

Ask Labor Jane: “I Quit My Job to Dedicate Myself to Organizing. What Now?”

BY

JANE MCALEVEY

Introducing our new organizing advice column, with labor organizer and strategist Jane McAlevey.

Wondering how to make your workplace or movement organizing more effective? Ask Jane!

Jane McAlevey has been an organizer and negotiator in the labor movement for over twenty years. While she continues to organize, she writes for various publications and is the author of three books, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell)*, *No Shortcuts, Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, and the forthcoming *A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing & the Fight for Democracy*.

Thousands of new organizers have passed through trainings with Jane McAlevey. Now, you can have your own organizing questions answered, in *Jacobin*’s newest column, “Ask me about labor and strategy,” with Jane McAlevey.

Hi Jane,

I'm twenty-eight years old, and I recently quit my job to dedicate myself to organizing. I've been volunteering with a few different organizations to try to get a sense for who's doing good work and where I might fit in.

I've been working with Sunrise Movement for the past six months since they seem to have the most momentum and a clear strategy that's working. Sunrise uses a mobilizing model, focusing on young people. How could we possibly apply a structure-based organizing model? I'm feeling at a loss as to how to define a structure and measure progress. Also, how can I get started doing actual structure-based organizing (say, with another organization)? I'm having trouble finding on-ramps into union organizing jobs.

Thanks,

**Jonah
San Francisco**

Hi Jonah, thanks for writing.

Great! Terrific that you want to dedicate your life to the progressive movement.

What we need in the medium and long-term in the United States is for a way bigger, way better, way stronger trade union movement. At age twenty-eight, the very most important thing that you could do is pick a career you enjoy, and prepare to get really, really good at your job. Your coworkers will wind up respecting someone who's very, very good at their job.

In the short-term, given your age, and that you just quit your job, I want to encourage you to spend between now and November 2020 getting some really good skills training. You can do that by working for one of the political campaigns that matter between now and November 2020.

You've got a terrific chance to help save American democracy and the planet if you go to work on an important noncorporate democratic campaign for the next fourteen months. And it will also give you a chance to get serious skills and experience before deciding to go back into the workforce to build a stronger trade union movement. The truth is, if one precondition of becoming a really successful trade union leader is getting good at your job, a second precondition is having some skills as an effective organizer.

I'm also glad you're asking about your volunteer time at the Sunrise movement. Sunrise is a self-selecting organization and that means that lots of terrific, excited, motivated activists join the organization who care a lot about climate change. That's great. The dilemma is, who we, the progressive movement, need to be spending our time talking to are people who don't agree with us.

How to convert a volunteer, activist organization to more purposeful, structure-based work is exactly the right question to ask. We know that Sunrise needs more power because the Democratic National Committee just issued them a resounding defeat on a very good cause, which was having a climate debate. How do we build the kind of power that's going to make it impossible for Tom Perez and the Democrats to ignore the very good demands of the Sunrise movement?

One way to do that is to shift Sunrise into a volunteer organization that focuses on structure-based organizing. That means creating structure everywhere you go. So if I was volunteering for Sunrise, I would sit down with the team of other volunteers at Sunrise, and make a list, what we call a power structure analysis, of all the organizations that existed in the area in which I lived and volunteered.

A power structure analysis would include mosques, churches, synagogues, housing developments, housing complexes, political precincts, parent-teacher associations, soccer clubs, and schools. These are among many structures that exist in any community.

A structure means there's a set number of people who relate to each other through a defined organization that has something like a bounded constituency, meaning again, it's got a membership. Let's just use the church as an example. If I was a volunteer activist at Sunrise, I'd try to figure out who are the important churches in the area in which I lived and volunteered, and then I'd be trying to figure out from among all of the volunteers at Sunrise and everyone we know, who's a member of that church.

Then we would begin outreach to that church, or temple, or synagogue, or mosque, or fill-in-the-blank. We would attempt to start figuring out how we could get a majority and then a super-majority of the members of each community institution around us to sign on to the demand that Sunrise is making. For example, to have the Democratic Party host a climate debate among its presidential candidates.

Structure-based organizing matters, as a method, because it gives it each and every one of us, whether we're full-time, whether we're volunteer activists, the ability to measure our effectiveness. We have a defined number of people who we're trying to move, who we're trying to persuade, and we can judge whether or not the work we're doing is being effective.

I'll close by addressing the last point you asked, about having a hard time finding an on-ramp to union organizing. Again, my own recommendation is that you spend more time thinking about a career choice you want to make and becoming and working your way up to being a very good worker. Then, that's your on-ramp to becoming a trade union leader.

On the other hand, if what you want to do is work as a full-time union organizer, who doesn't come from the rank and file, you have to find a good union, a democratic union that runs real organizing programs. You should only apply to work for a democratic union that's engaging in real organizing, not just shallow mobilizing, or even worse, advocacy.

The main clearinghouse for jobs in the labor movement is UnionJobs.com. There are plenty of unions who are on the union jobs' website that you probably don't want to go work for. And in fact, almost all of them advertise there. Ask

around, to people who are in the labor movement: *which of these unions would be a good place for me to work, where can I learn some serious skills, contribute meaningfully to building a stronger labor movement?*

Good luck, Jonah! The Left needs all the good organizers we can get.

In Solidarity,

Jane McAlevey

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jane McAlevey has been an organizer and negotiator in the labor movement for over twenty years. While she continues to organize, she serves as the Strikes Correspondent for the *Nation* and Senior Policy Fellow at UC Berkeley's Labor Center. McAlevey is the author of three books, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell)* and *No Shortcuts, Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*, and the forthcoming *A Collective Bargain: Unions, Organizing & the Fight for Democracy*.

FILED UNDER

UNITED STATES

WAGES, PRODUCTIVITY, AND UNEMPLOYMENT / UNIONS / STRATEGY

UNIONS / LABOR MOVEMENT / SUNRISE MOVEMENT