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**Between Old and New Unionism: Race, Professionalism,  
and Resistance in a District of Market Reform**

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<https://doi.org/10.14507/epaa.30.6199> This article is part of the special issue *Teachers and Educational Policy: Markets, Populism, and Im/Possibilities for Resistance*, guest edited by Meghan Stacey, Mihajla Gavin, Jessica Gerrard, Anna Hogan and Jessica Holloway.

**Abstract:** This article centers a group of teachers who participated in a multi-day strike and a statewide walkout in Colorado. We examine whether their experience with contention signaled important shifts in views of market-based educational policies, teacher professionalism and the role of unions. Qualitative methods and critical theories of educational policy guided the research design and analysis of data. Findings include divergent experiences with contention among teachers, shaped by race and racism, and enduring ideas of professionalism tied to hierarchies of class and gender. These tensions complicated coherent interpretations and critiques of market policies and strained solidarity for sustained resistance. We discuss the implications of findings for efforts to shift

traditional teacher unions toward expansive ideas of professionalism premised on anti-racism, collective action, and social justice for and with communities of color.

**Keywords:** professionalism; teacher unions; resistance; neoliberalism; market reforms

### **Entre el viejo y el nuevo sindicalismo: Raza, profesionalismo y resistencia en el distrito de reformas de mercado**

**Resumen:** Este artículo se centra en un grupo de maestros que participaron en huelgas en Colorado. Examinamos sus experiencias con la contención y consideramos si indican cambios importantes en las ideas sobre políticas educativas basadas en el mercado, profesionalismo docente y el papel de los sindicatos. Usando teorías críticas de política educativa como lente interpretativa y métodos de investigación cualitativos, encontramos que las experiencias divergentes entre los docentes fueron moldeadas por políticas de raza y racismo, e ideas perdurables de profesionalismo ligadas a jerarquías sociales de clase y género. Estas tensiones complicaron las interpretaciones y críticas coherentes de las políticas de mercado y forzaron la solidaridad de los docentes para una resistencia sostenida. Discutimos las implicaciones de estos hallazgos para los esfuerzos por cambiar los sindicatos tradicionales hacia ideas expansivas de profesionalismo basadas en la acción colectiva y la justicia social para y con las comunidades de color.

**Palabras clave:** profesionalismo; sindicatos de docentes; resistencia; neoliberalismo; reformas de mercado

### **Entre o velho e o novo sindicalismo: Raça, profissionalismo e resistência em o distrito de reformas de mercado**

**Resumo:** Este artigo centra-se em um grupo de professores que participaram de greves no Colorado. Examinamos suas experiências com contenção e consideramos se suas experiências sinalizam mudanças importantes nas ideias sobre políticas educacionais baseadas no mercado, profissionalismo dos professores e o papel dos sindicatos. Usando teorias críticas da política educacional como uma lente interpretativa e métodos de pesquisa qualitativa, descobrimos que experiências divergentes entre professores foram moldadas por políticas de raça e racismo e ideias duradouras de profissionalismo ligadas a hierarquias sociais de classe e gênero. Essas tensões complicaram interpretações coerentes e críticas das políticas de mercado e forçaram a solidariedade dos professores para uma resistência sustentada. Discutimos as implicações dessas descobertas para os esforços para mudar os sindicatos tradicionais para ideias expansivas de profissionalismo baseadas na ação coletiva e na justiça social para e com as comunidades de cor.

**Palavras-chave:** profissionalismo; sindicatos de professores; ; neoliberalismo; reformas de mercado

## **Between Old and New Unionism: Race, Professionalism, and Resistance in a District of Market Reform**

In this article we focus on the experiences of public school teachers in Denver, Colorado, who participated in a national movement, called “Red for Ed,” that involved six statewide walkouts across the United States in 2018, and four teacher strikes in urban districts in 2019. We center a group of local teachers and examine their decisions to become involved in political contention, their experiences with contention, and consider whether their experiences signal important shifts in ideas about market-based educational policies, teacher professionalism and the role of unions. Market-

based education policies are increasingly prominent in urban districts in the United States and encompass reforms promoting school choice, vouchers, and the use of high-stakes tests for teacher evaluation and merit pay. Scholars regard such policies as market-based because they promote choice and competition and the devolution of government services to private managers and organizations (Apple, 2016; Scott & Holme, 2016).

Political contention in a context of market reforms, however, does not make visible teachers' subjective understandings of policies nor the meanings they make of their professional identities in relation to policymakers, district leaders, and the communities they serve. While some teachers who participated in walkouts and strikes were animated by concerns with market reforms—evidenced by the Colorado Education Association (CEA) embracing social media campaigns that used the hashtag #ClassroomsNotCorporations—it is unclear how rank-and-file teachers made sense of the broader ecology of educational policies premised on competition and standardized test scores as measures of competence. Moreover, as teacher associations and unions are the primary organizations that have mobilized teachers to challenge district leaders and policymakers, these entities have also been shaped by taken-for-granted ideas of professionalism that have deep roots in American liberal values premised on individualism and economic freedom. Critical race scholars have warned that much of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century classical liberalism overtly sought to advance social hierarchies of race, class, and gender (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). As such, discourses of professionalism for educators in the US (both past and present) cannot be divorced from norms and expectations that have historically disadvantaged women of color in the profession, despite their pedagogical contributions. Informed by such history, the present study also considers how the politics of race and racism in the local teacher workforce, coupled with ideas of professionalism that promote hierarchies of class and gender, complicate subjective interpretations of market policies, as well as strain teacher solidarity for organized resistance. These tensions could stall shifts toward expansive ideas of professionalism and unionism premised on justice and equity with and for marginalized communities.

The study is guided by a critical theory of education policy, which considers the history and context of policy, and the experience of policies on the part of those impacted by them, as well as issues of power and privilege that shape the discourse, development, and implementation of policies (Horsford et al., 2018). Critical examinations of policy also include struggles to resist policies, even policies rhetorically and ostensibly oriented to equity (Horsford et al., 2018). Indeed, we used this framework to understand teachers' resistance to a compensation policy in Denver, called *ProComp*, which was rhetorically designed to “professionalize” teacher compensation and promote better outcomes for students, but was rooted nonetheless in market principles of individual competition via performance-based pay incentives and standardized test scores as dominant measures of competence. A critical policy framework invited us to look beyond the policy as a “set of rules that attempt to constrain or channel behavior in particular directions through regulative, normative, or cognitive means” (Coburn, 2016, p. 467), but to view it as text, discourse, and political spectacle. In the latter, as Stephen Ball (1993) notes, policy texts and discourses are never neutral, and instead are “both contested and changing, always in a state of ‘becoming’, of ‘was’ and ‘never was’ and ‘not quite’” (p. 11). Hence, we viewed *ProComp* as part-and-parcel of contested discourses that individualize responsibility (and blame) for educational outcomes via market logic.

