

ORGANIZINGFORPOWER

1st Chapter of No Shortcuts

By Jane McAlevey

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.

1 — Joseph E. Luders, *The Civil Rights Movement and the Logic of Social Change*, New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2010. The full footnote from which this sentence is taken is: "I suggest that economic actors differ in their exposure to the disruption costs that movements generate in launching protest marches, sit-ins, boycotts, picketing and so on. Some of these insights have been investigated by labor historians and economists seeking to explicate strike outcomes. Curiously, the labor movement is conventionally ignored by scholars of social movements."

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 all-around 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

2 — C. Wright Mills, *Power Elite*, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1956.

friends with it ...). Part of what made Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward's 1977 book, *Poor People's Movements*,³ 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."⁴ 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

3 — Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, *Poor People's Movements: Why They Succeed and How They Fail*, New York, NY: Vintage Books Edition, 1979.

4 — Bertrand Russell, *Power*, New York: Norton, 1969.

5 — Coral Davenport, "Nations Approve Landmark Climate Accord in Paris," *The New York Times*, Dec. 12, 2015.

(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,⁶ 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

6 — See Dennis Wrong's book *Power* for a good discussion of power theory and to better understand the forms of power various players exercise.

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.”⁷

7 — Marshall Ganz, *Why David Sometimes Wins: Leadership, Organization, and Strategy in the California Farm Worker Movement*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2009.

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

8 — David Bacon, *The Right to Stay Home: How US Policy Drives Mexican Migration*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2013.

9 — Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow in the Age of Colorblindness*, New York: The New Press, 2012.

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 setup 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

10 — Theda Skocpol, *Diminished Democracy: From Membership to Management in American Civic Life* (The Julian J. Rothbaum Distinguished Lecture Series) (Kindle Locations 1645–1648).

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press. Kindle Edition, 2003.

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 armory of material resources and political special forces, but the 99 percent have an army.

Over the past forty years, a newer mechanism for change seekers has proliferated: the mobilizing approach. Mobilizing is a substantial improvement over advocacy, because it brings large numbers of people to the fight. However, too often they are the same people: dedicated activists who show up over and over at every meeting and rally for all good causes, but without the full mass of their coworkers or community behind them. This is because a professional staff directs, manipulates, and controls the mobilization; the staffers see themselves, not ordinary people, as the key agents of change. To them, it matters little who shows up, or, why, as long as a sufficient number of bodies appear—enough for a photo good enough to tweet and maybe generate earned media. The committed activists in the photo have had no part in developing a power analysis; they aren't informed about that or the resulting strategy, but they dutifully show up at protests that rarely matter to power holders.

The third approach, organizing, places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people, a mass

of people never previously involved, who don't consider themselves activists at all—that's the point of organizing. In the organizing approach, specific injustice and outrage are the immediate motivation, but the primary goal is to transfer power from the elite to the majority, from the 1 percent to the 99 percent. Individual campaigns matter in themselves, but they are primarily a mechanism for bringing new people into the change process and keeping them involved. The organizing approach relies on mass negotiations to win, rather than the closed-door deal making typical of both advocacy and mobilizing. Ordinary people help make the power analysis, design the strategy, and achieve the outcome. They are essential and they know it.

In unions and SMOs in the United States today, advocacy and, especially, mobilizing prevail. This is the main reason why modern movements have not replicated the kinds of gains achieved by the earlier labor and civil rights movements. Table 1.1 compares the three models by their distinct approach to power, strategy, and people. Hahrie Han has a somewhat similar chart in her excellent book *How Organizations Develop Activists*.¹¹

11 — Hahrie Han, *How Organizations Develop Activists: Civic Associations and Leadership in the 21st Century*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

