

USA: We Just Remembered How to Strike

Tuesday 30 April 2019, by [MOODY Kim](#) (Date first published: 20 April 2019).

2018 might have been the year that convinced workers that the strike holds the power needed to move today's corporate giants and austerity-obsessed governments.

We might not exactly be able to define the series of strikes in 2018 and early 2019 as a “strike wave.” But the past year, the strike finally broke free of the bonds of business-as-usual collective bargaining in diverse settings, the rank and file took charge in a number of mass stoppages, the long-brewing revolt of those working in the social-reproductive realm took shape, and telecom workers continued their long string of strikes. Meanwhile, tech workers may have just started their own strike traditions. In most cases, the strike brought badly needed victories for labor.

As reported by the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS), the number of work stoppages in 2018 actually fell below the levels of recent years at about 122 to 112, in descending order, to about ninety. But the highest-profile strikes were not counted by the FMCS: 373,000 education workers in six “red” states with no collective bargaining rights fielded grassroots strikes, reaping significant victories.

The growing rebellion of private-sector social-reproduction workers followed their public education colleagues, as thousands of healthcare and hotel workers “hit the bricks.” Eighty-four thousand hospital workers struck in 2018, as did nineteen thousand hotel workers. In addition, over nine thousand members of the Communications Workers of America (CWA) across the Midwest struck AT&T for several days beginning on May 31. Another 3,200 telecom workers struck in collective bargaining situations. Twenty thousand non-union Google tech workers walked off the job for part of a day in protest of the tech giant’s tolerance of sexual harassment.

It was a year in which the strikes of some workers inspired those of others.

Strikes at the Heart of Social Reproduction

The most widely reported and analysed, of course, were the education workers’ strikes in [West Virginia](#), [Oklahoma](#), [Arizona](#), [Colorado](#), [Kentucky](#), [North Carolina](#) — “red” states all, except Colorado which went from a split state government to Democratic control in 2018.

None of these strikes, which brought out some 373,000 teachers and support workers, occurred within traditional collective bargaining settings, as public employees in most of these states do not have bargaining rights. They were for the most part initiated by the rank and file, famously enabled by social media, but launched after considerable communications, face-to-face meetings, preparations, and lower-level actions.

In some cases, unions and their leaders played an important, sometimes contradictory role; in most they followed the ranks. The February strike by West Virginia school workers inspired those in other “red” states to follow suit.

These were political strikes against the red-state governors and state legislators. They not only

demanded better pay for teachers and support workers but defended public education as an institution. They were part of a movement among public-school workers that has deep origins, but the acceleration of which can reasonably be traced back to 2010 when the Coalition of Rank and File Educators (CORE) [beat the old guard leadership](#) of the 27,000-member Chicago Teachers Union.

The new leaders and their supporters commenced to seriously organize the members for action while building alliances with parents. After intense organizing and preparations, in 2012 the CTU struck for more than a week and won much of what it demanded. Many leaders of the red state strikes testified that they had watched and studied CORE and the CTU strike. A few had been veterans of that struggle.

Additional strikes occurred as 2,400 teachers struck in Tacoma, Washington and 3,800 in Jersey City. In Chicago in December 2018, 550 members of the CTU launched the first ever all-out [strike at a charter school](#). The January 2019 [strike](#) of 35,000 members of the United Teachers of Los Angeles, led by the rank-and-file Union Power leadership team since 2013, in opposition to the privatization of the school system as well as for better wages continued this trend into the new year.

They [won](#) pay increases, a cap on class sizes, more nurses in schools, fewer tests, possible limits on charter schools, and more, stretching the limits of collective bargaining. They, in turn, inspired teachers in [Denver](#) and Virginia to keep up the momentum.

About a fifth of all strikes in 2018 took place in another major area of social reproduction: the nation's increasingly commodified corporate hospital sector. The number of strikers was lower than in education at about eighty-four thousand, including sympathy strikers at the University of California's medical centers — itself an unusual development. The number of hospital strikes, however, had grown from 10 in 2008 and 2009 together, when I last researched this, to 20 in 2018 alone.

While these strikes were led by unions in collective bargaining situations, they reflected the growth and increased militancy of nurses' unions in particular. For years, nurses organizations have been leaving the management-dominated American Nurses Association as a younger generation of more militant nurses began to take over many of the state associations. In many cases, they did so to become independent state associations willing to strike.

