

The Power of Deep Organizing

BY

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Jane McAlevey's *No Shortcuts* provides a dynamic framework for building union power.

The profound defeat of the US labor movement over the past three to four decades is usually measured by the loss of things that workers once took for granted like decent wages and benefits. A less quantifiable but ultimately more decisive indicator is the retreat from possibilities. By extension, the labor movement's renewal (or reinvention) is inseparable from reversing, through effective struggle, this lowering of expectations. Jane McAlevey captured this sentiment in the title of her first book, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell)*, a memoir based on her experiences as a labor organizer.

The underlying argument of *Raising Expectations* was that while the threat of globalization, austerity, and anti-union legislation is real, these factors can also be an excuse; the mantra of "Globalization (or whatever) made us do it!" was not of course an entirely incorrect sentiment, but it avoided asking to what extent the problem also lay with the unions themselves.

Raising Expectations was full of struggles that McAlevey was directly involved in — struggles that showed what could be done despite the overwhelming power of capital. It had a personal, chatty feel to it and had an instant and powerful impact on rank-and-file workers and labor activists, quickly and deservedly making McAlevey a hit on the labor circuit as a speaker, trainer, and strategist.

The crisis within the labor movement has had all kinds of unions scrambling to find "new" models. But leaderships that were averse to institutional risk and lacked faith in their members — or worse, feared an awakened membership — gravitated to alternatives that were no alternatives at all: corporate campaigns that substituted PR and moralizing for organizing, deals with employers that left the members aside, mergers that added size but no energy or strategy. Refusing to build working-class agency, their eventual failure should not have surprised anyone.

As the title of McAlevey's second book asserts, there are no shortcuts. In *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, she argues that only a radical rethink of strategy — which implies a wholesale top-bottom restructuring of everything about how unions function and allocate resources; how they relate to their members, the community and employers; how they develop leadership and how they bargain; and how they understand “politics” — has any chance of rebuilding working-class power.

No Shortcuts is more academic and more conceptual than *Raising Expectations* yet remains very readable. The prime concern of both books is working-class agency and *No Shortcuts* repeatedly emphasizes the fundamental differences in how advocacy, mobilization, and organizing proper deal with worker agency.

Advocacy is the lowest form of worker participation. It “doesn’t involve ordinary people in any real way; lawyers, pollsters, researchers, and communications firms are engaged to wage the battle.” Mobilizing does bring significant numbers of people into the fight, but they are, McAlevey contends, generally the already committed activists, not the mass of the workforce and community, “because a professional staff directs, manipulates, and controls the mobilization; they see themselves, not ordinary people, as the key agents of change.”

It is the third approach, organizing proper, that McAlevey insists on because it “places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass of people never previously involved — that’s the point of organizing.” Campaigns of course matter in themselves “but they are primarily a mechanism for bringing new people into the change process and keeping them involved.” It is ordinary people who “help make the power analysis, design the strategy, and achieve the outcome. They are essential and they know it.”

No Shortcuts provides a wide variety of new examples beyond McAlevey's own direct involvement that show others independently coming to similar approaches. The rich case studies range across the private and public sector. These clarifying examples include Chicago teachers and food workers in North Carolina, comparative strategic approaches among nursing home workers in Washington and Connecticut, and a worker action center standing outside the formal labor movement, Make the Road in New York. McAlevey also offers a comradely assessment of these movements' strengths and weaknesses that broadens the discussion of what to do and how to do it.

To be clear, McAlevey makes no claim to inventing a new organizing model. Her model is inspired by the class-struggle unionism of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s and came to McAlevey through her mentors in the iconic SEIU Local 1199 New England. Her contribution lies in the adaptations made based on her own experiences and, as an obsessive organizer, pulling together the model's core elements into a tight methodology of organizing that could be passed on and emulated by others (a how-to manual to complete this trilogy seems the next logical step).

There are criticisms of McAlevey's approach, but before turning to them it is useful to summarize the basic elements of the organizing model she is encouraging:

1. Deep organizing.

Unions have been trapped in a mobilizing model that focuses on activists and workers who are already committed, when what is needed is an organizing strategy oriented to reaching the indifferent or opposed workers. Without that, unions cannot build the breadth and commitment necessary to address their powerful adversaries.

2. Full-worker organizing.

Union members (and indeed all working people) are more than “just workers.” They are simultaneously members of the community and have a range of untapped potentials as organizers in and outside the workplace. Full-worker organizing builds on those broader potentials.