Resistance to the *ProComp* policy, however, was regarded as complexly as the policy itself. Therefore, we examined whether or how teachers' decisions to participate in political contention (a strike) was narrowly or broadly framed and understood in light of local and national discourses of market policies. Moreover, we connect teachers' descriptions of their experiences with contention to the broader history of unionism and professionalism, in terms of the politics of race, class, and gender that have often fragmented solidarity for workers in the US (Loomis, 2018). We find this

history politically relevant for the sustenance of current struggles that seek to build solidarity among teachers, and with the communities they serve.

## Literature Review

### Historical Background: Teacher Unions and Professional Associations in the US

Historically in the US, teacher unions and associations were beset by gendered and racist ideas of work, compensation and status, and have vacillated between narrow and more expansive views of who belongs in a union and what a union is for. The first national teachers' union to exist in the US, called the National Education Association (NEA), ironically began as a professional organization, not a union (Loomis, 2018). The NEA was founded by a group of White, male education leaders who sought to increase the status of teaching by emphasizing the authority, guidance and leadership of White male administrators and politicians rather than attending to and elevating the experiences of teachers, most of whom were women, working in classrooms (Haley & Reid, 1982). It was not until 1912, 55 years after its founding, that the largely white female rank-and-file teachers were recognized with their own department within the NEA. In 1974, seven years after electing its first Black president, Elizabeth Koontz, the NEA stopped accommodating segregated local associations and became a fully integrated organization (Murphy, 1990).

The American Federation of Teachers (AFT), by contrast, was founded nearly 60 years later in 1916 when eight local teacher unions, frustrated by the NEA's commitment to a professionalism predicated on White, male superiority, decided to join together to create one big union better equipped to fight for their needs as rank-and-file teachers. The first presidents of the AFT were women and all former classroom teachers (Haley & Reid, 1982). The first local union the AFT brought into its national organization after its founding was the Armstrong-Dunbar High School Teachers Union, a union of Black teachers who taught at a segregated high school in Washington, D.C. (Quinell, 2018). Initially, the founders of the AFT attempted to organize within the NEA, but NEA leaders were suspicious of class consciousness among unionists and felt that if teachers "behaved like trade unionists they would lose all respect and status in the community" (Murphy, 1990, p. 210). In response to the NEA's rejection, the AFT joined the American Federation of Labor (AFL) in 1916. The AFL is an industrial trade union which was led to prominence by Samuel Gompers and his commitment to business unionism, a form of unionism that relies on a small board of union members, rather than collective action, to negotiate labor issues such as pay, sick leave and contract hours (Taft, 1963).

The structures and belief systems of AFT's business unionism and NEA's professionalism have had a lasting impact on how local teacher unions organize themselves in the US and the strategies they deploy to achieve results. Many teachers in the US continue to have a strong attachment to describing themselves and their work as "professional" and most teacher unions in the US are led by presidents and board members who rely sparingly on collective action. For example, when Denver teachers went on strike in 2019 it was the first time a strike had been called by the Denver Classroom Teachers Association (DCTA) in 25 years. Though it is tempting, given the origins of the NEA and the AFT, to label the NEA as the traditional, conservative union and the AFT as the progressive, social justice union, in reality both the professionalism of the NEA and the business unionism of the AFT have worked in different ways to undermine the collective power of teachers and their capacity for organized resistance. The persistence of these norms, consequently, have left teachers acutely vulnerable to market-based policies, including its cultural impact on work norms and heightened sensibilities of personal responsibility, which have changed schools in ways that traditional bargaining in a business model of unionism is ill equipped to address (McAlevy,

2016). A “new professionalism” (Evetts, 2011), moreover, reinforces ideas of work tied to hierarchy coupled with new expectations for competition and production based on corporate models of management, further weakening teachers’ collective power and capacity for resistance. Indeed, scholars warn that shifts in the organization of public institutions, as they accommodate market reforms, have resulted in teachers being recast from “public service professionals” to competitive “producers” (Ward, 2011). This recast, as Hargreaves (2000) writes, “subject[s] teachers to the micro-management of ever-tightening regulations and controls that are the very antithesis of any kind of professionalism” (p. 169). In this sense, current teachers are perhaps more vulnerable than their counterparts in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as neoliberalism encompasses both a ubiquitous regime of policies and a normative force that aligns more tightly the cultural conditions of work in the private and public sectors.

### **Political Background: Neoliberal Policies and Teacher Backlash**

The policy regime of neoliberalism, which gained momentum in the US in the late 1970s and 1980s, has meant significant changes in wages and working conditions of public and private sector workers, including teachers (Apple, 2016; Ball, 2003). Raewyn Connell (2013) describes neoliberalism as “the agenda of economic and social transformation under the sign of the free market [where] needs formerly met by public agencies on a principle of citizen rights, or through personal relationships in communities and families, are now to be met by companies selling services in a market” (p. 100). By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, public schools had been brought into closer relationship with market logics via deregulation, private management, competition, and contingent labor in the form of at-will contracts for teachers. These changes have resulted in increased uncertainty over the role of unions in teachers’ occupational lives. For teacher unions, shifts in the organization of public institutions have meant that collective actions have been constrained by policies that are designed to construct and incentivize an increasingly individualized and insecure workforce (Connell, 2009; Hall & McGinity, 2015; Sachs, 2016).

Decades of market reform and austerity on the part of U.S. states and school districts likely prompted national backlash and the wave of strikes in 2018 and 2019. The walkouts and strikes involved teachers from across the country leading and participating in the Red for Ed movement. In the states of West Virginia, Kentucky, Oklahoma, North Carolina, Arizona, and Colorado, teachers organized statewide walkouts, sick-outs, and “wildcat” strikes (called “wildcat” because they were not authorized by local or national teacher unions; Blanc, 2020). Protests lasted an average of five days in length, including nine days (in West Virginia and Oklahoma). The demands of teachers concentrated on improved school funding, greater supplemental services for students and teachers, and better pay (Brasch, 2018). Several protests included critiques of a number of market-based policies, such as school choice, vouchers, and high-stakes tests. In 2019 the Red for Ed movement continued, this time in the form of authorized strikes led by local unions in four urban districts: Los Angeles Unified School District, Oakland Unified School District, Chicago Public Schools, and Denver Public Schools. The concerns expressed by local union chapters were largely similar to statewide walkouts the prior year, focusing on low teacher pay, a dearth of supplemental services, and market reforms that were viewed as having led to school closures and decreased funding for public schools (Givan & Lang, 2020).

To several activists and reporters, the walkouts and strikes appeared as exciting new forms of teacher resistance, including possibilities for shifts away from old models of unionism that have dominated teacher unions since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and toward social justice unionism. Social justice unionism, also called community-based unionism (McBride & Greenwood, 2009) or social movement unionism (Weiner, 2013), seeks to connect traditional conceptions of labor (i.e., salary

and benefits) to broad struggles for democratic control of public institutions by disenfranchised communities who rely on them most (McAlevey, 2016). The power of social justice unionism rests in its commitment to organized collective action by rank-and-file members and connected to broad social movements for civil rights and racial and economic justice. Given past and present struggles in the US for civil rights in policing, housing, employment, and education on the part of racially minoritized groups, social justice unionism is a potential solution to chronic divisions within U.S. society along lines of race and class, and where the plight of teachers (who are still largely white at approximately 80%) is more closely tied to the needs of students and their families (who are increasingly racially diverse at approximately 50% [Perrillo, 2012]).

