

Teacher Strikes

In the spring of 2018, teachers in Arizona, Colorado, Kentucky, Oklahoma, North Carolina, and West Virginia either performed a walkout or went on strike to protest what they considered to be low salaries and inadequate educational funding. One common complaint is that teachers frequently need to take on extra jobs in order to pay their bills. For instance, Craig Troxell, a full-time high school science teacher, drives a school bus before and after school to make ends meet, in addition to working over the summers mowing lawns and roofing houses.¹

In several of these states, the strikes had some measure of success. In other places, the outcome was less clear. Regardless of the outcome, the strikes had a big impact on the communities in which they occurred. The most immediate impact is clearly on the children—which is also the group who has the least say, politically. For example, some people argue that teacher strikes are bad for kids, as the strikes disrupt the learning environment and hurt student progress. In 1992, a judge ordered striking teachers in Detroit to go back to work, on the grounds that the strike caused “irreparable harm” to students.² These strikes can have important impacts on other community members, as well—in particular on working parents, who now need to make special arrangements for childcare. This can be especially difficult for lower-income families, who might not be able to afford to take time off from work or to pay for additional childcare.

In support of striking teachers, others maintain that strikes are only bad for students in the short term. Good teachers can have a profoundly positive effect on children. The only way to reliably attract and keep good teachers is to compensate them adequately for their hard work. Strikes are a way to achieve that end.

Recent polls show that most Americans support teachers’ right to strike. Nevertheless, in most states (including in some of the states in which striking occurred) it is illegal for teachers to take collective action such as striking.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Is it immoral or unjust for states to make it illegal for teachers to strike?
2. Teachers strikes involve temporarily withholding a vital service from children. Does employing a strategy like this violate an educator’s fundamental duty to her students?
3. Arguments about the morality of teachers’ strikes often focus on the well-being of students. Do teachers have to prove that strikes make *students* better off in order to justify them? Or can strikes be justified on the basis of the interests of the teachers themselves?

¹ <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/31/us/oklahoma-teachers-profiles/index.html>

² <https://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/1992/09/30/04strike.h12.html>