3. Class perspective.

McAlevey laments the marginalization of class in progressive analysis — the dependence on selling your labor power to others in order to meet your needs — and places class at the center of her organizing. Quoting Ira Katznelson: “American urban politics has been governed by boundaries and rules that stress ethnicity, race and territoriality, rather than class, and that emphasize the distribution of goods and services, while excluding questions of production or workplace relations. The centerpiece of these rules has been the radical separation in people’s consciousness, speech and activity of the politics of work from the politics of community.” Building unity across these divisions is fundamental to building class power.

4. Organic leaders.

The development of workers into a social force capable of exercising power doesn't occur spontaneously; it needs to be built and this depends on certain workers acting as catalysts. ("All people are not alike.") Identifying such workers is one of the most important and difficult organizing tasks. These organic leaders may hold no elected position but fellow workers look to them for opinions and advice, and have confidence in following them. They carry out the crucial labor-intensive organizing tasks of one-on-one conversations about workplace and community concerns. (Among the issues raised here is how those appointed as organic leaders and those elected as workplace and local leaders relate to each other).

5. Power analysis.

Knowing your opponent is indispensable to building your power and strategy. This includes not just mapping your employer's strengths and vulnerabilities but also that of the broader power structure you face geographically — in the community and at higher regional and sometimes national levels.

6. Documenting the potential power of workers themselves.

Keeping track of every worker's involvement, assessing hierarchies of leverage within the workplace, and noting influential contacts in the community and support from other unions is the flip side of documenting the employer's power. Power analysis and charting involve technical expertise but the process of gaining this information should also be structured to engage the members as part of their learning and development.

7. Direct action.

The model is biased toward direct action. Strikes are not only economic weapons but crucial to building capacities and relationships. The same goes for directly confronting management in the workplace over grievances rather than confining responses to legalistic forms.

8. Big bargaining.

The bargaining itself is distinct not only in terms of the demands put on the table, which must be sensitive to both the needs of the members and building community support, but in terms of the structure of bargaining. The innovation here lies in bargaining committees that include representatives from every department, every shift, every classroom, floor, functioning unit — the size of the bargaining team can number in the hundreds.

The justification for this break with the traditional structure of union bargaining teams is that it demonstrates to management the depth of the union's strength; it exposes workers to management arguments and develops confidence in directly confronting them; and it is part of broadening the cadre base. (The extension of bargaining to broad involvement may have roots in anarchist thinking but here it is especially structured and disciplined).

9. Stress tests.

Constant self-evaluation is fundamental. Tests are built in so that the union is constantly assessing the strength and weaknesses of organic leaders, the members, and specific departments (for example, any department that cannot show it has a strong majority of its members supporting the union does not get a seat at the table — pushing such departments to do the organizing so they aren't excluded).

10. Systematic organizing.

All organizing has to include strategic flexibility. But McAlevey is also adamant that the model is a totality and works because various aspects of the model are self-reinforcing. Cherry-picking pieces can derail success. As well, the fact that this model can be presented as a whole makes it easier to emulate.

Confronting Class

McAlevey refuses to romanticize the working class; worker spontaneity will not build power. Developing the potential agency of workers requires bringing the specific art of organizing into their struggles by way of carefully trained and experienced staff and full-time paid organizers.

It's this emphasis on staff and paid organizers that has led to criticisms of the model being top-down. But the whole thrust of the model, confirmed in its actual practice, is precisely to identify and develop rank-and-file organic leaders who can in turn be the catalysts for the widest and deepest engagement of workers, and the development of their capacities and confidence as the workplace and community organizers without whom success is impossible.

There is also the argument that in McAlevey's focus on staff and workers, she ignores the role of the "militant minority" that can lead the strikes and resistance that inspires others. There are two crucial distinctions between them and McAlevey's "organic leaders." First, the organic leaders are not self-selected or chosen on the basis of their ideology but their credibility among workers.

Second, the organic leaders are part of a patient, disciplined internal plan to develop majority power as opposed to adventures that might result in high-profile but premature and ultimately counterproductive actions. Nevertheless, if the socialists or independent militants that make up the "militant minority" come, as they did in the 1930s and in some of McAlevey's recent examples, with the kinds of skills and orientation that fit the deep organizing model, their contribution can be invaluable.

One recent critique rejected the very idea of having an organizing model: "Trying to find an ideal 'model' is a distraction. Organizing is hard. It is expensive, risky and even in ideal circumstances fails a lot." No-one would deny the complexities of organizing workers but the point is precisely to *limit* those uncertainties and counter the powerfully resourced and highly systematized efforts of employers. (And no-one would deny that even then the messiness is never totally erased).

Moreover, if organizing is primarily and irrevocably “difficult” it seems to let questioning union structures and practices off the hook. If the idea of an overarching method is precluded, then the question of how radically unions must change to be successful likewise tends to be set aside.

