

Words To Win By

Episode 5: Striking for Public Education - West Virginia and Arizona

Transcript

Fred Albert:

Our members were stating Enough is enough. We made placards that said those very words. Enough is enough. We've had it. We can't continue the same way. We need to make sure that our healthcare, uh, is sustainable. We need to make sure that we're being provided resources in our classrooms. And you haven't been listening to us, so we're saying enough is enough.

Theme Song:

People say to me, you gotta be crazy. How can you sing in times like these? Don't you read the news? Don't you know the score? How can you sing? And so many others, grieve. By way they reply, I say a Fool, such as I who sees this song is Somewhere to begin.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

This is Words to Win By and I'm Anat Shenker-Osorio. In 2018, a show of labor solidarity swept across the United States, led by some of the arguably unlikeliest folks in some of the unlikeliest places, a nationwide movement of public educators came into the spotlight. Today, as the US is in the midst of a decidedly different battle over public education, this time over a right wing vilification of critical race theory, we look back to what happened in 2018 and consider how to apply the lessons from this effective mobilization to the battle. We must wage for accurate, honest, fully funded public education today. That our story begins in West Virginia, a state where striking is illegal is arguably integral to the success that followed. West Virginia is a state where the vast majority of kids attend public schools and where people largely support public education – in theory anyway. In practice, West Virginia has some of the lowest educator pay in the nation. At the top of the show, you heard from Fred Albert, the state president of the American Federation of Teachers, West Virginia. Here's Fred on the issue at the heart of the West Virginia strike.

Fred Albert:

We have a healthcare program here called PEIA, Public Employees Insurance Agency. PEIA was a great program. It was given to teachers and service personnel. Over the years, in lieu of a pay raise, the out-of-pocket expenses were increasing. So our pay was not increasing, it was stagnant, and we felt we have to do something. We felt disrespected. We felt like it had been decades, uh, since our legislators had actually funded resources for public education at the level they needed to be funded.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

On February 21st, 2018, West Virginia Governor Jim Justice signed legislation providing teachers, school service personnel and state police with a 2% salary increase starting in July and scheduling a 1% pay hike for teachers in 2020 and 2021. Educators unions said the raises

wouldn't cover cost of living increases, and the bill didn't address the core concern related to the public employee insurance program and healthcare costs.

Fred Albert:

Our teachers were underpaid, and we are losing teachers all the time in West Virginia because they can go to a contiguous state and make a lot more money. Those teachers can cross the border into Maryland or Virginia and make anywhere from 15 to \$20,000 more annually. And the public is smart enough to realize that our teachers were not being paid cushy salaries, but in lieu of their salaries, they were given this healthcare instead of a pay raise. So when that started eroding their take home pay, I think the public really saw that yeah, maybe in the private sector you get a cost of living pay raise or you get an annual pay raise. That's not necessarily true in public education.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

West Virginia educators were ready to do something about their underfunded schools and unreliable benefits. Striking may have been against the law, but it certainly wasn't outside the state's cultural customs.

Fred Albert:

Well, you know, West Virginia being a state that has a rich history in coal, the coal industry, we're not unfamiliar to strikes. It's kind of in our DNA, when something arises to the level that we're dissatisfied, we need to make a statement that that's the worker mentality here in West Virginia.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

So they put it to a vote. Members of the state's three education related unions cast a ballot to decide if they would go on strike. The response was overwhelming. Even the state's 55 county superintendent supported the movement. So in February of 2018, West Virginia educators walked out of their schools. The buses stopped running and educators headed to the state capitol.

Fred Albert:

So we went in force to the legislator, to the capitol. We had as many as 10,000 people there on some days. We packed the the galleries, we packed the halls, uh, we shouted, we stayed. We we lined up around the capitol. We did all that we could think to do, to bring attention to what we were enduring.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

After another teacher strike in the 1990s, the West Virginia Supreme Court ruled that because educators are denied collective bargaining rights, they have no right to strike. So basically because they have no rights at work, they have no right to take action, to demand more rights at work. But with the West Virginia fighting spirit, they did it anyway. Here is Fred with more on how daunting the first days of the strike were.

