

SHORTCUTS

ORGANIZING



IN THE NEW GILDED AGE

JANE F. McALEVEY

NO SHORTCUTS

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ORGANIZING FOR POWER IN THE NEW GILDED AGE

JANE F. McAlevey





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1199's Advice To Rookie Organizers

2t close to the workers, stay close to the workers.

Tell workers it's their union and then behave that way.

Don't do for workers what they can do.

The union is not a fee for pervice, it is the collective experience of workers in struggle.

The Union's function is to assist workers in making a positive change in their lives.

Workers are made of clay, not glass.

Don't be agraid to ask workers to build their own Union.

Don't be agraid to confront them when they don't.

Don't spend your time organizing workers who are already organizing thenselves, go to the biggest-worst.

he working class builds cells for its own defense - identify them and recruit their leaders Anger is there before you are - channel it, don't defuse it.

Channelled anger builds a fighting organization.

Workers know the rists, don't lie to them.

Every worker is showtime - communicate excitement, energy, urgency and confidence.

There is enough oppression in workers lives not to be oppressed by organizers.

Organizes talk too much. Most of what you say is forgotten. ~

Communicate to workers that there is no saluation beyond their own power.

Workers united can beat the boss. You have to believe that and so do they. Don't understimate the workers.

We lose when we don't put workers into struggle

taken from 1199 Organizing Conference February 6-9, 1985 Columbus, Ohio

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I haven't changed my opinion one iota of the many people to whom I owe tremendous thanks for their patience with me, for sharing key life lessons with me, for the endless time and skill they've invested in my thinking and my work, and, often, for their love. But I will limit my acknowledgments here to the players who have specifically helped me get through five years of a Ph.D. program.

Mapping my academic pursuit chronologically, I must first thank two people more than any others, the ones who talked me into the doctoral program: Larry Fox and Frances Fox Piven (who are not related on the Fox side, though I quickly discovered that they shared the gene

for wicked intelligence). I'd had zero plans to attend graduate school, and couldn't imagine why I should shift out of full-time organizing. But when warfare inside the trade union movement led to the destruction of years of good efforts and dashed hopes and dreams and possibilities for thousands of workers, I knew it was time to step outside the fray, in order to observe and better reflect on and understand what was happening, and what it meant for the future. At that very moment, coincidentally, I received an early-stage cancer diagnosis that would require a full year of nothing but medically focused pursuits. It was during my Sloan-Kettering year that Bob Ostertag talked me into writing down my reflections and offered to mentor me through a book. That project, with enthusiastic support from my Verso editor Andy Hsiao, became Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell). Frances and Larry were early readers of the manuscript, and each came to the same conclusion: I should weather the political storm generated by my first book by going to graduate school for a few years. They've always given me good advice, and I thank each of them enormously for guiding me through complicated chapters of my life. Frances became in academia what Larry had been in my SEIU years, an incredible mentor.

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NO SHORTCUTS

Ι

Introduction

Curiously, the labor movement is conventionally ignored by scholars of social movements.

Joseph Luders, *The Civil Rights Movement and the Logic of Social Change*¹ [162nd Footnote]

THERE'S AN INFORMAL GESTALT IN much of academia that unions are not social movements at all: that *union* equates to "undemocratic, top-down bureaucracy." Yet not all so-called social movement organizations (SMOs) fit their own definition of *social*; many function from the top down as much as any bad union. An SMO's membership, if it has one, can be and often is as irrelevant and disregarded as the rank and file in the worst union. Likewise, scholars assume that material gain is the primary concern of unions, missing that workplace fights are most importantly about one of the deepest of human emotional needs: dignity. The day in, day out degradation of peoples' self-worth is what can drive workers to form the solidarity needed to face today's union busters.

Earning my doctorate after long practical experience—as a young, radical student leader, then as a community organizer, a full-time educator at the Highlander Center, and, eventually, a union organizer and chief negotiator and an electoral campaign manager—I find it impossible to sort the process of progressive social change into two distinct piles or traditions. All of the unions I worked with were by any definition social movements, characterized by progressive goals that reached

well beyond the workplace; prefigurative decision-making; and robust participation by workers, their families, and their communities.

In this book, in the term *movement* I consciously merge agencies that have been studied separately: the people in unions, who are called workers, and many of the same people after they have punched the clock at the end of their shift and put on their SMO (or "interest group") volunteer hats—people who are then called individuals. Workers, too, are individuals. A divided approach to workplaces and communities prevents people and movements from winning more significant victories and building power. To the extent that a dichotomous approach persists in academia, it deprives scholars, students, and practitioners from better understanding two longstanding questions: Why have unions faltered? and What must be done?

