

Abstract

Title- 55 Strong

Program of Study- Cinematic Arts

Presentation Type- Performing Arts

Subtype- Film

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In February of 2018, every public school in West Virginia shut down. For two weeks, education was at a stand-still as legislators and teachers debated. After a nine-day work stoppage, the teachers won. This was the first time I had witnessed democracy in action, specifically by people I knew personally. To learn more, I started by interviewing two teachers from my old high school. The class project became a reality as I interviewed more and more teachers, legislators, and union leaders. In 1990, West Virginia teachers went on their first strike. They were promised a pay raise and a fix to their insurance. However, the problems worsened twenty years later. In the proposed budget for 2018, the teachers were allocated a 1% pay raise and a 10% increase in their insurance premiums. A wellness initiative, Go365, was implemented that tracked teachers' health, punished them for not reaching goals, and invaded their privacy. The teachers had enough and went on the first state-wide strike. After two weeks, they received their resolutions. However, teachers felt called again to defend public education in 2019 when Senate Bill 451 was proposed. This bill would have introduced charter schools and Education Savings Account, taking funding away from public education. The teachers went on a two-day work stoppage and killed the bill. In a state that is separated by 55 counties, public educators found

common ground to fight issues that were affecting the whole. It became evident that these teachers had a heritage of striking, as their families had deep roots in the coal mine unions. Teacher strikes across the nation have begun, inspired by West Virginia teachers. 55 Strong is a film that shares the stories of teachers, union leaders, and legislators as they work to fight for what they believe is right.