Current efforts to shift teacher unionism toward a social justice model, however, must consider *how* professionalism is understood, evaluated and experienced under neoliberalism, which may weaken sustained opportunities and possibilities for teachers to participate in collective actions, such as Red for Ed. As such, we join a small but important group of scholars who have sought to highlight current and historically rooted racialized, gendered and classist dimensions of teacher professionalism that privilege white women and marginalize teachers of non-dominant ethnoracial and linguistic backgrounds (D'Amico, 2016; Marom, 2018; Meiners, 2002; Scott & Holme, 2016), and separate “professionals” from those considered “laborers” or “workers” (Hanlon, 1998; Ozga & Lawn, 1981).

With the dominance of an outcomes-driven approach to education, and a narrowing of teacher professionalism to producible, countable achievements (Apple, 2016; Hall & McGinity, 2015), and no ideal professionalism to return to, critical scholars have begun to imagine progressive forms of professionalism, which some have called community-based professionalism (Anderson & Cohen, 2015), democratic professionalism (Zeichner, 2020), and postmodern professionalism (Hargreaves, 2000). These newly imagined forward-looking ideas of professionalism, similar to social justice unionism, must be embedded in community-based movements for justice and equity, and call on teachers to be accountable to the students, families and communities they serve, rather than test scores as sole metrics of evaluation or to powerful elites in positions of authority. However, what remains undertheorized is what it takes for teachers, both as individuals and as a collective, to reject market-based professionalism or the return to familiar, hierarchical notions of professionalism, and instead embrace professionalism tied to community advocacy and empowerment.

### **Context of Study: A District of Market Reform**

Denver, which is the capital of Colorado and the state's largest urban center, has embraced a number of market-based education reforms. As seen in Table 1, market reforms in Denver Public Schools (DPS) are evident in multiple domains and at various levels (districtwide and schoolwide), including a portfolio management model with several autonomous schools and providers, as well as performance-based evaluation and pay structures. In 2020, DPS' portfolio of schools included approximately 39 district-run innovation schools, 14 innovation zone (iZone) schools overseen by an external nonprofit organization, 58 independently run charter schools, and 95 district-run traditional public schools (DPS, 2021). A system of autonomous schools come with unprecedented flexibility for school leaders, including exemptions from state laws related to teacher hiring.

**Table 1**  
*Market Reforms in Denver Public Schools*

| <b>District level</b>  |   |
|------------------------|---|
| Salary & Pay Structure | <i>ProComp</i> (a performance-based, merit-pay system)  |
| Management Structure   | Portfolio Management Model (a system of autonomous schools)<br>School Choice Program  |
| Labor / Workforce      | Alternative Teacher Prep Programs (including non-university-based)<br>Traditional Teacher Prep Programs (primarily university-based)<br>Unionized & Non-unionized teachers                    |
| Accountability         | High-Stakes Testing System (Performance Framework)<br>Accountability-driven school closures   |
| <b>School level</b>    |   |
| School Types           | Innovation Schools (semi-autonomous)<br>Charter schools (autonomous)<br>Traditional Public Schools (managed by district)<br>Co-Located Schools (autonomous & district schools share building) |

Prior to the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the DCTA was generally accommodating to market reforms and even worked with the district to negotiate a pay-for-performance compensation system, called *ProComp*, which reflected many market-based ideologies. However, in 2016 a group of Denver teachers came together to form the “Caucus of Today’s Teachers” with the intent of pushing DCTA toward a more social justice and militant stance. In 2017, a founding member of the caucus ran against the long-time DCTA president. During the presidential campaign, the DCTA president and his allies insisted that DCTA, under his leadership, was making progress toward better engagement of members and increasing interest and support during contract bargaining. The caucus leader and his supporters portrayed DCTA as ineffective at battling the “corporatist agenda” of DPS and of inadequately addressing the broader social justice issues that impact the lives of DPS students, communities and teachers (Gorski, 2017). In the end, the caucus leader lost by less than a 3% margin suggesting a tension among DCTA members between narrow and more expansive views of unionism.

## Theoretical Framework

A *critical policy framework* informed our design and analysis of teacher resistance to education reforms in the Denver context. A critical policy framework encourages researchers to look beyond a policy’s rhetoric or its technical claims, and to view policy as embedded in processes of power and the lived experiences of historically marginalized groups (Diem et al., 2018). Critical policy scholars remind us that words like “professional” are never neutral and that policy text and discourse are



routinely contested, for better or worse, in often fraught sociopolitical contexts (Ball, 1993). This nuanced approach to policy analysis, which is both tentative and firm, helped us to understand the historical, political, and local context in which teachers made meaning of their work and professional identity, as well as their resistance to the organization of work, particularly in light of dominant political forces tied to neoliberalism and market reforms.

Critical policy scholars pose broad concerns about the implications of prominent policies, including limitations to democratic participation on the part of parents and families (Scott & Holme, 2016; Trujillo & Renee, 2015), as well as limitations to educators of color and the historic traditions of teaching that many have sought to enact for critical democracy and educational justice (Anderson & Dixon, 2016). Additionally, the work of critical policy scholars has done much to illuminate the ways that current notions of professionalism, particularly those captured in policy documents, function as a means of instrumentalizing neoliberal ideology. As such, our framework guided the conceptualization of the study, the questions we posed, and broad categories for analytic coding.

## Research Methods

We used qualitative research methods to understand whether and how teacher political contention was shaped by concerns with market-based educational policies and held meanings beyond the primary policy of *ProComp*. A critical theoretical framework heightened our attention to divergent experiences and rationales for contention due to politics of race and racism, and class and gender, in the local context, as well as historical and sociopolitical conditions of resistance within unions and discourses of professionalism. Our research questions fell into primary and secondary lines of inquiry:

### Primary Research Questions:

1. In what ways, if at all, did teachers use political contention to challenge market-based education policies and discourses, broadly and/or concretely?
2. How was political contention shaped by teachers' views of professionalism and unionism?
3. How did political contention shape teachers' views of professionalism and unionism?

### Secondary Research Questions

1. In what ways did teachers' rationales for political contention reflect goals of *social justice unionism*, such as economic and racial justice for marginalized communities of color?
2. In what ways did teachers' rationales for political contention reflect goals of traditional *business unionism*, such as labor-specific issues focused on pay, hours, and benefits?

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 teachers—13 teachers who participated in political contention in the 2018 walkout or 2019 strike, one teacher who did not, and one teacher whose interview was not included for technical limitations. Participants were selected using both purposeful and snowball sampling, where we asked current interview participants for nominations of subsequent interviewees who met a set of criteria (by race/ethnicity, school type, and experience). As seen in Table 2, participants differed in characteristics related to identity, experience, and school type. In Figure 1, a detailed overview of participant characteristics and school types is offered.