In light of McAlevey’s model and the larger contradictions shaping the struggle to build localized bases of workplace and community power, three questions about the limits of McAlevey’s model arise: First, how can this model be disseminated more broadly? Word of mouth and McAlevey’s publications are not enough given the scale and urgency of the issue.

Second, the model works where there is a union leadership fully committed to implementing it as a whole. But such unions or locals are the exception, not the rule. What then are the model’s implications for operating within unions that are hostile to the model or only interested in pulling particular pieces from it?

Third, there are limits to what unions, even the best unions, can do. Globalization, financialization, austerity, etc. may often be defeatist excuses but they are nevertheless also real barriers and threats to workplace power. Can unions do more than stretch the limits they face or is it necessary to address other forms of working-class organization? Or, pushing the last point a bit further, where in the discussion of power, class, and worker agency does socialism come in?

On the first point of getting this model out there, as successful as McAlevey’s work and books have been in popularizing this approach to building worker power, we need something much more systematic to realize the potentials of deep organizing. Does that part of the labor movement that is sympathetic need to establish an institute to train the organizers who can then fan out across sectors and across the country to multiply the message? And in line with the thrust of McAlevey’s model, should such training include a heavy dose of field work and learning by doing?

But even this would be limited to the few unions already on-side. What then? The Toronto Labor Committee, a group of socialists, labor activists, and organizers, has initiated an experiment in bringing the McAlevey model to a larger working-class base. We had been floundering in trying to create cross-workplace rank-and-file links focused on “democratic, militant, class-based” unionism. As correct as it may have been to attempt this, it was too abstract to sustain rank-and-file interest.

In contrast, using McAlevey’s work to give people a tangible notion of how a transformed union might function and be able to stand up to what they face has led to great interest. The local example of the eleven-thousand-member Elementary Teachers of Toronto (with whom we have links) adopting the McAlevey model powerfully reinforced that interest. We had to first teach ourselves the key components of McAlevey’s model, and then recruit interested rank-and-file workers (and some leaders) to classes that elaborate on the principles and experiences of this model. The next crucial step is asking which pieces of the model can be applied or adapted to building a force within the union to get the model on the union’s agenda.

Alongside this, we have been struggling with how to combine building the union with raising larger, more political questions. One modest element of this, especially but not only in the public sector, is to confront the apparent constraint

of fiscal budgets on what is possible and run educational for workers on how to read budgets technically and how to understand them politically.

But the larger point is that even the best and most community-rooted unions cannot change the world by themselves and so are confined to the limits of operating under capitalism. Unions can educate about elite and local power but focusing their education on capitalism as a *system* rarely occurs. They can create organic leaders but not necessarily lead them to the next step of becoming organic *socialist* leaders. They can support political parties but do not ask what role workers and unions might have in transforming capital states to socialist states. Such things — all vital to dealing with working-class power — can only be tackled within or alongside an institution with a broader and longer-term perspective: a coherent socialist tendency or party.

In fact, the absence of such a left is not only a limit to further advances, it also goes a long way to explaining the defeats of the labor movement over the past decades. This is suggested by the very origins of the model McAlevey promotes. The Communist Party and other socialist organizations were indispensable to the advances in working-class struggles in the 1930s — the decade out of which McAlevey's model emerged. And it is no coincidence that the remarkable organizing carried out by the Chicago Teachers Union or the Smithfield workers included socialists with their particular skills, connections, strategic sensibilities, and longer-term horizons.

Though *No Shortcuts*, in its concern with revitalizing unions, doesn't directly raise the relationship between class power in the workplace/community and the struggle for socialism, McAlevey does nevertheless make two contributions to that issue: First, and most important, any socialist project demands multiple concentrations of progressive and sustainable institutional power; neither protests nor electoral breakthroughs will mean much without this. McAlevey has demonstrated that building such bases is possible in the here and now.

Second, her model includes general organizing tenets beyond getting workers a union or organizing the already unionized. Principles such as taking class beyond the workplace, identifying organic leaders, seeing all workers as potential organizers of an alternative power base, addressing how to penetrate those not unsympathetic, etc. are of value to *any* class-based organizing, including socialism. What needs careful consideration and assessment is the potentials of adapting McAlevey's organizational insights to taking on capitalism — not just fighting and reforming it, but replacing it.

For those of us grappling with the near-overwhelming difficulties of the “how-to” of changing our workplaces, communities, and society, *No Shortcuts* is an invaluable resource. It should be read, passed on, discussed, constructively challenged, and acted on.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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