

# Can Weak Unions Get Teachers More Money?

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## News Analysis



Teachers in Arizona demonstrated at the Capitol in Phoenix as the legislature discussed a budget that included raises for teachers. Matt York/Associated Press

On Thursday, a weeklong walkout by teachers in Arizona resulted in a major victory, as the state's governor [approved](#) a 10 to 20 percent wage increase and a significant investment in public schools.

That followed a roughly \$6,000 salary increase that Oklahoma teachers won by threatening a walkout (and later following through). Which in turn came on the heels of a 5 percent raise for teachers in West Virginia, who had shut down schools for almost two weeks.

The teachers were intent on making a statement. “No funding, no future!” they [chanted in Oklahoma](#). And their mantra seemed to carry the day.

That all this took place in so-called right-to-work states, where the power of unions is limited, raises some interesting questions: Do weak unions go hand-in-hand with more effective political activism? Would strong organized labor prevent teachers from getting their way? After all, in Wisconsin, a state where unions were famously powerful, public sector workers suffered a historic defeat at the hands of Gov. Scott Walker in 2011.

Yet the reality is closer to the opposite.

Strong unions tend to be effective at securing gains for workers. Weak unions often shortchange the rank and file. The [data show](#) that workers in heavily unionized areas earn a significant premium over workers in lightly unionized areas. And unless the teacher movements in West Virginia, Oklahoma and Arizona breathe new life into unions, or birth lasting institutions to replace them, they are likely to be short-lived.

Perhaps counterintuitively, one need look no further than Wisconsin to appreciate the benefits of strong unions. The measures enacted by Governor Walker — which ended teachers’ ability to bargain collectively over anything but base wages and required the unions to win annual “recertification” votes to officially stay intact — should by all rights have destroyed public employee unions across the state. By some measures they did. Membership collapsed after 2011, from half of public employees to just over one quarter [within five years](#).

But in certain parts of the state, the unions have not only remained viable, they've become more aggressive.

Consider Racine, a city of about 75,000 in southeastern Wisconsin, whose teachers have voted overwhelmingly to retain their union.

Just before the Walker measures were enacted, the union secured a two-year extension of its favorable contract — with strict rules on class size, staffing and evaluation procedures. When that contract ended, the union saw to it that most of the key elements were inserted into a “handbook,” said Peter Knotek, a recent president. That included a requirement that the district consult with the union on policy changes.

In 2015, the president of the Racine school board tried to eliminate this provision. His effort narrowly failed, but the teachers were not so forgiving. The union recruited candidates for the nine school board seats and locked down [eight of them](#) in the next year's election.

“We were pursuing an agenda of growing power independent of any other institution in the community,” Aaron Eick, one of Mr. Knotek's successors as union president, said in an interview last week.

The teachers' union in Racine is proof that strong unions provide more than just wage increases and protection from arbitrary bosses. They provide a kind of social glue — making members feel invested in a larger mission and promoting a sense of solidarity. Thanks to their involvement in the union, Racine teachers immediately understood the threat that Governor Walker's plan posed. Hundreds trooped to the capital to resist it.

“Very scared and conservative people were like, ‘All right, fine,’” Mr. Eick said. “People who you never would have thought would participate” got involved.

In West Virginia, by contrast, it was years before teachers rose up to protest their eroding standard of living.

Beginning in 2014, after the Republican-controlled Legislature refused to increase funding for health insurance, foisting benefit cuts and cost increases onto public sector workers, the teachers' unions pleaded their case to lawmakers. But the unions were ineffectual because they struggled to rile up their membership. Even in many counties where the unions were active, most members were disengaged.

Nicole McCormick, a music teacher who helps lead the Mercer County local, said, "It was like the same 15 faces at every meeting," even though there were hundreds of members. For the rest, she added: "I was having to say the same thing 25 times and they still wouldn't understand. 'What do you mean? What legislation?'"

## Comments

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Worse, the lack of collective bargaining rights set teachers against one another, distracting them from external threats. Without collective bargaining, no one union can operate as the exclusive representative of teachers in a county. In that vacuum, at least two unions competed to scare up members.

"The unions spend a lot of time trying to out-recruit the other one," said Jay O'Neal, a seventh-grade English teacher from Charleston who was a leader of the protest movement.

Mr. O'Neal and his colleagues were remarkably successful at building

momentum for the walkout through a Facebook group. But they won only a down payment on what they'd hoped for. The health insurance issue was deferred to a task force that began public hearings last week — not coincidentally, long after the fervor had subsided.

Mr. O'Neal observed that “we've seen people fall off, not be as involved” since the strike was resolved in March, pointing to another problem with weak unions: It is much easier to rouse people for a single, high-profile fight than for sustained advocacy. For that you need institutions that carry on the struggle while workers get on with their daily lives.

“I think sometimes it's a little glib for people on the political left to say we should just have a more fired-up base,” said Joseph Slater, an expert on public employee unions at the University of Toledo College of Law. “Workers have full-time jobs.”

Of course, strong unions can bring their own baggage. Leaders can grow remote from their membership. A union's strength may give it irrational confidence that it can defeat threats through conventional politics — like elections and lobbying — rather than more radical measures, like work stoppages.

In West Virginia, by contrast, the weakness of the unions left workers no choice but to take the lead. And the unions were in no position to resist. “I said the unions won't start the movement, but if it hits critical mass, they'll have to join in,” said Ryan Frankenberry, West Virginia director of the Working Families Party, who advised Mr. O'Neal and his colleagues.

But, in the end, there is no substitute for a strong union in a long-term struggle against powerful antagonists. And even the West Virginia walkout would have been impossible without the unions, which presided over an authorization vote in every county. “You can't organize a strike on Facebook,



even if everyone sounds really excited,” said Cathy Kunkel, an organizer with the progressive group Rise Up West Virginia who helped teachers strategize.

To really get teachers marching in lock step, Ms. Kunkel said, they needed the heft of a union.

**Correction:** *May 5, 2018*

*An earlier version of this article incorrectly stated that Peter Knotek was the president of the union in Racine when it fought for the continuation of key contract elements. He had recently served as president, but was not president at the time.*