**Table 2**  
*Summary of Interview Participants*

|  | <i>n</i>  |
|--|-----------|
| <i>Race/Ethnicity</i>                      | 14        |
| Black/African American                     | 5 (35.7%) |
| Latinx                                     | 1 (7.1%)  |
| White                                      | 8 (57.1%) |
| <i>Teacher Experience</i>                  | 14        |
| Novice                                     | 2 (14.3%) |
| Mid-Career                                 | 8 (57.1%) |
| Veteran                                    | 4 (28.6%) |
| <i>School Type</i>                         | 13        |
| Traditional, Public                        | 4 (30.8%) |
| Traditional, Public, Co-located            | 3 (23.1%) |
| Innovation                                 | 4 (30.8%) |
| Innovation, Co-Located                     | 2 (15.4%) |
| <i>Type of Teacher Credential Program</i>  | 13        |
| Traditional                                | 9 (69.2%) |
| Alternative                                | 4 (30.8%) |
| <i>Strike Participation Rate by School</i> | 13        |
| Low ( $\leq 54\%$ )                        | 3 (23.1%) |
| Medium (55%-84%)                           | 3 (23.1%) |
| High ( $\geq 85\%$ )                       | 7 (53.8%) |

Interviews with all participants were recorded and transcribed verbatim. Teachers were granted confidentiality from work colleagues, including school principal and district leaders. Interviews were triangulated with supplementary data involving discourse analysis of collective bargaining meetings, and online postings by union leaders and teacher activist groups.

When collecting and analyzing our data we took a general, inductive approach, iterative throughout and after data collection, and drew on techniques of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This means that as we conducted interviews, we took brief notes during and after each interview and met weekly to discuss emerging questions and themes. From this process we developed our initial codes (quite open) which we then followed with analytic coding more closely tied to our conceptual frameworks (Saldaña, 2009). We then placed our data, our codes and our questions in a dialectical relationship with literature on teacher unions, teacher strikes and the marketization of education. The literature we read, specifically on the history of teacher unions and teacher professionalism and how both are responding to forces of marketization, pushed us to look deeply into our data and consider whether and how meaning making by our participants were “within” and “outside” of extant theorizing and literature.

**Figure 1**  
*Characteristics of Interview Participants*

| Name    | Race/<br>Ethnicity        | Teacher<br>Exp. | School Type                      | Teacher<br>Pathway | Union Status                  | Strike<br>Involvement | Walkout<br>Participate |
|---------|---------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Nora    | Black/African<br>American | Veteran         | Innovation<br>Co-located         | Alternative        | Member                        | Yes                   | Yes                    |
| Janelle | Latinx                    | Veteran         | Traditional Public<br>Co-located | Traditional        | Board<br>Member               | Yes                   | Yes                    |
| Jacklyn | Black/African<br>American | Mid-<br>Career  | District Office                  | Traditional        | Non-Member                    | No                    | No                     |
| Shirley | Black/African<br>American | Veteran         | Innovation                       | Traditional        | Member                        | Yes                   | Yes                    |
| Zia     | Black/African<br>American | Novice          | Innovation                       | Alternative        | Member                        | Yes                   | No                     |
| Destiny | Black/African<br>American | Mid-<br>career  | Innovation                       | Traditional        | Member                        | Yes                   | No                     |
| Talia   | White                     | Mid-<br>career  | Innovation<br>Co-located         | Alternative        | Member                        | Yes                   | No                     |
| Joanna  | White                     | Veteran         | Traditional Public               | Traditional        | Member                        | Yes                   | N/A                    |
| Holly   | White                     | Mid-<br>career  | Innovation                       | Traditional        | Member                        | Yes                   | N/a                    |
| Heidi   | White                     | Mid-<br>career  | Traditional Public               | Traditional        | Member                        | Yes                   | Yes                    |
| Karla   | White                     | Mid-<br>career  | Traditional Public               | N/A                | Member<br>& Strike<br>Marshal | Yes                   | Yes                    |
| Maya    | White                     | Mid-<br>career  | Traditional Public               | Traditional        | Union Rep.                    | Yes                   | Yes                    |
| Ada     | White                     | Mid-<br>career  | Traditional Public<br>co-located | Alternative        | Member                        | Yes                   | Yes                    |
| Alia    | White                     | Novice          | Traditional public<br>co-located | Traditional        | Union Rep                     | Yes                   | Yes                    |

*Note:* All names are pseudonyms.

### Limitations

Our sample is primarily with teachers who participated in acts of resistance via the walkout and strike. Data collection is needed with teachers who did not participate in walkouts or strikes. Also, the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded over the course of data collection and impeded efforts to conduct more interviews. The context of the study, moreover, takes place in a state where teachers *can* unionize and where collective bargaining is recognized by state and district leaders. Our findings, therefore, are less generalizable to educators in so-called “right to work” states.

### Findings

The widespread implementation of market-based reforms in the US, despite vocal criticisms by teachers and teacher unions, support the claim that traditional teacher unions have been ineffective at mobilizing large scale collective action and resistance to such reforms (see Weiner,

2012). Though scholars have begun to document the effectiveness of social justice unionism in securing wins against neoliberal policies (Givan & Lang, 2020), we found ourselves curious as to how Denver teachers themselves viewed the function and role of DCTA in addressing the marketization of their working conditions. More specifically, as we read and reread our data, we found ourselves taking note of which market-based reforms our participants mentioned in interviews as problematic and when, if at all, teachers saw DCTA as a way to address their concerns.

### Traditional Unions as a Limited Force to Challenge Market Reforms

To explore this topic, we developed a system of coding to note which market-based reforms our participants discussed in our interviews. This system of coding generated a matrix of teacher responses about which market reforms weighed prominently in their participation in strikes and walkouts. In Figure 2, participants described some market reforms as “problems” while others were “mentioned,” and others not mentioned at all. Reforms marked as problems were seen as infringing on teachers’ abilities to be the teachers they wanted to be, prompting teachers to lament and/or offer clear critiques of the reform. The symbol “X” refers to topics that did not come up in the interview. The label “mention” refers to topics that did come up, but about which the participant did not share a critique or perspective. For example, a teacher may mention that they were certified through an alternative credential program but not reveal whether they felt the program was positive or negative. The matrix offers early identification of patterns of convergence and difference across interviews, in terms of which market reforms were experienced as challenges and which ones were not. After completing the matrix, we then studied teachers’ responses to interview questions such as, “what prompted you to go on strike?” and “What work still needs to be done in DPS?” and, “What is your relationship to DCTA since the strike?” These probing questions helped us to begin to understand how participants connected the role of their union to market-based reforms.