In 2009 several of these formed the National Nurses United (NNU) which has led many strikes in the last decade. Three of the 2018 healthcare strikes deserve special mention.

The May strike of healthcare, maintenance, and technical workers at the University of California's medical facilities by the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees was [joined in a sympathy strike](#) by thirteen thousand university technical workers represented by the University Professional and Technical Employees (CWA). This brought the total number of strikers to fifty-three thousand, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Fifteen thousand University of California healthcare workers struck again in October. In December 2018 the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), a split from the SEIU, led a strike of four thousand mental health workers at the giant Kaiser corporate healthcare system in California — another first.

There was a third major strike upsurge in 2018 among those who labor in social reproduction. Six thousand five hundred hotel workers represented by UNITE HERE struck at twenty-six Chicago full-service hotels and another 12,700 at Marriott hotels across the country. The groundwork for the nationwide strike at Marriott, the largest hotel chain in the US, had been laid over years by bringing

the contract expiration dates at twenty-three hotels into sync.

Many of these low-paid workers had been working more than one job to make ends meet — hence the strike slogan “One Job Should Be Enough.” After two months they won both wage and benefit increases and some contract language to deal with current and future technological changes across the Marriot system.

What is particularly significant about the Marriot strike is that it succeeded in reversing one of capital’s major goals of that last half century. Management sought in that time to dismantle national or company-wide agreements that “take labor out of competition” wherever they existed (steel, trucking, auto, etc.). Destroying these sectoral agreements reduces bargaining to single worksites wherever possible, thus reintroducing the potential of competition between bargaining units.

The Marriott settlement, and the alignment of bargaining dates which undergirded the strike, is a big step toward turning the tables on capital in this regard.

The Roots of Rebellion in Social Reproduction

The *Wall Street Journal* [presents](#) the conventional explanation for the rise in strikes: a “strengthening economy and tight labor market.” In this view, workers are fighting to make up for income lost in the recession, and the “tight labor market” means they’re less afraid to take on the risk of striking.

In fact, despite the low official rate of unemployment, America’s reserve army of labor is larger than ever. The labor force participation rate remains well below its 2000 level across race and gender. At the same time, there are many former teachers, nurses, and hotel workers who have left their jobs to seek work elsewhere. In any case, the *Wall Street Journal*’s explanation would apply to most industries where there is little evidence of increased strike activity.

There are a number of particular circumstances that favored effective organization and action in the realm of institutionalized social reproduction. For one, these industries have been growing over time as society’s need for these aspects of social reproduction has grown. Even as education and hospital workforces have grown, they’ve been hit with relative labor shortages, as lagging pay and work intensification push workers to leave their employer or even the industry altogether.

This is particularly true of teachers and nurses. Turnover is also high among hotel workers, who tend to move from one job to another within the industry. One lesson to draw is that high turnover of the workforce is not by itself a barrier to either unionization or successful strikes. In fact, where it tends to create labor shortages, even temporary ones, turnover can increase the impact of a strike.

There are other characteristics that these three social-reproductive sectors share that tend to aid organization and strikes. Workers in education, healthcare, and hotel accommodations are disproportionately concentrated in urban areas — 92 percent of hospitals, for example, are in urban areas. Hotels are also concentrated both in cities and around the nation’s larger airports.

Public K-12 school systems in urban areas obviously employ greater numbers in a finite geographical setting than their more rural counterparts. This is true even in the more rural red states where the 2018 strikes took place.

Charleston was the initial hotbed of organizing in West Virginia. While, as Lois Weiner pointed out in a valuable [symposium](#) on the “red” state strikes in *Historical Materialism*, in Oklahoma and Kentucky “Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and Louisville were all strongholds of the walkouts.”

That doesn't mean that urban centers are the only site of rebellion. For instance in West Virginia, teachers in the former coal field counties, which boast strong union traditions, actually struck first. But concentrations of workers are generally a favorable factor.

Those states also shared the fact that is the state legislatures and not individual school districts that determine pay and conditions for teachers and support workers. That provided a unifying strike target for all education workers.