Fred Albert:

It was a scary time. Uh, we didn't know. When we stepped out that very first day, it was a huge step because we didn't know that we would really have the public support at that time. Our first day we had a picket line formed at one of our high schools here in, in the county where I live, and our national president, Randy Winegarten, came to West Virginia on that day and she joined us on that picket line. And her message was, you've got to do this. You, you have to stay strong. This is tough, but you've done it and you've got to stick together. And, and so then out of that, we named it 55 Strong, uh, 55 counties. All counties were out and we stood, uh, in solidarity with our brothers and sisters. I'll never forget that morning. It was foggy. It was dark. Uh, when we formed that first picket line and there were picket lines being formed all across the state. It was very encouraging for our national president to be here with us and to tell us, you're doing the right thing. It is scary, uh, cause it is illegal for us to do this in West Virginia. That didn't stop us in 1990, and it didn't stop us this time.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

West Virginia's educators had the support of most parents, superintendents, and even the governor. But some West Virginia lawmakers tried vilifying the educators. These opponents wanted to paint the strikers as selfish, more concerned about their own wants than children's needs.

Fred Albert:

There were legislators who definitely opposed what we were doing, and they blamed us. They tried to put blame on us, and, and they tried to paint us as, oh, those teachers only care about themselves. The service personnel only care about themselves. They're not caring about the children, they're not taking care of the children. But that was so untrue because our teachers and our service personnel made sure when we walked out that the, there was food available. We helped to pack lunches. We helped to make sure that, uh, daycares could remain open. Some of our teachers, you know, they're also parents, so they had to take care of their families, but we did make sure that our children were given safe places to go, uh, where to they could, could stay during the day and their parents could continue working. So I think that showed where our hearts were, that yes, we were making a statement because of our working conditions and because of our healthcare insurance. But we were also very cognizant of the fact that our children needed to be taken care of, and they needed to be in safe places.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

West Virginia educators had and maintained close ties to their communities, to the kids that they served. This made it hard for the opposition message to gain any traction. And so West Virginia educators were sending clear signals back to their communities, and they needed to be equally clear to lawmakers at the state capitol.

Fred Albert:

We're there at the Capitol. We have a strong presence there, uh, every day during the session. And we were meeting face-to-face with our legislators and we were talking to them and we were asking them for help to resolve this. So we're there for 11 days and we were getting recognized

around the country. We were getting messages from people as far away as Wisconsin, California, Texas, telling us that they were proud of what we were doing. So we knew we were doing the right thing, and not just for us, but we were, we were giving public education a real notice that these conditions in West Virginia are not acceptable. And if they're not acceptable here, they're not acceptable in Kentucky or Arizona and all those states that followed what we did.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

55 United, a simple message of solidarity in a very short phrase, but more critically, a demonstration of solidarity through collective action, and one that paid off. After two straight weeks of schools being closed, West Virginia state legislators granted a 5% raise to all public employees, not just educators. The power of solidarity extended even beyond the immediate issue. Also, a task force was developed to look for a sustainable funding source for the public insurance plan.

Fred Albert:

Now, 5% sounds like a lot, but that wasn't 5% of your salary. It was an average salary of public school teachers. So it, it mattered. Uh, I think it ended up being about \$2,200, something like that. But that was enough. Uh, at that time we felt to bring a resolve. We, we wanted to be back in our classrooms. We didn't want this to go on forever. That's where teachers love to be. That's where they want to be, and we want to be there with our students.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

The strike in West Virginia inspired educators in other states. In April of 2018, teachers in Oklahoma also went on strike. Arizona followed suit and from their cities and districts around the country. Someone who was on the front lines of the Arizona strike is Marisol Garcia, a veteran middle school teacher, and the vice president of the Arizona Educators Association in 2018. She was watching strikes like the one in West Virginia.

Marisol Garcia:

And so, you know, you turn on the TV or you turn on social media and you see all these people that look like you saying the same things you are saying and kind of saying, well, why can't we do that here? And there was this really young man who right outta college, moved here from Wisconsin, was working in a very small school district and just was kind of like, I don't really understand why you all are putting up with this. And so he publicly tweeted at the president Joe Thomas of of AEA and said, when, when are we going out on strike?

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

The impetus to take action came from the grassroots, including from Noah Carves, a music teacher in Tolson, Arizona. Noah saw the unjust conditions he and his colleagues faced and saw what was possible in West Virginia and Oklahoma by no means bastions of progressive labor rights and education funding. But it's one thing to diagnose a clear problem and quite another to be able to formulate an effective cure, let alone mobilize others.

