Thousands of Arizona public school teachers walked out of their classrooms last month to gather in the state capital Phoenix—a Republican stronghold—wearing red t-shirts and chanting “Red for Ed”. They were joined by teachers from over 27 districts in Colorado who walked out of their classrooms to march down the streets of Denver.\(^1\) Now there are indications that teachers in Illinois and New Jersey may strike too. These are the latest in a slew of labor actions in North American public schools that started in February this year with teachers in West Virginia striking for over two weeks. Teachers in Kentucky and Oklahoma soon joined the strikes with public schools shutting down for weeks in these states.\(^2\) Low wages compel many teachers to work two to three jobs in addition to teaching full-time in schools. The infrastructure is appalling in many of the state-run schools with broken desks, rats, mold, termites, and tattered and dated textbooks. Often teachers buy their own school supplies and even pay for desks for their students to sit in the classrooms.

Economic Policy Institute data shows that public school teacher pay gap is growing in the US from 4.3 percent in 1996 to 17 percent in 2015 in comparison to workers with similar levels of education and experience. The data further shows that the striking teachers live in states with some of the largest pay gaps: 63 cents on the dollar in Arizona; 65 cents in Colorado; 67 cents in Oklahoma; 75 cents in West Virginia; and 79 cents in Kentucky (Allegretto 2018). The gendered nature of labor in the US public schools, with over 77 percent teachers being women, may hold some explanation for such disparities and abysmal conditions of work. Historically this has been the case where work perceived to be “women’s work” has been devalued, underpaid or unpaid. In her recent *Antipode* lecture at the annual meeting of the American Association of

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1 See https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2018/apr/28/resistance-now-arizona-colorado-teachers-strikes
Geographers,³ Silvia Federici spoke of some of the historic struggles fought by women internationally to challenge these injustices, such as the Wages for Housework campaign (WfH). The women who launched WfH in Padua, Italy, in 1972 were influenced by the anticolonial movement, the Civil Rights movement, and other political struggles in different parts of the world. The campaign demanded that the state recognize women’s domestic work as work that needs to be remunerated “as it contributes to the production of the labor force and produces capital” (Federici 2012: 8). The political objective was to push back against the social order that created the “naturalized and sexualized” nature of unwaged work performed in homes by women. By demanding wages for housework, the women attempted to make visible their labor in the home and challenge “its more insidious character as femininity” (Federici 2012: 19). The present wave of strikes in US public schools led by women teachers⁴ needs to be seen beyond wages as political action to create visibility for the work being performed predominantly by women and their refusal to be treated with indignity and apathy.

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In his new book, geographer Andrew Herod brings the labor question back into the heart of understanding the global economic processes shaping the world we live in. Starting with his seminal work in the 1990s (Herod 1997, 2001), when he coined the term “labor geography”, Herod has long been calling for a radical shift in the way labor is viewed as “variable capital” that has little role to play in the production of work geographies. Herod argued for a more labor-centric spatial analysis of economic processes to understand how workers and their organizations actively shape the landscapes of capitalism. Since then labor geography, now in its “fourth phase” (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2011)—starting with neoclassical locational theory (phase 1), to

³ See https://antipodefoundation.org/2018/04/05/the-2018-antipode-aag-lecture/
⁴ See https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/10/women-teachers-strikes-america
Marxist economic geography (phase 2), to the agency of labour and labour’s spatial strategies (phase 3), to new modes of organizing, non-union workers, new sectors/sites of work, and new geographical domains (phase 4)–has attracted geographers and labor scholars to delve deeply into the fundamental tenets of the sub-discipline, namely, worker agency in shaping economic geography.

Herod’s new book, simply titled *Labor*, is a resource guide on the topic, touching upon aspects of migration, the changing nature of work and workplaces, and the old and new global economy and labor’s place in it. Drawing upon his earlier work and scholars such as Michael Storper, E.P. Thompson, and others, Herod sets the tone of the book in a short opening chapter with a conceptual discussion on labor as a unique resource that is capable of altering its own conditions of existence. He argues that as both producer and consumer of goods and services, labor needs to be seen as an *object* and *subject* of analysis–it has a “double nature” that makes it unique and “fundamentally different from any other resource” (p.1). Introducing the idea of double nature of labor, Herod emphasizes the need to understand the geographical situatedness that shapes workers’ (in)ability to act.