In all of these cases, the industry's built infrastructure and the services provided are essentially immobile. Individual schools, hotels, or hospitals can be closed, of course, but the services these provide and the workers who deliver them are necessarily local in nature. These jobs can't be exported, and the relatively high fixed costs of these institutions — which must be met even during a strike — work in favor of the strikers.

Also important, the workers in all three industries are predominantly women. They bear the extra burden of "emotional labor" as well as deteriorating working conditions and family responsibilities. Women are the major source of union growth. While union membership as a whole fell by 1.5 million from 2000 through 2018, the number of women union members grew by 832,000.

Low or stagnating pay has been a key demand in all of these strikes. But profound changes in the nature of the work in these and other industries is an underlying source of deep dissatisfaction. This holds true for both professionals, such as teachers and nurses, and support or noncredentialed workers in healthcare, education, and accommodations.

The driving force behind these varying forms of work intensification, whether they involve deskilling, additional tasks, the speed of service delivery, or usually a combination of these, is the increased quantification and standardization of workers' performance. These are often digitally-driven changes or procedures that build on, but go well beyond, traditional Taylorism or [lean production](#).

In teaching this has taken the well-known form of measuring teacher performance by their students' standardized test results. But it goes beyond this. As Lois Weiner observes in *Historical Materialism*, the consequences of teaching's transformation "have become increasingly important as teachers' work has been transformed: standardized testing and 'data-driven instruction'; methods of surveillance and control; have reduced autonomy and increased the workload while reducing time interaction with students that actually help them."

These issues, she notes, traditionally fall outside of collective bargaining, sometimes by law. So does the overall attack on public education embodied in privatization and the rise of charter schools. Yet opposition to this offensive has been a recurring theme in these strikes.

The problem is that both the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association have accepted a framework of business unionism which is hesitant to mount these wider challenges. As Eric Blanc points out in the *Historical Materialism* symposium concerning the "red" state unions prior to the strikes, "In all these states, labor-management "cooperation" has led to concession after concession over the past decades. Instead of building workplace power or strikes, unions have generally focused on public relations campaigns and lobbying Democratic Party politicians."

This has left working conditions in the schools almost entirely to legislators, local school boards, and managers. Thus, resistance to these issues often takes the form of flight rather than fight as thousands leave the profession.

This is what one teacher [writing](#) in *Forbes* called "a slow motion walkout of teachers who will never

return to the profession at all” underlying the nation’s teacher “shortage.” The rise of a rank-and-file movement among teachers across the country who have come together in the [United Coalition of Rank and File Educators \(UCORE\)](#) offers the hope of broadening the agenda of teacher unionism as well as advancing both militancy and union democracy.

A similar erosion of professional standards and working conditions is found in hospitals which have become de facto profit-making institutions (despite their “non-profit” tax status). Three-quarters of “community” hospitals are now concentrated in competing, mostly urban corporate systems. Nursing has been subjected to digitally-driven electronic systems such as GPS tracking of personnel, Electronic Health Records (EHR), and Clinical Decision Support Systems (CDSS) that increase record-keeping, quantify care, standardize treatment, and reduce autonomy.

As a union-backed study of the impact of these new forms of technology argues, “the standardization required by computer technology deprives caregivers of the opportunity to tailor treatment to the needs of their patients.”

Work intensification cascades to the non-medical staff who must keep up the pace and whose work is also increasingly monitored. Unsurprisingly, nonfatal injury rates for hospital workers as a whole are high at 5.7 per 100, compared to 3.5 in manufacturing, 3.1 in construction, and 2.8 in the private sector as a whole.

Nurses, in particular, have attempted to reduce the impact of this standardization by fighting for lower patient-nurse ratios with some success.

Nevertheless, turnover rates in excess of 50 percent are common for both nurses and support staff. At the same time, evolving healthcare unions have successfully organized and deployed the strike in hospitals across the nation to combat this trend.

Work in the nation’s full-service hotels is generally low-paid and hard. Housekeepers and maids, who make less than \$12 an hour on average, are expected to clean fifteen rooms a day in hotels that are often understaffed, according to UNITE HERE. In a survey of hotel housekeepers, 91 percent said they had experienced work-related pain. Nonfatal injury rates are above average at 4.5 per 100.