Marisol Garcia:

So after that tweet, Joe tweeted back to him, Hey, Noah, why don't you get your entire site to wear red? And then we'll have a chat. It's a pure grassroots organizing one-on-one, right? Let's, but it was publicly done, which was kind of fascinating. And so Noah, the next week, he went and talked during the week, talked to all his friends and his colleagues, and he took a picture and he got everyone on that site to wear red. And I think that was the jump because right away that weekend there were people just chatting online. And, um, a second group of people kind of led by another online organizer. Uh, Rebecca Gerelli, again from Chicago, who had lived through the Chicago strikes, decided to start this Facebook group. And that was the first kind of grassroots, what I would call rank and file potential members and members of the union saying, it's not just about me and my classroom, it's about everybody, bus drivers, front office workers, everybody. We just wanna win. Like the bottom line is our folks are suffering, and if you can give us the kick in the butt to get us across the goal line, great. And in Arizona, it is very, very conservative, and the word union wasn't an openly used and anywhere in our state because it was used as a tool by the right conservative movement to make us sound like, you know, these communist socialists. But they labeled us. It was difficult.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Much like in West Virginia and Oklahoma. Lawmakers in Arizona had made drastic cuts in public school funding throughout the previous decade. States have cut income taxes, taking resources directly out of schools and handing them over to the wealthiest. In addition to enabling them to give kickbacks to their lobbyists and donors, Republicans push these drastic cuts to help fuel a favored right wing storyline. That public services are inherently inferior to private ones. They have created a self-fulfilling prophecy by starving schools, especially those that educate primarily black and brown kids, and keeping educators scrambling with low pay and meager benefits, politicians ensure that public education suffers. Unless parents can kick in. The difference with massive PTA fundraisers and corporate sponsorships, this fuels the race and place-based inequities already endemic to our highly segregated communities and builds desire for handing out unregulated charters and other forms of privatization to give corporations a slice of the lucrative public education pie. All this is done under the guise of providing parents school choice, when in fact, these lawmakers are merely guaranteeing fewer and fewer classroom slots that can deliver what we know works: up to date materials, engaging lessons, experienced and respected teachers, and safe welcoming facilities. In Arizona, Republican governor Doug Ducey ignored demands to end giveaways to corporations and the wealthy in order to do right by kids, by funding public education. For Marisol and her fellow educators, the situation was becoming increasingly untenable.

Marisol Garcia:

It was 2018, the governor's up for reelection. We had long-term Republican majority in both the House and the Senate in the legislature, and they had really made defunding schools a priority. They've gone out of their way in every way possible, creating voucher systems, not fulfilling a, what we call a base student level of funding. They made it extremely difficult for school districts to, uh, retain and recruit new educators. But increasingly the education workforce was being really, like churn and burned just coming in large class sizes, disrespect, and it just was hitting a

peak. And with the oncoming elections and, and quite frankly, just spurring from the Trump election, the women's marches, the students kind of standing up for themselves, I think there was this pressure to do something. And even though honestly, the union and our locals were fighting as hard as they could, we just didn't have a statewide system or strategy to bring everyone together. We had never really connected beyond our classroom or our sites. So it was a really difficult time to be an educator in Arizona.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Educators across different districts and positions in Arizona started to strategize. They held Zoom meetings every night – before it was cool. They engaged with local leaders, anticipating the argument that teachers are selfish, as has long been claimed by opponents. Arizona educators needed to communicate that their demand for better working conditions was part and parcel of their mission to do right by kids. They first held walk-ins where parents and staff would register their support for educators during drop off at school, and they crafted their list of six very clear demands for teachers and ESP or education support professionals.