**Figure 2**  
*Market Reforms Described as Problematic by Participants*

| Name                | Testing | ProComp/<br>Merit-based<br>pay | Charter<br>Schools | Innovation<br>Schools | School<br>Choice | Alt.<br>teacher<br>cert. | Increased<br>admin powers | School<br>Closures | Prescribed<br>Curriculum | Teacher<br>Disrespect | Teacher<br>Accountability | Separation from<br>Community |
|---------------------|---------|--------------------------------|--------------------|-----------------------|------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| Nora                | X       | X                              | Problem            | Problem               | X                | Mention                  | Problem                   | X                  | X                        | Problem               | X                         | Problem                      |
| Janelle             | X       | X                              | X                  | X                     | X                | X                        | Problem                   | X                  | X                        | Problem               | X                         | Problem                      |
| Jacklyn             | Problem | X                              | Problem            | Mention               | Mention          | X                        | Mention                   | Problem            | Problem                  | X                     | Problem                   | Problem                      |
| Shirley             | X       | X                              | X                  | X                     | X                | Mention                  | Problem                   | X                  | X                        | Problem               | X                         | Problem                      |
| Zia                 | X       | Problem                        | X                  | Problem               | X                | Mention                  | Problem                   | X                  | Problem                  | Problem               | X                         | Problem                      |
| Destiny             | Problem | X                              | X                  | X                     | X                | X                        | X                         | X                  | X                        | Problem               | X                         | Problem                      |
| Talia               | Problem | Problem                        | Mention            | Mention               | Problem          | Mention                  | Problem                   | X                  | X                        | Problem               | Problem                   | X                            |
| Joanna              | X       | X                              | X                  | X                     | X                | X                        | X                         | X                  | Problem                  | Problem               | X                         | X                            |
| Holly               | X       | X                              | X                  | Problem               | X                | X                        | Problem                   | X                  | Problem                  | Problem               | X                         | Problem                      |
| Heidi               | X       | Problem                        | X                  | X                     | X                | Mention                  | X                         | X                  | X                        | Problem               | X                         | X                            |
| Karla               | X       | X                              | Problem            | X                     | X                | X                        | Problem                   | X                  | X                        | Problem               | Problem                   | X                            |
| Maya                | Problem | Problem                        | Problem            | Problem               | Problem          | X                        | X                         | Problem            | X                        | Problem               | Problem                   | X                            |
| Ada                 | Problem | X                              | Mention            | Mention               | Mention          | Mention                  | Problem                   | X                  | X                        | Problem               | Problem                   | Mention                      |
| Alia                | Problem | Problem                        | Problem            | Problem               | X                | X                        | Problem                   | X                  | X                        | Problem               | Problem                   | Mention                      |
| % Marked<br>Problem | 42.9%   | 35.7%                          | 35.7%              | 35.7%                 | 14.3%            | 0%                       | 64.3%                     | 14.3%              | 28.6%                    | 92.9%                 | 42.9%                     | 50%                          |

Notes: All names are pseudonyms. “X” means it was not mentioned by participant

The 12 reforms and associated practices listed in Figure 2, considered to be part and parcel of market-based policies in education, emerged with some consistency in our interviews. Though it wasn't always clear that teachers connected the reforms they listed to marketized systems, there was a robust understanding and critique of how such reforms impacted their working conditions and occupational identities. For example, all 14 of our participants listed compensation as a primary concern for either themselves or for their colleagues and noted that it was a central issue of the strike. Yet only 5 of the 14 specifically critiqued the merit-based compensation model, *ProComp*, which shaped teacher salary. We also noted in our data that compensation, whether teachers connected it to market reforms or not, was the only issue that our participants consistently trusted the union to resolve. Beyond compensation, teachers noted a variety of education issues that scholars have connected to markets, but there was little evidence in our data that our participants connected these concerns to their union involvement or identified DCTA as a vehicle for resistance. The perspectives of Joanna and Zia are representative of such issues.

Joanna, a veteran white teacher, spoke ardently about the lack of respect for teachers in today's climate. When responding to the question, "what prompted you to go on strike?" Joanna first mentioned compensation, but then told us that disrespect, in the form of not being listened to or supported, was the prime reason for her participation. She said, "...it's a lot of years of not being listened to... So, I mean, I did it [participated in the strike] because I was mostly tired of not being listened to and I wanted to make an impact." Then, toward the end of the interview when responding to a question about conditions in Denver after the strike, Joanna said, with some exasperation in her tone, "The district *still* isn't listening. I mean, it's still an ongoing battle." However, when asked about her relationship to the union after the strike Joanna said that though she's still a member, she isn't involved and doesn't follow what DCTA says. This suggests that, though disrespect was a primary reason behind Joanna's strike participation and continues to be something she identifies as an issue, she does not consider the union to be an organization that either can or will resolve her key education concerns.

A similar pattern was echoed in the interview with Zia, a novice Black teacher. During the interview Zia spoke with enthusiasm when she talked about joining the strike in order to be part of "the moment" and the fun she had out on the strike line. She said of the strike, "That was fun! And the different locations [for rallies], that was fun too. I liked drumming when we got to drum the chants. I loved that part." Zia also identified the union as positioned to resolve what she viewed as a problematic component in the *ProComp* model, a performance-based mechanism that resulted in Zia, a second-year teacher, getting paid more than the veteran teachers she saw as mentors. She recalled her discussions with veteran teachers, "I was like, 'You've been here longer, you know what to do, I'm brand new, but I'm getting paid more than you?' That doesn't seem right at all." However, when the question of race and the treatment of students and teachers of color was raised, Zia did not mention the union as a resource and lamented the lack of culturally competent highly trained administrators and teachers, and the absence of quality curriculum available to students of color. Social justice unionism makes explicit its connection to and solidarity with marginalized communities and so we took note when neither Zia nor other participants of color looked to DCTA as an ally in their fight for racial justice.

For both Joanna and Zia and many of other participants, faith in the union, particularly in DCTA's ability to raise teachers' salaries, was strong enough to put them out on the strike line. However, when it came to issues outside of compensation, DCTA and collective action was no longer mentioned by our participants as a vehicle for change.

The two participants who did draw connections between DCTA and broader issues of justice were Heidi and Maya. Heidi and Maya are both white, mid-career teachers who are deeply

involved in the union. Heidi is connected to the Caucus for Today's Teachers and Maya, after rising to DCTA leadership during the strike, left teaching the year after the strike to become a fulltime union organizer. However, though both Heidi and Maya pointed to the potential of unions to address social justice issues and to challenge market-based reforms, they both also acknowledged that DCTA, specifically, may not be able to do so just yet. In response to the question "How would you describe Colorado's participation in the Red for Ed movement?", Maya hesitated before saying that in Colorado the Red for Ed movement is very much tied to compensation. She then shifts to talking about Chicago and tells us that Chicago's union is much more "developed" and "advanced" suggesting a union is further along if it no longer limits itself to fighting for compensation. She said:

I think the Colorado Red for Ed movement is really based on funding and kind of rightfully so. We're just like abysmally funded relative to our state's economy... But, I mean, I have teacher friends in Chicago where I know that their union is a lot more developed and so they have a much stronger vehicle to deal with other social justice issues, like part of their contract they're negotiating for was even things like Affordable Housing Access. So, I think the Chicago Teachers Union is a lot more advanced about integrating other social issues in a meaningful way.

Heidi also mentioned Chicago in her response to the question "what's your perception of teacher unions?" She said, "... the Chicago teachers union this past fall was on strike... one of the gains they made was like a school psychologist or social worker or something in every building. So, if unions can work for things like that, in addition to just teacher salaries, then I think that will be really helpful in changing the impact [of unions]." Additionally, Heidi explicitly connects the purpose of teacher unions to the complaints and frustrations of teachers. When responding to the question "what brought you to union work" she said, "... you realize these concerns you have – there's a place where you can go to try to address them. They might not get solved right away, but rather than complaining in the copy room during lunch time, there's ways that you can channel that and try to address those concerns."

