant number of Americans are skeptical of the very notion of a public good; these days, this skeptical view dominates many state governments. So the same core features that make public education so vital to our democratic fabric—it's everywhere, and it accepts everyone—also make it too big for some elected officials to tolerate. For years, efforts claiming to improve or reform public education have often amounted to little more than chipping away at its funding.

Many teachers have had enough. In recent weeks, teachers have pulled off mass strikes in West Virginia, Kentucky, and Oklahoma, using school cancellations as leverage against the budget cutters. Arizona may be next. These are states with sharp limits on union activity, so a lot of the organizing for the strikes is being done outside the traditional collective bargaining process. Yet in multiple locations, protesting teachers have achieved critical mass, forcing elected officials to listen.

Notably, wages and pensions aren't all the teachers want to talk about. In Oklahoma, state spending on education has gone down by more than a fourth since 2008. A lot of schools don't have much support staff left; they also can't afford new textbooks. Some have even gone to four-day weeks to save on maintenance costs. The strikers are fighting for decent pay but also for their schools, their students, and their communities. As classroom teachers, they have a lot of credibility in this debate. As public employees, they are uniquely positioned to express outrage on behalf of not just themselves or each other but the whole community, because these cash-starved schools belong to everyone.

Striking teachers are fighting for their students and communities.

In most statehouses, privatization and disinvestment rule the day. Organized labor is far weaker than it once was, and an upcoming Supreme Court ruling in *Janus v. AFSCME* is expected to weaken it further. Yet teachers are acting collectively to defend a critical public good. And they are counting on their neighbors to stand with them, because even people who disagree about politics can agree that a community needs good public schools.

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