Marisol Garcia:

These demands were very clear that we needed equal pay for ESP, we needed 20% raise, we needed, you know, all these things that across the board we all agreed on so we had ownership of. Then when the governor and the legislature said, yeah, we're not gonna do any of that, then it, we decided that we were going to have a vote.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

As we heard earlier, educators, parents and community allies in Arizona took to wearing, making signs and creating street art using the color red. Red for Ed originally came from the Chicago Teachers Union, where legendary leader Karen Lewis, led a nine day strike. Like any uniform or shared symbol having everyone wear or carry red conveyed unity, a group affiliation that's at the very core of being in union and having any kind of collection action work. But it wasn't just any color, it was red. Which offers a choose your own adventure of meaning. It could be interpreted as red states for education, wearing the purportedly conservative color in service of solidarity for public education. Red is also the color of the iconic schoolhouse and the prototypical apple given to teachers. It is the much maligned red pen, which is used for correcting errors. It is about having a visible marker, a color other than blue, black or graphite in order to say, this is not right, and we need to cross this off and put this other thing in its place. And so there's just so many potential meanings, but more than anything, it's a really succinct way to show solidarity. Arizona educators voted to walk out on April 20th, but the night before the governor threw a wrench in their organizing a plan called 20 by 2020. The plan was to increase dollars for Arizona teachers without raising taxes.

Marisol Garcia:

And so of course it was like extreme panic across the board, like, wait a minute, did he meet our demand? He didn't. He kind of shortchanged it, but it was a publicity stunt. So much of a publicity stunt that he had Democrats and Republicans behind him when he announced this. People that we thought were our allies standing behind him, including like the PTA and other

education groups, including, you know, the school boards and the administrators. No one checked in with the, he was doing anything to stop this strike, right? Anything he could. And right away it was, you know, internally we realized this money was only gonna go to a very small section of only classroom teachers, not even counselors or school psychologists. It was not gonna touch ESP at all. And there was no guarantee because they had not signed the budget so that we, we, we, this could have been just all for nothing. He was trying to slow it down. Um, so we quickly grouped, we got Joe, Noah and an, uh, a very, very powerful ESP woman leader, and they all got on Facebook and said, this is junk. This is not worth it. We're walk still walking out.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

This called for solidarity. It wasn't enough to just give teachers more pay. Educators across professions deserved more, and schools more broadly needed greater funding. And so they would carry out their plans to strike.

Marisol Garcia:

We were really grateful because at that point, NEA was like, okay, we have manpower that we can go help with all of the logistics they really helped with, we need toilets. We, we need water stations a hundred degrees. We need to make sure that the police are, you know, they worked on all those logistics and NEA dues dollars helped facilitate all of this stuff. As we started to gather at the front of the, the marching line and they, you know, here's your sign, the police kept moving us forward a couple blocks at a time. And it was really emotional because as the closer we got to the capitol, the staff kept telling us to slow down because they said that last people still had not left the stadium. So we had thought maybe 15,000 people were gonna show up. It, it was closer to 75,000. And it truly was more of a community event because as we set up at the actual capitol and began just speaking in my opinion, truth to power, and stood on that stage, I recall Joe Thomas, you know, with me as my president saying, we may never, ever see this again.

We have an opportunity to speak about what's important to people's lives and really lift them up so they can see us speaking about that. Let's do that. And a lot of these folks don't understand how this is a pure labor movement event. How this is a pure woman's event. 80% of our employees are women. How this was changing just a, a discussion about race because we were, we were equalizing what was acceptable in each school classroom, regardless.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

The strike forced the state legislature to increase salaries for school personnel across the board. It also successfully pressured the legislature to rescind a new proposed tax cut and halt efforts to take an anti privatization referendum off the November, 2018 ballot.

Marisol Garcia:

And so after the budget passed, people realized that they were going to get a raise. They realized that they did more than just get a raise for everyone because our locals were gonna negotiate it out for the, for everyone. There was this, Hey, you know what, this, we can do this at

any time. Like, we have the power now we have it. We understand, we, we've learned. And then the next day at school, um, the teachers got there super early and they had this welcome back kids. We missed you. We loved you in these tunnels of joy and, you know, and, and the, and it was a communal event that we did this for you. We're back, let's go. We're gonna hit their ground running. So I think all in all, people walked away with, you know, I walked out for my kids, I came back and it was for something bigger than me and it was a, you know, collective piece that was, um, something they'd never felt before.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

As a result of these strikes, membership in the educators unions grew considerably both across the country and specifically in Arizona and West Virginia. It was in taking bold, visible action that all of the unions gained support, not just for themselves, but for the purpose and promise of public education.