My hypothesis is threefold. First, the reason that progressives have experienced a four-decade decline in the United States is because of a significant and long-term shift away from deep *organizing* and toward shallow *mobilizing*. Second, the split between "labor" and "social movement" has hampered what little organizing has been done. Together, these two trends help account for the failure of unions and progressive politics, the ongoing shrinking of the public sphere, and unabashed rule by the worst and greediest corporate interests.

Third, different approaches to change lead to different outcomes, often very different outcomes. I discuss three broad types of change processes: advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing—although my emphasis, if not my obsessive emphasis, is on the latter two. Each method produces a different kind of victory, and not all of these victories are equal; some are actually defeats. Only organizing can effectively challenge the gross inequality of power in the United States. Today, there is very little understanding of what factors lead to small, medium-, and high-impact victories, or why.

Power and Power Structure Analysis

In the United States, C. Wright Mills popularized the concept of power and power structures in his book *The Power Elite*,² published in 1956. In the sixty years since then, progressives have largely ignored and omitted discussions about power or power structures. Nothing produces

deer-in-the-headlights moments for activists in the United States like the question "What's your theory of power?" The 1967 follow-up book to Mills's work, Who Rules America, by William Domhoff (and his present-day website bearing the same name), is still considered the best allaround go-to resource for local activists trying to understand how to do power-related research on their opponents. But Mills, Domhoff, and others who offer academic discussions of power largely attend to the power structures of the elites, of those who routinely exercise a great deal of power (national power in Mills's work, local power in Domhoff's). And the conversations about elite power can get very circular (they exercise it because they have it, they have it because they exercise it, were born into it, have friends with it . . .). Part of what made Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's 1977 book, Poor People's Movements, so refreshing—and smart—is that they inserted ordinary people into discussions about who can exercise power.

In discussing power, I am going to put brackets around this very big concept. My interest, borne out by the empirical cases that follow, is in understanding the power structures of ordinary people and how they themselves can come to better understand their own power. There's plenty of evidence on the front pages of The New York Times that Mills's elites still rule. The level of raw privilege that a Mark Zuckerberg or Bill Gates or Jamie Dimon presently possesses isn't much different from that which Bertrand Russell described in his 1938 book *Power* as "priestly" and "kingly." That helps explain why multinational CEOs were included, and indistinguishable from, the Pope, kings, and presidents in the many photos taken at the December 2015 climate talks.⁵ It doesn't seem all that difficult to understand how today's priestly-kingly-corporate class rules. But for people attempting to change this or that policy, especially if the change desired is meaningful (i.e., will change society), it is essential to first dissect and chart their targets' numerous ties and networks. Even understanding whom to target—who the primary and secondary people and institutions are that will determine whether the campaign will succeed (or society will change)—often requires a highly detailed power-structure analysis.

This step is often skipped or is done poorly, which is partly why groups so often fail. Domhoff's website, combined with a dozen other more recent similar websites—such as LittleSis, CorpWatch, and

Subsidy Tracker—can help groups in the United States sharpen their analysis of precisely who needs to be defeated, overcome, or persuaded to achieve success. Understanding who the correct targets are and the forms of power they exercise should be only one step in a power-structure analysis, but often when that step *is* taken, it only plots the current power holders in relationship to one another. Good start, but keep going.

What is almost never attempted is the absolutely essential corollary: a parallel careful, methodical, systematic, detailed analysis of power structures among the ordinary people who are or could be brought into the fight. Unions that still execute supermajority strikes have an excellent approach to better understanding how to analyze these power structures: to pull off a huge strike and win (as did the Chicago teachers in the new millennium) requires a detailed analysis of exactly which workers are likely to stand together, decide to defy their employer's threats of termination, and walk out in a high-risk collective action. Which key individual worker can sway exactly whom else—by name—and why? How strong is the support he or she has among exactly how many coworkers, and how do the organizers know this to be true? The ability to correctly answer these and many other related questions—Who does each worker know outside work? Why? How? How well? How can the worker reach and influence them?—will be the lifeblood of successful strikes in the new millennium.

Liberals and most progressives don't do a full power-structure analysis because, consciously or not, they accept the kind of elite theory of power that Mills popularized. They assume elites will always rule. At best, they debate how to replace a very naughty elite with a "better" elite, one they "can work with," who wants workers to have enough money to shop the CEOs out of each crisis they create, who will give them a raise that they will spend on consuming goods they probably don't need. The search for these more friendly elites frames the imagination of liberals and progressives. An elite theory of power for well-intentioned liberals leads to the advocacy model; an elite theory of power for people further left than liberals—progressives—leads to the mobilizing model, because progressives set more substantive goals that require a display of potential power, or at least a threat of it.

