

Rural Organizing, Institutionalization, and “Getting Back” An Interview with #RedForEd Organizer Vanessa Arredondo

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Abstract

This interview takes place between two Arizona Red for Ed movement leaders. The conversation centers primarily on how Vanessa Arredondo, a central leader in the movement and a 4th grade teacher in Yuma, Arizona, understands the elements of rural organizing in Arizona. As the interview progresses, increased focus is placed upon the issue of institutionalization and movement engagement with electoral politics. Ultimately, the interview offers insights developed from grassroots organizing for activists and scholars interested in understanding the often-overlooked dimensions of rural organizing, as well as how they relate to issues of institutionalization and the consequent decrease of political capital.



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Noah Karvelis: Thanks for taking the time to talk with me today. Of course, we worked together in organizing #RedForEd in Arizona, so some of this, I think, is going to feel a little funny, but I guess just answer like I don't know you or anything about your work. And honestly, you were probably doing stuff that I had no idea about. But anyways that's my first question: What was your role in #RedForEd, and what did your organizing work look like?

Vanessa Arredondo: I usually like to start from the beginning. So, for me, it was when I saw colleagues from Phoenix who were going to be attending this event on Facebook about wearing a red shirt. I clicked on the group, and then I saw that you needed moderators for the group, Arizona Educators United (AEU). And previously, before seeing that group, I had joined different Facebook groups, just about teachers trying to improve stuff. And I was like, "Okay, I think I can do this." I had no idea what it was going to turn into. So, I volunteered and said that I would help moderate the group, whatever that meant at that moment. And then I think that Monday is when we had our first organizing call.

And with me being out in Yuma while we were trying to figure out what's going to happen, I thought that the best way for me to help was in the background, organizing and putting things together. Not so much being in the front out there. I wasn't in Phoenix, I was in Yuma, and I thought that was the best way that I could contribute to AEU.

And so we were just starting to find liaisons [or, movement site leaders across different schools in Arizona]. Then we started getting liaison sign-ups like crazy. The group started growing like crazy, and my brain needs some sort of organization, so I'm making sure that, "Okay, we have liaisons here but we need one here." So how do I get people to know where we have someone or not? So then I focused more on creating the lists, organizing, counting liaisons, making something out in the public where people could see, "Oh this school has a liaison and this different one doesn't." And that also helped people within those districts to get organized and look for those people throughout the district.

And then back in Yuma, where I was teaching, it was definitely different for me because I knew more teachers in the Phoenix area. I didn't know teachers in Yuma County. So for me, it was very important to ask, "How do I connect with the leaders?"

But it wasn't even that I was looking for people. It was just, I guess, my work ethic throughout the school year. That helped people see me as a leader. I did get nominated to be teacher of the year at that school. So I think when people saw what I was trying to do and what was happening, I don't want to say that they took me seriously, but it's like they know, "Okay, this is a big issue that we need to address." And then, slowly, people started to become involved.

NK: One thing I'm realizing is part of the story that I didn't know is that you seem to feel that your leadership in Yuma and in Phoenix came out of your success as a teacher. Is that fair of me to say? Could you say more about that?

VA: I think to some extent it did have something to do with it. I don't know, I've always let my work speak for itself. I don't try to just go around and do things to get my name known, but I've always worked hard in school. So teachers have known that I'm there for my kids. I'm there for making things better for them and trying to do whatever I need to do. Whether it's spending money or saying "you need tutoring before or after school." In one way or another, I've always been there

for the kids. I would always try to help and say, “Okay, how else can I get involved? What can I do to help?”

So, I don't know, but I'm just making some conclusions that my work ethic and the stuff I did in school helped people take me seriously. They saw that I'm busting my butt in the classroom and trying to make things better. But, this is a bigger issue that we really need to address because we can spend 12 hours a day at school. If we don't really focus on these bigger issues, things are not going to change.

NK: You mentioned earlier some of the things you were doing in terms of lists and reaching out to people. I remember you were working, like, crazy hours just doing crazy amounts of work putting data together. This was a 60,000-person movement and you created a way to talk to all of them at the same time. Could you talk a little bit about how that worked?

VA: Well, I think at first, when we started getting all these people to sign up, it was getting overwhelming trying to keep it organized. First, we had to let people [Arizona teachers] know who had a liaison and how many people didn't. Then people wanted to know many liaisons there were and who they were so that they could reach out to them. So, the thing that came to mind for me was to go to the Department of Education website. I saw that they had a list of all the schools and all the districts. So we had some sort of holiday and I said: “That's it, okay.” I spent, I think, nearly 16 hours one day just copying and pasting all the schools in Arizona and all the districts just to get things organized.

And then we used Action Network (a communications and organizing platform) to organize an Excel sheet by county, by school, and to just have that data.