Work has grown harder as mattress weights have increased in recent years along with the number of service items and gadgets that have to be handled. Work is quantified and standardized along lean production lines, and the burden of emotional labor is high for most occupations in this predominantly female, largely minority workforce.

In her [study](#) of worker relations in luxury hotels, Rachel Sherman states:

Because worker’s presentation of self and capacity to interact constitute part of the product, managers must control the worker herself in order to control production. This requires extending managerial influence to areas that have traditionally been private, which can incur worker resistance.

Beyond even the oppressive demands of emotional labor, hotel workers and housekeepers in particular face a tsunami of sexual harassment. A survey by UNITE HERE found that 58 percent of female hotel workers had experienced sexual harassment from guests. As a result of pressure from the union, panic buttons to report sexual attacks are already used in hotels in several US cities. They were also part of the 2018 settlement at Marriott.

Continued union pressure and the high visibility of the #MeToo social media campaign have finally forced Marriott and Hilton World Wide to begin arming their employees with panic buttons — something they opposed for years. The gradual “rollout” of these devices, however, will take until 2020. Hyatt already deploys the panic buttons in 120 of its hotels and other chains claim they will follow.

The political economy of organized social reproduction has meant that low and/or stagnant wages and limited benefits, on the one hand, and increased work intensification, on the other, underpin the viability and profitability of these industries. For education, these conditions are caused by a general crisis of public funding (itself brought on by neoliberal policies), massive tax reductions, and giveaways to other industries by local and state governments.

This is particularly the case for primary and secondary education workers, who account for over a third of all state and local government employees. In addition, there is the ideological attack on public education and the promotion of standardization, privatization, marketization, and charter schools. Hospitals, which receive about half their income from Medicare and Medicaid, are also affected by the prevailing austerity regime and the limits imposed by ObamaCare.

Both hospital systems and hotels operate in highly competitive and concentrated urban markets, rather than national or global ones. This is true even where the corporation is international, as is often the case with hotel chains. As a result, profits depend on maximizing rates of exploitation, which in turn means wage restraint and work intensification. At the same time, the growing capital intensity in traditionally labor-intensive hospitals and hotels increases the potential for wage and benefit gains and hence the effectiveness of strikes.

Under the contradictory nature of these objective conditions, worker actions — when they are big enough, persistent enough, and not limited to symbolic actions like those of the Fight for \$15 campaigns — can have an impact on wages, benefits, and even conditions that usually aren’t addressed in traditional collective bargaining.

Despite all the efforts to dumb down and standardize teaching, education remains a necessity for a functioning and competitive capitalist system, making education workers’ demands harder to ignore. In the case of hospitals and hotels, it is the intensity of competition in these focused markets that give the union and workers leverage. But in all cases victories were dependent on high levels of solidarity and a resolute leadership, whether that comes from the officials or from a “[militant minority](#)” in formation within the ranks.

This analysis outlines the enormous pressures on those who labor in social reproduction, while explaining the economic forces that underlie those pressures. But it does not tell us why this acceleration of strike activity in these specific corners happened in 2018. Nor is it likely to be the basis of predictions about further strike waves in the near future.

The reasons for action now rather than earlier or later are best found in the subjective explanations of those who organized and led these strikes at both the leadership and grassroots levels.

But the pressures on the workforce in these and other industries and the forces behind them are certain to continue. And the example of successful strikes can be contagious. At some point, if the union leaders don’t act on these issues a growing number of rank and filers will draw the lessons workers in education, healthcare, and hotels have taught us—that direct actions can win. They’ll either put the pressure on the officials to act or act themselves.

Telecom and Tech?

Some already have. In June, 9,700 CWA members at AT&T facilities across the Midwest took to Facebook and then to the streets — apparently to the surprise of most officials. One local union official [told](#) Rebecca Burns of *In These Times*, “It was amazing how fast it spread.” Another official thought the teacher strikes had been a source of inspiration for the “spontaneous” walkout.

The context was company intransigence in negotiations and attempts to coax workers to accept their “final offer” by sending letters, emails, and even phone calls to the workers homes. Strikers, who had already been suffering overbearing management pressures at work, took offense and launched into action for several days. The union officials appear to have gone along. The contract battle, however, has not been settled, and the workers continue to use inside mobilization tactics to pressure for a settlement.