Marisol Garcia:

I still see pictures and I get goosebumps. I still can't believe that I was holding this sign. I still can't believe that, you know, in that little on the grounds of the capitol, that there were all these people that I couldn't even imagine being part of, like an action that was so defiant because the words limited them from doing that. When they, when they decided to be part of it, it became more of a community that nobody can ever take away from them.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

What these strikes teach us is that having clear, concise, and repeated wording as well as obvious imagery that builds identity and invites affiliation is core to ensuring your message spreads. That a message of solidarity can move even the reddest of states to progressive change. But most important, that sustained collective action is itself the message. There is nothing we can say that is louder than what we do. As our attention turns to the midterms and the current debate swirling around critical race theory, the right is making their case significantly more visibly.

Protest nats:

No CRT no CRT, I did not sign up when I had children to co-parent with the government.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

The current attacks on public schooling are a case study in how the right has mastered that turnout is persuasion that the job of a good message isn't to say what's popular, but rather to make popular what we need said. As polling shows people and parents in particular support accurate and honest curriculum. They oppose banning books and they want kids to be protected from Covid with masks and vaccines. But these right wing attacks offer red meat for their base. In sending vitriolic adults out to protest at school board meetings, the right once again proves that deets are truly the most effective form of messages. For most voters who pay little attention to the details of state legislation – seeing parents protesting on their local news or social media feeds creates social proof. These displays, especially since parents on our side of

this argument are largely invisible, suggests that the current bands are actually desired and therefore desirable.

People more readily believe what they think people like them believe. The election we just had this November of 2021 makes it seem the right has a clear and unstoppable slam dunk with this issue. Case in point, Virginia, where Republicans ran on opposing critical race theory and Democrats tried to skirt the topic only to piss off parents when the person running for governor made an ill-advised remark while caught off guard at a debate. But what flew under the radar was that Progressives won in some very challenging school board races in Colorado, Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, New Mexico, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas, and Wisconsin. Messages reinforcing the need for fully and fairly funded schools successfully bested this anti CRT propaganda. By giving a clear picture of what schools and educators stand for we won. In our recent research for the National Education Association with Lake Research Partners, and We Make the Future our dial tested message, making the case for our whole public education agenda. With direct rebuttal to this right wing race, baiting beat out opposition tropes, not just with our base, but with voters persuadable on this issue who make up the majority.

Dial Tested Message:

School is a place where childhood happens. A place where children of different places and races learn from the past, makes sense of the present and prepare for the future. While educators work to deliver our children accurate and honest education. Some politicians are trying to turn us against schools so they can deny certain children resources and write people who look like them out of our history books. Our children deserve the freedom to learn, to develop the knowledge and skills to reckon with our past, shape a better future, and pursue their dreams by speaking up at school boards, contacting our elected leaders and voting to fully fund our schools. We can ensure every child the quality education we want for our own.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

And while presenting a clear message is essential, nothing can ever take the place of action. Many of us remember the familiar admonition from school to show, not tell in our writing. Well, if ever there were a time, place and purpose to apply this, it's right now. To show up, speak up, and stand up for the kind of quality public schools we want for all of our children.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

Words to Win by is a Wonder Media Network production. The show is produced by Grace Lynch, Britany Martinez and Sundus Hassan Nooli with editorial support from Ale Tejada, Carmen Borca-Carrillo, Liz Brown, Anthony Torres, and Jillian Marcells. Our executive producers are Jenny Kaplan and me, Anat Shenker-Osorio. Our theme music is written by T.R. Richie, produced and arranged by Dan Leon. Special thanks to Kim Anderson, Stephanie Luongo, Bob Morganstern, Shilpa Redi and Michelle Ringette. If your words don't spread, they don't work, so please let others know and rate and review the show Wherever you listen to your podcasts.

Theme Song:

A song is somewhere to begin to search for something worth believing in. If changes are to come, there are things that must be done and a song, it's somewhere to begin.

Anat Shenker-Osorio:

The public relations industry was created to help companies and industries deal with a few converging problems. The vote was expanding to people who were not white, male or rich. Journalists were making the public aware of the fact that companies were polluting the environment. Labor unions were protesting poor working conditions, and the US government had the audacity to start regulating business. What was the captain of industry to do? Experts in psychology and communication created PR to help companies shape the public's understanding of key issues and bend political will in their favor. It began more than a hundred years ago and has fundamentally shaped the world we live in today to understand how tune into rigged a new podcast about the history of disinformation in America, available wherever you get your podcasts.