People would ask, “Hey can I get the district liaison list so that we can organize?” Having all that information organized and available really helped. Tucson educators used that list very well. They organized across town and came together.

And in Yuma, I just kept putting that information out there and people really responded well to it. I think it motivated them even more than before to see, “Hey, they're organizing too.” People saw that we, in Yuma, needed to be a part of this too because it's an issue that affects us all. In the rural areas, sometimes we miss out on what's actually happening at the Capitol because we're so far away.

NK: A lot of times we'd be on calls or in meetings and you'd say “Yuma just isn't there yet, it's different here. You guys don't get it but it's not Phoenix. It's not Tucson.”

I wonder if you could talk a little more about Yuma and what this actually looked like in rural areas. You mention that people felt excited by this. Could you tell us about what that community actually looks like, who's there, and what that history is? What is the spark that brought them into the Red for Ed movement?

VA: In Yuma County, we do have, like in the Somerton district, a lot of Hispanic educators. And we have a lot of people who go from Yuma to Phoenix and then come back to help the community. But, in those rural areas in general, a lot of the information doesn't always get to them or there's some sort of disconnect that we really need to just improve in general so that rural areas know

about this work. And now I'm in a rural area closer to Phoenix. We're only an hour and a half away, but a lot of the information still doesn't get here.

So we really had to figure out a way of making sure that people knew what was going on with education. I tried to make trips to Phoenix and go to the marches and connect with people. Then, I would come back to Yuma and connect with community leaders. This was essential. I don't think anything would have been able to happen if it weren't for those other leaders. They started popping up. I was a stranger going in there, but I learned that all these other schools had different leaders that were already there that the staff looked up to. So, all these leaders stepped up as they were learning more information.

NK: I remember Yuma actually became a little bit of a stronghold for Red for Ed. Is it like that still? Is there a point somewhere that you feel that energy starts to die off or is it still there?

I feel like, in general, across Arizona, for me it felt that things became a little less grassroots and you can of course disagree with that. I felt like we became less grassroots, affiliated with different things, knocking doors for candidates, and things like that. I felt like we lost people when that happened. Did you see that in Yuma and other rural areas? Or did they stay on board as the movement shifted?

VA: No, I mean people did collect signatures [for the ballot initiative, #InvestInEd] but just my personal opinion, as soon as we became involved with candidates, that became a mess. As soon as it became about more than fighting for the five demands that we had all agreed on, I think that we definitely lost support. But, and again I think it comes back to actually educating people, we have to let people know who is actually responsible for all the issues that our kids deal with. That's something I really want to focus on. But then, because people aren't all aware of that, I feel that we lost them when we started getting into electoral stuff.

I think maybe because everything was so fast or we were so tired of it, I mean it was four months of go, go, go, go, go and no break from March to July (2018). I mean, I would love to go back and see what were the main reasons people became disconnected and figure out what it's going to take to bring them back.

It really opened our eyes to how we can organize better. I think it was just multiple factors for a lot of us. First of all, this is just completely new. We had never done anything like this. And then it just took so much energy out of us, took us away from our personal life or family life, and all of the stuff going on in our classrooms. So, I think there's multiple factors that played into that.

But, just my personal opinion, as soon as we started supporting candidates (by knocking doors for union-endorsed candidates), it was a mess. As soon as it became more than fighting for the five demands that we had all agreed on, I think that we definitely lost support.

NK: Yeah, I agree. I pretty much feel the same way. I'm critical of our own decisions in that moment. And I think you're onto something because I felt that too, when we shifted and it became more electoral, we lost people for sure. And I remember you saying that over and over again, "We're losing folks doing this."

VA: And that's what I tried to bring up again last year. In 2018, AEU had 2000 liaisons in schools across Arizona. Then we came down to 500 last year. And I think a lot of that is just because we

lost focus. I understand it needs to happen in one way or another, people need to get educated on who is actually causing the issues. And a lot of people, a lot of educators, it did open their eyes on who they're voting for, and they're actually seeing what that is doing to their profession. But other people are not aware of that or they just refuse to see it.

As soon as we split, and it became less about the demands, we lost a lot of support. I'm thankful that we have Kathy (Hoffman, the former educator and new Arizona Superintendent of Public Instruction). We elected a new superintendent, but then I go back to Yuma and people aren't involved and I ask myself, "How do I bring you back? How do I go to that person who has a different political affiliation than me and have a conversation with them about this again?"

We were able to come together for education. That's the one thing that still bothers me. You look at all these people who came together because we backed these five demands, and then I wonder, "What went wrong? What did we do wrong? Why did we lose focus on that?"

And, I don't know. I just have a hard time letting go of 2018 because I was able to see how all these people came together. It didn't matter what political party, we were all there for education. So many times, I just wish we were still there and, I shouldn't get stuck on this, but now we have all these other issues that are getting in the way.