This belief on the part of Heidi and Maya (both up and coming leaders in DCTA) that unions can and should be used to tackle systemic issues that affect conditions of work and student well being suggests the possibility that DCTA, despite many teachers in our study not identifying the union as an ally in broad forms of resistance, is moving toward a social justice stance. However, it is also important to note that both women are white, and that they are both originally from outside of Colorado. We find these qualities important in terms of who feels supported and seen by the union. As is made more explicit in a subsequent section on unionism and communities of color, feeling visible by the union was not shared by all our participants, including teachers of color, and thus raises concerns about the trajectory toward social justice unionism in Denver.

### **Teachers' Varied Interpretations of Professionalism**

A primary and radical power of unions is their orientation to collectivism, particularly in the face of reforms that value and reward individualism and competition. Indeed, much of the work in Critical Policy Studies on teaching during neoliberal times has revealed the isolating realities of working and competing in marketized contexts. Ball (2003) writes that within this ensemble of neoliberal forces "teachers are represented and encouraged to think about themselves as individuals who calculate about themselves, 'add value' to themselves, improve their productivity, strive for excellence" (p. 217). In this way, the expectation of individualized competition, with colleagues and with oneself, is deeply embedded in neoliberal ideals of teachers' work. As has been previously discussed in this article, professionalism is a fraught term within education and has been used by

the state as a strategy for control of teachers as often as it has been used as a strategy by teachers to “protect against dilution” (Ozga & Lawn, 1981, p. vi). Though much has been written about teacher professionalism in recent years, it is also clear in the history of the NEA and the AFT that teacher professionalism has been a contested issue for well over a century and that years of discord have resulted not in consensus but in a plurality of definitions (Nairz-Wirth & Feldmann, 2019).

Accordingly, in interviews with participants the terms “profession” and “professional” did not have a fixed definition but rather operated as stand-ins for several meanings. From this observation, we developed a number of inductive codes to help us critically engage with our data and uncover the ways professionalism was operationalized in interviews with participants. We identified six primary uses for the term professional or profession within our interview data: status, respect, compensation, a job, authority and autonomy. Table 3 gives examples of each use.

**Table 3**

*Participants’ Uses of “Professional” or “Profession” (Examples)*

| Professionalism as              | Quote  |
|---------------------------------|--|
| Professionalism as status       | “Are we still a profession? They call us babysitters you know.” – Shirley  |
| Professionalism as respect      | “Can I still come into the department and be treated with respect and be treated as a professional even though no one else chose to go on strike?” – Talia               |
| Professionalism as compensation | “It was such a well-respected profession, and now seeing these brand new teachers coming in and they’re working three jobs and can’t afford to live in Denver.” – Joanna |
| Professionalism as a job        | “I really, really appreciate my profession” – Janelle  |
| Professionalism as authority    | “There’s a kind of teaching movement right now to take back education and make sure that we’re treated as professionals” – Karla   |
| Professionalism as Autonomy     | “The more my colleagues and students learned about my values as a person, the more I felt, like in a professional setting, I needed to live by example.” -Alia           |

In conducting this type of coding, we noticed that the meanings our teachers ascribed to professionalism were generally positive, even if the surrounding contexts were not conducive to the professionalism that they believed they deserved or wished to inhabit. For example, in the last example Alia talks about feeling that the more she was deeply known as an individual, the more she felt the desire to embody her values while at work (in a professional setting). However, by the end of the school year, she decides that her working conditions and the expectations placed on teachers did not grant her enough professional *autonomy* to “live by example” and so she makes the decision to no longer be a teacher. Alia does not equate professionalism or a “professional setting” as the reason she is leaving, but rather external factors that do not allow her to bring her authentic values to the professional setting of her classroom.

Figure 2, which displays the 12 market-based reforms that came up in our data, shows that the category “teacher disrespect” was identified most often as a problem by our participants, and “increased administrative power” as the second most frequent. This to us demonstrates that our teachers are clearly concerned with levels of respect and autonomy, two values that professionalism is often assumed to provide, that they receive as teachers. However, what did not emerge from the data was evidence that our participants had identified “professionalism” as a method of control or as a tool of teacher accountability by which respect and authority are lost. We found this surprising given that Denver teachers went on strike largely to resist *ProComp*, a performance-based compensation system that purports to “pay teachers like professionals” but, in practice, pays teachers according to externally defined accountability metrics and, like many market-based systems, often results in decreased autonomy for teachers (Torres, 2014). This brought up interesting questions regarding how *ProComp* was situated and understood within the context of union bargaining.

DCTA conducts all of its bargaining sessions with DPS in an open forum and has all bargaining sessions recorded and live streamed to Facebook© so teachers can stay informed, even if they are not able to attend. Thus, we were able to watch a number of bargaining sessions and include these videos as supplemental data for this study. The following excerpts, taken from a bargaining session that occurred early in the negotiation process (30 months before Denver teachers went on strike), is an example of DCTA and DPS arguing over some of the targeted incentives included in *ProComp* and routinely included in performance models of compensation, such as extra money for teachers working in “hard to staff schools.” These excerpts offer an interesting glimpse into how professionalism is understood and operationalized within Denver and provide an interesting comparison to the interview data we collected.

Three excerpts from one bargaining session are included (DCTA, 2017). The first two are spoken by the then superintendent, Tom Boasberg. The third is spoken by Pam Wilson, a retired Denver teacher and current staff person of the Colorado Education Association (CEA) who works closely with DCTA during contract negotiations. In the following excerpts, they are negotiating over targeted incentives (what the district wants) and increased base pay for all teachers not tied to performance or targeted incentives (what the union wants).

#### Excerpt One from August 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017

|   |            |          |   |
|---|------------|----------|---|
| 1 | [00.00.56] | Boasberg | Uh because I think the interest that <u>you</u> all have as               |
| 2 |            |          | teachers in being paid a a <u>professional</u> salary is an               |
| 3 |            |          | interest that we <u>clearly share</u> (.) And that’s true for             |
| 4 |            |          | teachers that’s true for school leaders that’s also true for              |
| 5 |            |          | <u>classified</u> folks(.) What we pay our our our <u>bus</u> drivers     |
| 6 |            |          | our <u>custodians</u> is far <u>far</u> less than we’d like to be able to |
| 7 |            |          | pay them so we very much respect(.) we very much                          |
| 8 |            |          | respect where you’re coming from on this.                                 |



Excerpt Two from August 31st, 2017

9 [00:04:31] Boasberg and I will say that within the proposal that we gave you  
 10 what you came back with earlier today was trying to get a  
 11 form of balance(.) right a form of balance around some  
 12 targeted incentives for teachers in our title 1 schools(.) I  
 13 think again we believe in that very very deeply(.) Right  
 14 [in audible] That is something honestly that is(.) we will  
 15 not sign a contract without a targeted incentive for  
 16 teachers in our title I schools who don't get [inaudible] I  
 17 [00:04:59] think that is just fundamental for where we are(.) in  
 18 terms of equity in terms of trying to close the  
 19 achievement gap(.) uh in terms of trying to get an  
 20 incentive(.) we- we've been trying to do that for four  
 21 years through ProComp(.) we haven't succeeded(.) and  
 22 and we're not willing to wait any longer.  
 23

Excerpt Three from August 31st, 2017

24 [00:07:11] Wilson we appreciate that you have wanted to make more  
 25 incentives rather than base for our teachers for quite a  
 26 while(.) but we have made it equally clear to you is that  
 27 what matters to us is base pay(.)