People to the left of both liberals and progressives have a different theory of power: different because it assumes that the very idea of who holds power is itself contestable, and that elites can be pushed from priestly-kingly-corporate rule. Though almost extinct nationally, there are still powerful unions operating at the local and regional level. These unions' democratic, open negotiations—in which tens of thousands of workers unite to stop bad employers from doing horrible things and then create enough power to pull up to the negotiations table as equals and determine something better—provide evidence that ordinary people can exercise both absolute power (power *over*) and creative power (power *to*). A focus of this book is on why and how to analyze this still vast potential power of ordinary people.

Marshall Ganz simplified the concept of strategy by explaining it as "turning what you have into what you need to get what you want." The word *you* is crucial—and variable. How do people come to understand the first part of this sentence, "what you have"? And *which* people get to understand? Only those who understand what they have can meaningfully plot the "what you need": create the steps that comprise the plan, plot and direct the course of action, and then get "what you want." And because "what you want" is generally in proportion to what you think you can get, demands rise or fall based on what people believe they might reasonably achieve. Who is the actual *you* in "what you want"? To better understand outcomes—winning or losing, a little or a lot—requires breaking down each subclause in Ganz's excellent definition of strategy.

First, Ganz rightly suggests that the specific "biographies" of those on "leadership teams" can directly affect strategy because "diverse teams" bring a range of "salient knowledge" and varied and relevant networks to the strategy war room. It follows, then, that the bigger the war room, the better. I expand who should be in the strategy war room from people with recognizable decision-making authority or a position or title—such as lead organizer, vice president, researcher, director, steward, and executive board member—to specific individuals who have no titles but who are the organic leaders on whom the masses rely: nurse, teacher, anesthesia tech, school bus driver, congregant, and voter. I urge a deeper dive into the specific backgrounds, networks, and salient knowledge of the masses involved, rather than only those of the leadership team—the rank and file matter just as much to outcomes, if not more, than the more formal leaders. Why? Large numbers of people transition from

unthinking "masses" or "the grassroots" or "the workers" to serious and highly invested actors exercising agency when they come to see, to understand, and to value the power of their own salient knowledge and networks. The chief way to help ordinary people go from object to subject is to teach them about their potential power by involving them as central actors in the process of developing the power-structure analysis in their own campaigns—so they come to better understand their own power and that of their opponents.

When they see that three of their own ministers and two of their city council members and the head of the PTA for their children's schools serve on commissions and boards with their CEOs, they themselves can begin to imagine and plot strategy. People participate to the degree they understand—but they also understand to the degree they participate. It's dialectical. Power-structure analysis is the mechanism that enables ordinary people to understand their potential power and participate meaningfully in making strategy. When people understand the strategy because they helped make it, they will be invested for the long haul, sustained and propelled to achieve more meaningful wins.

Three key variables are crucial to analyzing the potential for success in the change process: power, strategy, and engagement. Three questions must be asked: Is there a clear and comprehensive power-structure analysis? Does the strategy adopted have any relationship to a power-structure analysis? How, if at all, are individuals being approached and engaged in the process, including the power analysis and strategy, not just the resulting collective action? Many small advances can be and are won without engaging ordinary people, where the key actors are instead paid lawyers, lobbyists, and public relations professionals, helped by some good smoke and mirrors. That is an advocacy model, and small advances are all it can produce—but I am getting ahead of myself.

Progressives, broadly defined, have enough resources to achieve a massive turnaround of the long reactionary political and economic trends in the United States, perhaps in all of the so-called Western industrialized countries. And substantial change can happen fast—in just a few years. (Note this, climate-change campaigners: Correct strategy and deep organizing can make things happen quickly.) One implication of my argument is that the people controlling the movement's resources—the individuals who are decision makers in national unions

and in philanthropy—have been focused on the wrong strategies for decades, leading to an extraordinary series of setbacks. Many of the biggest victories of the past 100 years, those won in the heyday of the labor and civil rights movements, have been all but rolled back.