The act of striking by the US public school teachers can be analyzed through such a spatial lens. In fact, a powerful way in which workers can act is by “withdrawing their labor”, and this has huge impact when done collectively (p.171). For instance, embedded in the historical context of the working class politics of coal mining communities in Appalachia, the protesting teachers of West Virginia spark off strikes across different geographical locations drawing upon common narratives, building networks and powerful solidarities. The spread of strikes can be seen as labor reconfiguring the geographical scale of action from a local to a non-local one.

Herod’s book is packed with case studies and data from across the globe that explains the larger historical shifts in the relations between the changing global economy and labor. Discussing labor in a global context, the book begins by explaining the interconnected processes
of migration and differential population growth in particular places that has shaped the
distribution of labor across different geographical locations. Together these processes broadly
determine the size of labor force in a place and indicate the kinds of work available and that can
be done in a particular location. To understand the planetary distribution of labor, Herod notes
the importance of looking at economic, social and political processes, such as industrialization or
the post-industrial contexts that influence the demography of a place, and insists that these in
turn influence how economic landscapes gets shaped locally and globally. Identifying two key
processes that have dramatically impacted labor since the mid 20\textsuperscript{th} century–globalization and
neoliberalization–Herod dedicates two chapters to explaining how globalization is shaping
working peoples’ lives and the production of more precarious work under neoliberalization. He
does so by explaining three phenomena–foreign direct investment, global production networks,
and global destruction networks–and exploring how they not just impact and link labor across the
globe in different ways, but also the role that labor plays in reshaping the way some of these
processes unfold in particular places, at particular times. Both chapters are peppered with recent
data and examples to illuminate these phenomena. Herod also mentions some of the political
outcomes, such as the rise of nationalist politics in some places due to increasing precarity and
consequent frustration amongst working people, citing examples of the 2016 US presidential
campaign, Brexit, and Marine Le Pen’s rise in France. These examples give a sense of the
political, economic and social divides that get produced and reinforced amongst working people
under conditions of precarity. He also touches upon issues of automation; for example, the
“Robot Replace Human” program in Dongguan, China, which aims to completely automate
hundreds of factories with industrial robots by 2020.

Examining the shifts in economy from “old” to “new”, the book presents data and
analysis to debunk the claim that work has become less dirty or that workers have become
emancipated in the “new” economy. This idea became popular in the 1990s when global leaders
and commentators predicted a shift from large-scale manufacturing and the production of
standardized goods to the use of advanced modern technology that would not only allow the production of more customized, individualized goods, but also purportedly liberate workers from the drudgery of traditional manufacturing jobs. This “new” economy would fundamentally change the way goods were produced (and consumed), professed the commentators. However, citing examples of the highly exploitative employment relations and dangerous conditions of work in the “new” economy, such as those found in the seafood or cocoa industry or on egg or tomato farms, Herod shows how slavery is central to the way in which work is organized in some modern global supply chains. The fact that countries such as the UK and US had to pass legislation like the Modern Slavery Act (2015) and Trade Facilitation and Trade Enforcement Act (2015) respectively testifies to the existence of “unfree” labor in the “new” economy. Even in the so-called “clean jobs” of the knowledge economy, the situation of labor remains the same where knowledge work gets built on the backs of millions of invisible, poorly paid workers across the globe. Herod sums up this discussion by concluding that rather than a “sharp break with the kind of capitalism that came before the ‘radically different’ New Economy … we appear to be experiencing in many ways simply more of the same” (p.169).

In the final chapter of the book, Herod brings back his original idea of how workers act as “subjects of their own histories and geographies” (p.170) by proactively engaging in processes to alter and create their own conditions of existence. Titled “Workers Fight Back”, the chapter focuses on labor’s activism and what that means for it as a resource. Elaborating through examples, Herod analyzes here some of the historical and more traditional organized labor struggles along with more recent, innovative, and creative struggles waged by workers and their organizations engaged in supply chains and the “gig economy”. Herod ends the book with a short concluding chapter that re-emphasizes the key conceptual framework for understanding labor’s capability of profoundly shaping its own existence, while being shaped by various contextual factors that determines its ability to alter the conditions of its use as a resource.
The book, as stated earlier, is meant to be a resource guide and will be a valuable reader for a course on labor—one that students, researchers and anyone interested in understanding the various processes impacting or influencing the lives of working people globally will find very useful.

References


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