Though the word “professional” is used only once, there is evidence here that DPS, or at least its leader Tom Boasberg, and the DCTA bargaining team understand the term in distinct ways. In excerpt 1, superintendent Boasberg begins by saying that teachers “being paid a professional salary is an interest we clearly share.” However, in excerpt 2 Boasberg makes clear that DPS will not agree to a contract that does not include incentivized pay for teachers working in Title I schools who are charged with “trying to close the achievement gap.” In this way, the persistence of the achievement gap is causally connected to the absence of incentivized pay. Rather than presume competence or connect “professional pay” to an intrinsic need for workers to be respected and compensated, a perspective the base pay argued for by Wilson might support, there is a presumption that teachers in Title I schools are either not the best, and therefore incentives would attract better teachers, or are not working hard enough to achieve equity and close the gap and would work harder if offered a monetary reward. It is also of note that the discussion about high poverty incentives is not portrayed as an argument for compensating teachers for the additional workload or the emotional labor of teaching in a high poverty school, but about the improved countable and quantifiable product they would produce because of incentives (i.e., increased test scores that would “close the gap”).

These excerpts, combined with our interview data, make clear that DCTA and DPS were, and perhaps still are, operating under different definitions of professionalism. One definition, according to our participants, implies status, authority, autonomy and respect, while the other, as evidenced by the bargaining session, is more aligned with ideas of test-based accountability. Though our interview sample does not include enough data to generalize how all DCTA members do or do not think about professionalism, the absence, on the part of DCTA’s bargaining team, of a clear

critique of how professionalism was used by leaders to rationalize individual accountability (and blame) for student outcomes, left Denver teachers vulnerable to greater levels of control. That is, beyond the technical elements of the *ProComp* policy, teachers were confronted with normative ideas of professionalism that rationalized stripping away autonomy and authority and placing it in the hands of administrators, while also minimizing attention to structural causes of student outcomes and collective forms of support for all teachers in underresourced schools.

### **Unionism and Communities of Color: Tenuous Ties, Deep Divisions**

An innovation in the evolution of public sector unions is leveraging strong relationships between public workers and those they serve, including educators and students and families. Social justice unionism is particularly marked by diverse coalitions in which teachers are nested as advocates and partners alongside communities whose struggles for equity coincide with teachers' demands for fully resourced schools with quality working conditions and adequately compensated staff and faculty. Such approaches to unionism make explicit the persistent truth: that teachers' working conditions are closely intertwined with students' learning conditions (Ayers, Laura & Ayers, 2018). Nonetheless, despite such ideals, historic and contemporary forces in school reform can work counter to the building of multiracial coalitions for shared struggle between teachers and historically marginalized communities of color.

We identified evidence of weak and tenuous ties between teachers and the communities they worked in, with the union playing peripheral roles in fostering coalitions for equity. In Figure 2, nearly half of our participants described “separation from community” as an important problem in their experience with DPS, including during the strike. Importantly, all the teachers of color in the study named separation from community as a problem, including Black and Latinx teachers who were highly involved in communities of color in Denver.

Nora, Shirley, and Janelle were veteran educators of color, active in their community, and often connected their activism to participation in the strike. Nora explained, “I believe I'm a community activist. And so, because I'm really involved in my community, I think that it was my duty as well as my right to be able to participate in the strike.” Similarly, Janelle explained how for many teachers of color, the strike was an extension of their activism; a way to show solidarity not only to their teacher colleagues, but also to the communities of parents and families they serve, “I saw a lot of teachers of color [on strike] and I think that they're really reflective and thoughtful on the history of this country, in terms of activism. I think that they stay loyal to *that*. ...I think that it resonates on a deeper level, because of the history of this country.” Janelle's observations were indeed reflected in Shirley's description of her participation in the strike, “Everything I do as an Afro-American, I need to think of my ancestors and the people before me that took that privilege and fought and bled and died for the rights of what we have now. So that's why I was on the strike line, and that's how it benefited me.” Despite the sense of shared struggle between teachers and communities, conveyed by teachers of color when describing their strike participation, these sentiments were not cultivated by the union itself, which was perceived as peripheral, and at times neglectful, in its outreach to communities of color.

Jacklyn, Destiny, and Holly spoke of disappointment with the union's engagement in communities. Jacklyn, a Black veteran school librarian who had been part of the union but was no longer, was quite critical of the union [She was also the only research participant, of the 14 discussed in this paper, who did not take part in the strike.] As she notes, “my issue with DCTA continues to be that they weaponize our [Black people's] suffering, the suffering of Black and Brown children, and they benefit and use it advantageously, but they will never demand of their teachers anti-racism training, anti-bias, oppression, or a culturally responsive curriculum.” Though

none of our other participants spoke as passionately against DCTA as Jacklyn, many echoed elements of her statement. Destiny, a Black mid-career teacher, told us that she had considered leaving the union because she didn't feel it cared too much about Black voices or Black issues. When asked why she stayed in the union, she answered, "[A mentor veteran Black educator] said, 'You can't leave, because if something ever happens, you'll have to go to them. They're going to have to protect you, so you can't leave.'"

Holly, a mid-career teacher, was the only white teacher who described "separation from community" as a problem when describing unions and the strike. In doing so, she lamented the lack of a social justice orientation in the union and its role in her work with students of color: "I don't think that I really associate my social justice work with the idea of unionization. I know that unions are necessary as a protective measure." Holly continued matter-of-factly when noting the union's peripheral role in her work: "Yeah if I wanted things to be changed, I [feel] like the most power that I [have] really...is in teaching students how to share their stories or navigate systems of power.... I associate DCTA with like, maybe they can protect me in doing that work, but the real work happens with students or with communities."

## Discussion

This study examined experiences among a group of teachers who participated in political contention (a strike or walkout), and explored whether and how their experiences shaped, or were shaped by, new and expansive ideas of unionism and professionalism. Moreover, as contention occurred in the context of a district employing market reform, the study aimed to examine teachers' views of market policies in education, including whether contention was connected to broad struggles to reclaim democratic control of public schools, particularly for marginalized students and families. Also, it was unclear if contention on the part of teachers would be sustained over time and inclusive of teachers across race. As critical scholars call for more progressive approaches to unionism in the US, these goals, if realized, must consider the processes by which teachers reckon with, and reconcile, legacies of racial division and inequity in the teacher workforce, as well as taken-for-granted constructs of professionalism rooted in liberalism and hierarchy that often fragment collectivist orientations to worker solidarity.