NK: Yeah. I feel the same way. That's 2000 liaisons across the state who said: "I want to help lead this movement" and then the next year, it's down to 500. I mean we lost 75% of the leadership.

And to me, it's amazing that, like you're saying, people didn't want to make it about political parties. And once it became that, 75% of the leaders bowed out. When it was "We're going to take direct action and we're going to make big demands!" people said, "Perfect, that's what I want to do." And that's kind of the big question. What was it? Was it the demands, the timing, or what exactly?

VA: I know that's something that I'm having trouble with. I'm just stuck on this. I know it's not about 2018 anymore, but when we [were] able to stay focused on what teachers wanted to do, look what we did.

We did it successfully once. Maybe it was a perfect storm. Maybe we got lucky. I don't know. But I refuse to think that. I spoke with so many different people from all sorts of different political parties, and we all came together for the same state and education. That was the whole thing!

I don't know. I just hope that we can make something happen so we can get back to that. I don't know what a good solution is, or how to bring that back. But it was so nice to see that we were able to come together for education.

NK: It's hard to even go back and put myself back in that space when we were making those decisions because it hurts. We lost something that was so amazing.

VA: Yeah.

NK: I think about, and you were at a lot of these rallies for candidates and the efforts to pass the #InvestInEd ballot initiative to increase public education funding after the walkout. They just didn't have the same energy.

Before, nobody even talked about political parties at the rallies. It wasn't even mentioned. It didn't even seem like it was a good question to ask. Why would you ever ask if you're a democrat, republican, libertarian, whatever? It was just that you're here, now let's work for these kids. And at some point, it became about something a little bit different than just the kids or the five demands. We lost folks.

I'm wondering if you can put yourself back in your shoes at that moment when we were making those decisions. What do you see as maybe a different possibility for AEU to build power and gain political capital so that other movements and activists don't fall in these same kinds of traps that we did?

VA: I would keep bringing everything back to the members. The one thing would be to just go back to the members and ask "what do you want?" Ultimately, we were able to undertake the statewide walkout because all of these members came together. Not just because we said, as leaders, "Okay, we're going to do it." Members were in it for the long run, and they believed in the cause. They believed in the five demands. The one thing that I would do is go back to the members. I would make sure that they're listened to and that they decided what was going to happen.

NK: That makes perfect sense. I think there was a moment – maybe because we were getting beat over the head with political attacks – that we, AEU leaders, became kind of insulated and leadership became really defined. We kind of turned our backs on the members.

I feel personally too, I became isolated in a different sort of world that wasn't so much teachers anymore. I lost some of my grounding and was moving in different spaces such as state and national union organizing and Arizona electoral politics. I agree with you. I feel that we just lost touch with the membership somehow.

VA: Even when we were at the capitol during the walkout, I mean, we did go around and we asked the members, "How long are we going to stay out here?" and people told us, "when they pass the budget, we go back in." It clears my conscience that we did do that with the people that were there at the Capitol. But we didn't do it statewide. We could have sent a survey, but we didn't. Instead, we went to people that were there every single day at the capitol, and we listened to that.

But I think we could have listened to the members more and realized how we weren't supposed to decide anything without them. If we don't have the support from the members, we're nothing. That's my thing. Whatever we as leaders do, it doesn't matter if we don't have people supporting or believing in the cause.

NK: We need people to support us to make us leaders. Nobody chose us to make these decisions. All of a sudden, we were in this position where we can call for a statewide walkout or decide if we are going back into the classroom. And the only title we have is administrator of a Facebook group. That's mind-blowing.

VA: Yeah, I know. That's the crazy thing. It's like, "Okay, but who are we?" We're a Facebook group that the members believed in. We were able to do this by having the members come together. It didn't matter what political party you were. We all believe in the same thing and look at what we were able to do as a grassroots movement with people that, including myself, had never been

involved in politics. It didn't matter that I didn't have any experience in anything or even how to work an Excel sheet.

When we focused on education, it was so powerful. I just have such a hard time letting go of that. It was so powerful. Oh, how do we get back to that?! We were able to do something special.

NK: I think people need to hear these sorts of stories. I feel people present the Arizona story as: “It was good, nothing went wrong. These leaders were geniuses,” and it's just not accurate to me. And people need to understand that it was messy and we won stuff, we created something, but also lost something. And if we don't talk about that part, we're not going to learn.

I really appreciate everything you said and you taking the time. I think these are the sorts of stories that have to get out there. It's not so cut and dry or simple and perfect. It's messy, messy work.

VA: I know. It was a lot. It's still a lot. And I mean, we all have a different side of how things happen. This is my experience. We were able to come together. We can do it. When we focus on the same issue, we are still able to come together. Now, is there a bigger battle that we need to fight? Of course there is. When we focused on this issue that we have in common, we were able to come together, and I guess I'm just so stuck in that. Maybe I should move off of it, but I'm still stuck in that.

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