Yet some of the victories achieved by the people in these two movements were durable—and so have not been entirely lost—because they instituted major structural changes that were embedded in government policies at the national, state, and local levels; they achieved strong or relatively strong enforcement mechanisms; they achieved better funding and staffing for the enforcement agencies; and, most important, each victory became part of the everyday consciousness of most people. We know this because people who say they don't like unions will also say, "At least in this country it's illegal for children to work in factories," or "I told the boss I wouldn't handle anything so toxic without protection," or simply, "Thank God It's Friday." That is, they don't like unions, but they see child labor laws, workplace safety regulations, the eight-hour workday, and the weekend-all benefits won by workers engaged in collective action through their unions—as the reasonable and beneficial norm. Similarly, many white people in the United States might find #blacklivesmatter overly confrontational, but they take it for granted that black people can vote, and that whites-only primaries and officially segregated schools are wrong, racist, and a thing of the past. And, despite their own continued contributions to maintaining de facto structural racism, they would not accept an official return to the apartheid of Jim Crow laws.

That is why reversing the gains of the two most successful movements—labor and civil rights—has required a sustained, multidecade, multifront campaign by the corporate class. The global trade rules that corporate elites methodically put into place have been a key strategy. From the 1970s through the 1990s, they gutted the power of U.S. factory workers, the biggest organized labor force of that time, by putting them in direct competition with workers earning \$1 a day in countries where rights are minimal and repression high. Then they started a drumbeat about unionized workers in the United States being overpaid, and rallied national opinion to that message. This is but one example of how people, in this case the corporate class, can change what academics call the opportunity structure to suit their long-term goals. Global and regional

trade accords also give multinational corporations the right to buy land anywhere in almost any country, and new corporate landlords have forcibly evicted or cheaply bought off millions of people from self-sustaining plots of land, directly contributing to a huge rise in immigration into the United States and Europe.⁸

During the same decades, the corporate class pocketed the courts, one judicial appointment at a time. The resulting deeply conservative judiciary has relentlessly chipped away at the major laws sustaining the victories of labor and civil rights, overturning hard-fought, key provisions of affirmative action and voting-rights protections. Moreover, along with austerity and privatization, conservative courts have facilitated a vertically integrated for-profit prison system, resulting in the mass incarceration of African Americans, detention centers overflowing with Latinos, and massive profits for the putrid penal system's corporate shareholders.⁹

The corporate class also created their version of a popular front, seizing the cultural apparatus through such rulings as the Federal Communications Commission's Clinton-era decision to allow multinationals to outright own the means of communication. They also built up, through very generous funding, the powerful Christian right.

In the zigzag of forward progress from the 1930s to the early 1970s, followed by defeats from the mid-1970s to the present time, what changed? Why were the achievements won during the heyday of the pre-McCarthy labor movement and the civil rights movement so substantial compared with the progressive achievements of the past forty years? Scholars and practitioners alike have numerous answers to these questions, overwhelmingly structural in nature. But in most of their answers they consider the labor movement as a separate phenomenon with little relationship to the civil rights movement. Social scientists have approached the study of each as if they were different species, one a mammal and the other a fish, one earthbound and one aquatic. Yet these movements have shared several key features that argue for understanding them as more alike than distinct.

The main difference between these two most powerful movements half a century ago and today is that during the former period of their great successes they relied primarily on—and were led by—what Frances Fox Piven has eloquently termed ordinary people. They had a

theory of power: It came from their own ability to sustain massive disruptions to the existing order. Today, as Theda Skocpol documents in *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life*, attempts to generate movements are directed by professional, highly educated staff who rely on an elite, top-down theory of power that treats the masses as audiences of, rather than active participants in, their own liberation:

Aiming to speak for—and influence—masses of citizens, droves of new national advocacy groups have set up shop, with the media amplifying debates among their professional spokespersons. The National Abortion Rights Action League debates the National Right to Life Committee; the Concord Coalition takes on the American Association for Retired Persons; and the Environmental Defense Fund counters business groups. Ordinary Americans attend to such debates fitfully, entertained or bemused. Then pollsters call at dinnertime to glean snippets of what everyone makes of it all.¹⁰

As the cases in this book—all situated in the new millennium—illustrate, the chief factor in whether or not organizational efforts grow organically into local and national movements capable of effecting major change is where and with whom the agency for change rests. It is not merely *if* ordinary people—so often referred to as "the grassroots"—are engaged, but *how, why,* and *where* they are engaged.

Advocacy, Mobilizing, and Organizing

Here is the major difference among the three approaches discussed in the book. Advocacy doesn't involve ordinary people in any real way; lawyers, pollsters, researchers, and communications firms are engaged to wage the battle. Though effective for forcing car companies to install seatbelts or banishing toys with components that infants might choke on, this strategy severely limits serious challenges to elite power. Advocacy fails to use the only concrete advantage ordinary people have over elites: large numbers. In workplace strikes, at the ballot box, or in nonviolent civil disobedience, strategically deployed masses have long been the unique weapon of ordinary people. The 1 percent have a vast