Findings revealed that despite a mainly positive experience with contention, teachers in Denver nonetheless voiced concerns about weak and inadequate engagement with communities of color on the part of union leaders. These struggles were compounded by a largely narrow view of the function of teacher unions, as protection from unfair principals and for collective bargaining over salary and pensions, rather than as a means for promoting justice-centered teaching and learning, or for collective organizing to challenge inequitable funding and unjust practices in schools. These concerns were undergirded by the union's inability to recognize and leverage the assets of teachers of color, as these teachers often served as prominent leaders in communities of color. We placed these tensions in the long complex history of professionalism and unionism, which illuminates enduring racial tensions that often weaken community support for unions.

Generally, we situated the study in historical, political, and local contexts so as to avoid easy renderings of teachers' experiences and meanings of contention, anticipating instead a nebulous and complex narrative of professionalism and unionism that worked to both constrain and enable new forms of organization, coalition-building, and conceptions of equity and justice. Unlike major cities with high-profile unions and an extensive history of labor militancy, Denver is a mid-sized city in a state known for its relatively moderate stances in the politics of educational policy. Yet market reforms in this context are as extensive, perhaps more so, than in cities with significant

research attention (e.g., Chicago and New York City). In this sense, Denver teachers, and their union, emerged as an interesting (and undertheorized) case to grapple with the meaning of teacher resistance in a context of market reform. What follows is a review of the primary themes that emerged, its connection to literature, and ideas for future research.

### **Market Reforms Felt Disempowering and Motivated Political Contention**

An important finding in the study was teachers' overwhelming sense of disrespect and loss of power, relative to district administrators and school leaders. All but one participant (13 of 14) mentioned "teacher disrespect" as a problem that shaped their participation in strikes and walkouts. Similarly, nine of 14 teachers described "increased power" of administrators as a problem that shaped participation in strikes and walkouts. These findings were in keeping with research on teacher demoralization and de-professionalization, particularly in districts enacting market-based reforms (Anderson & Cohen, 2015; Santoro, 2011). While these issues precede the onset and growth of market reforms in the US (see McNeil, 1986), it is nonetheless important that lack of respect and autonomy are not uncommon in work settings aligned with "new professionalism," characterized by market competition, audit culture, performance pay models, and high-stakes accountability systems (Horsford et al., 2019). Concerns about increased power of administrators, moreover, are undergirded by market reforms that devolve management of schools to private operators, and away from traditional bureaucracies. As noted by participants in our study, including those who worked in schools with formal autonomy from district oversight, autonomous schools can work adversely on *teacher* autonomy and control (Torres, 2014).

### **The Union Nurtured Unity Among Members, But Not with Communities of Color**

In the face of district reforms that left participants feeling less valued and respected, the union was described (via the organization of the strike) as fostering an important sense of connection and solidarity. As one teacher noted, "When the strike came about there was a wonderful sense of unity...DCTA did a beautiful job of connecting with other unions." Nonetheless, nearly half the teachers in our study described a sense of "separation from communities," primarily from parents and families of color, before and after the strike. While weak ties in school-community relations have been studied in education research, particularly weak forms of engagement between district leaders and parents and families of color (Dyrness, 2011), it is important to note that market reforms were intended to empower parents via school choice and *decentralization* of district bureaucracies (often criticized by market advocates as monopolies unresponsive to parents) (see Friedman, 1962). Our study did not explore parents' experiences with market reforms, but teachers in our study, including all teachers of color, expressed concerns about parents and families who they believed were not served well by current district policies, and which motivated their participation in the strike. Their concerns are in keeping with ethnographic research on parents' adverse experiences of market reforms, particularly Black families participating in school choice programs and who described experiences of disempowerment (Pattillo, 2015).

Our findings illustrate what may be an added layer of marginality for parents and families in market settings, which is exclusion and separation from both teachers and district leaders, including in moments of resistance by teachers who themselves sought resolve from feelings of disempowerment in a district of market reform. Historical grounding for this finding, of teacher disempowerment and separation from community, was evident in Murphy's (1990) 80-year history of unionism and professionalism, wherein she states, "in the history of teacher unionism, teachers give into the self-definition of professionalism only to discover that it is not merely a linguistic concession but a profound ideology that separates them from community" (p. 16).

## Missed Opportunities to Leverage Assets of Teachers of Color

The experiences of teachers of color in our study were particularly noteworthy, as they described high levels of involvement in the schools and communities where they worked. Indeed, many described themselves as community activists, and linked their participation in the strike to a legacy of activism and broad movements for social justice in communities of color, including for educational justice, civil rights, and access to teaching jobs with fair treatment and equitable pay. Despite their rich traditions of activism, most teachers of color in the study (4 of 6) described weak and tenuous ties to their union, with one teacher of color conveying deep resentment of unions. This finding is in keeping with research on the dual and complicated roles of teachers of color, as civic actors and role models in their communities and as district and state employees in a highly unequal system of public schooling (Todd-Breland, 2018). Over time, in the evolution of unionism, particularly unions with an explicit social justice orientation, teachers of color, particularly Black teachers, have played pivotal roles in broadening and bridging ideas of equity and justice that invites communities of color and teachers into shared projects of organizing and resistance. In our study, we saw little evidence of Denver's union leveraging this duality as an asset among the teachers of color in their union.

## Between Old and New Ideas of Unionism

Teachers in our study described hybrid forms of unionism with blended approaches, which fell in neither old nor new categories of unions and professionalism. Indeed, teachers described both broad and narrow reasons for their strike participation and the goals they hoped it would accomplish. Broad goals for most teachers included more respect and power for teachers and the work that they do, particularly in the face of increasing control and autonomy for administrators. Teachers of color in the study, and one white teacher, viewed striking and unionism as protecting the social justice work they do with students in underserved communities. Narrow goals were also voiced, as all teachers connected the strike to the district's merit-based salary model, and over which collective bargaining broke down. Lastly, while few teachers framed their concerns as one of "markets", the concerns they did raise occur in the context of such reforms, and which researchers have linked together as consequences of competition and autonomous management of public schools (Anderson et al., 2018). As such, we viewed their experience and understanding of strike participation as a partial vehicle for challenging market reform, and the union as rife with possibility (yet unrealized) for mobilizing a diverse coalition for equity and justice broadly.

## Conclusion

This article offers insight on how teachers experience political contention in a context of market reform. Future studies should consider the multiple meanings of contention among teachers and within teacher unions, including varied interpretations of educational policies, concepts of professionalism, and models of unionism, particularly for teachers across race, gender, experience, and preparation. These qualities should be contextualized within local reform movements, with attention to how they illuminate or mystify dominant educational paradigms. Similarly, future studies should consider strategies for labor organizing both *within* unions (as many shift from old to new models) and *between* unions and the communities they serve. Building broad and diverse coalitions for change is an important innovation and defining element of progressive unionism. Future research should also consider *how* unions change over time, from traditional models and tactics toward engagement with communities and the use of organizing principles geared toward in civic capacity and collective power for social change. Lastly, we encourage researchers to examine

the experiences of teachers who are not members of unions in contexts of market reform and consider structural and sociocultural forces of professional socialization that shape these teachers' experiences and that may weaken solidarity with unionized teachers.

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