In addition, 1,400 CWA members at Frontier Communications in West Virginia and Virginia struck in March for twenty-two days. An ongoing strike by 1,800 members of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) at cable company Spectrum (a subsidiary of Charter Communications) that began a year earlier dragged on through 2018 with no apparent outcome. While unions can claim about a quarter of all installation and maintenance telecom workers, they are weak in cable.

The CWA has a long history of strikes in those companies that operate the nation’s landline and long-distance telephone service. This goes back to the 1971-72 seven-and-a-half-month strike by forty thousand workers at NY Telephone, a then-AT&T affiliate that’s now under Verizon. Again in 1989 sixty thousand members of CWA and IBEW struck NYNEX (now Verizon) for four months. In 2016, thirty-nine thousand CWA members struck Verizon for forty-nine days, beating back concessions and winning job guarantees for call center workers.

These and subsequent strikes by CWA have all been highly active, involving mobilization and confrontational tactics throughout. At Verizon the union was able to use the rising competition for fiber-optic services (FiOS) as one form of leverage. The transition from copper to fiber is both a threat and an opportunity for CWA.

As Dan DiMaggio [points out](#) in *New Labor Forum*, much of local fiber installation is being subcontracted. At the same time, CWA members at AT&T sit on the third largest amount of the country’s growing and competitive long-haul fiber cable traffic. This is the underlying infrastructure of the internet, wireless telecom (which isn’t actually wireless), data transmissions, and the “cloud.” While fiber optic cable requires less maintenance than copper, it runs alongside the nation’s roads and rails, its conduits are shared by several other internet, cable, and other service providers, and is vulnerable to accidents, failures and delays at various points.

The problem is that although thousands of CWA members work in AT&T’s wireless, internet, and fiber-based phone networks, much of the installation of this growing fiber network is done by specialist contractors, according to the Fiber Optic Association. Thus, the future of union power at AT&T, where many of the strikes of the last few years have taken place, depends on either winning much of this work or organizing a significant proportion of the contract workers if it is to have the kind of leverage seen in the 2016 Verizon strike.

The brief walkout of twenty thousand non-union Google employees in 2018 may not have matched the mass strikes that education workers fielded that year. But it was certainly an experience in the power of collective action for workers usually stereotyped as individualistic.

This walkout was set off when Google management awarded Android founder Andy Rubin a \$90 million golden parachute after he had been accused of sexual harassment. At the same time, according to a report in *Wired* one of the strike organizers said they were inspired by the walkouts

of Marriott and other low-paid workers in the Silicon Valley area.

It wasn't the first such action at Google. That came as a protest against President-elect Donald Trump's proposed ban on Muslim immigrants. Google employees have also protested the tech firm's involvement with the US military and intelligence establishment's surveillance operations. As a recent exposé in the *Guardian* revealed, this involvement is deep, largely secretive, and lucrative.

The willingness of Google workers to use their collective power for political statements is just the latest in a series of political actions drawing on the strike tactic, even if symbolically, such as the women's strike of 2017, the days without immigrants, and the Fight for \$15 movements. Furthermore, there is at least some evidence that more workers are watching those who strike and win, and taking inspiration or drawing lessons for themselves.

At the same time, in 2018, more Americans approved of unions at 62 percent than at any time since that rate hit a low in 2009 at 48 percent. The Gallup poll was taken in August after the major education strikes and the giant walkout at the University of California's medical facilities. Although this high approval rating can't be attributed to these strikes, since it was already at 61 percent in 2017 when there were few high-profile actions, it shows people were not put off by this level of direct action, either.

2018 demonstrated the ability of rank and file workers from teaching to telecom and tech to take the initiative. It also showed that unions who forge a more militant and democratic direction, particularly in healthcare, could take successful direct action. UNITE HERE members at Marriott hotels took an important step toward establishing company-wide bargaining in an effort to reduce competition among its members. In schools, hotels, and hospitals the year showed that preparation, mobilization, and strong workplace organization can win.

While 2018 didn't quite bring a mass strike wave, it just might be the year that convinced more workers that the strike packs the kind of wallop needed to move today's corporate giants and austerity-oriented governments.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kim Moody is a co-founder of Labor Notes. He is the author of numerous books about the American labor movement, including [On New Terrain: How Capital Is Reshaping the Battleground of Class War](#).

Kim Moody

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