TABLE 1.1 — Options for Change

	Advocacy	Mobilizing	Organizing
Theory of Power	Elite. Advocacy groups tend to seek Elite. Advocacy groups tend to seek one-time wins or narrow policy changes, often through courts or back-room negotiations that do not permanently alter the relations of power.	Primarily elite. Staff or activists set goals with low to medium concession costs or, more typically, set an ambitious goal and declare a win, even when the “win” has no, or only weak, enforcement provisions. Back-room, secret deal making by paid professionals is common.	Mass, inclusive, and collective. Organizing groups transform the power structure to favor constituents and diminish the power of their opposition. Specific campaigns fit into a larger power-building strategy. They prioritize power analysis, involve ordinary people in it, and decipher the often hidden relationship between economic, social, and political power. Settlement typically comes from mass negotiations with large numbers involved.
Strategy	Litigation; heavy spending on polling, advertising, and other paid media.	Campaigns, run by professional staff, or volunteer activists with no base of actual, measureable supporters, that prioritize frames and messaging over base power. Staff-selected “authentic messengers” represent the constituency to the media and policy makers, but they have little or no real say in strategy or running the campaign.	Recruitment and involvement of specific, large numbers of people whose power is derived from their ability to withdraw labor or other cooperation from those who rely on them. Majority strikes, sustained and strategic nonviolent direct action, electoral majorities. Frames matter, but the numbers involved are sufficiently compelling to create a significant earned media strategy. Mobilizing is seen as a tactic, not a strategy.
People Focus	None.	Grassroots activists. People already committed to the cause, who show up over and over. When they burn out, new, also previously committed activists are recruited. And so on. Social media are over relied on.	Organic leaders. The base is expanded through developing the skills of organic leaders who are key influencers of the constituency, and who can then, independent of staff, recruit new people never before involved. Individual, face-to-face interactions are key.

However, Han focuses on what I call self-selecting groups that do not make class a central issue. This book does focus on class, and on the clear and vital distinction between the strategy of developing activists, who are not always drawn from the working class, and that of developing organic leaders, who always are.

Structure-based vs. Self-selecting Groups

The labor and civil rights movements were located in the landscape of what I call structure-based organizing. The structures were, respectively, the workplace and the black church under Jim Crow. Both movements chose organizing as their primary strategy. Mobilizing and advocacy also played a role, but the lifeblood of these movements was mass participation by ordinary people, whose engagement was inspired by a cohesive community bound by a sense of place: the working community on the shop floor, in the labor movement, and the faith community in the church, in the fight for civil rights. The empirical research that follows and the voluminous literature examining the outcomes of the 1930s through 1960s are

fair grounds for arguing that structure-based organizing still offers the best chance to rebuild a powerful progressive movement. Unorganized workplaces and houses of faith remain a target-rich environment, and there are plenty of them, enough to return the labor movement to the 35 percent density it had when inequality was falling, not rising.¹²

Since organizing's primary purpose is to change the power structure away from the 1 percent to more like the 90 percent, majorities are always the goal: the more people, the more power. But not just any people. And the word *majority* isn't a throwaway word on a flip chart, it is a specific objective that must be met. In structure-based organizing, in the workplace and in faith-based settings, it is easy to assess whether or not you have won over a majority of the participants in the given structure to a cause or an issue. A workplace or church will have, say, 500 workers or parishioners, and to reach a majority, or even a supermajority, the quantifiable nature of the bounded constituency allows you to assess your success in achieving your numbers. An organizer intending to build a movement to maximum power who is approaching a structured or

12 — Five million unorganized hospital workers, 12 million unorganized factory workers; it is a very long list by sector. See Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson, "Union Membership and Coverage Database from the Current Population Survey" Industrial and Labor Relations Review, Vol. 56, No. 2, January 2003, 349–54.

bounded constituency must target and plan to reach each and every person, regardless of whether or not each and every person has any preexisting interest in the union or community organization. Beyond understanding concretely when a majority has been gained, the organizer can gauge the commitment levels of the majority by the nature, frequency, and riskiness of actions they are willing to take. The process of building a majority and testing its commitment level also allows a far more systematic method of assessing which ordinary people have preexisting leadership within the various structures, a method called *leadership identification*. These informal leaders, whom I will call organic leaders, seldom self-identify as leaders and rarely have any official titles, but they are identifiable by their natural influence with their peers. Knowing how to recognize them makes decisions about whom to prioritize for *leadership development* far more effective. Developing their leadership skill set is more fruitful than training random volunteers, because these organic leaders start with a base of followers. They are the key to scale.

This process differs considerably from the self-selecting that goes on in movement work, such as environmental and other single-issue fights, women's and other identity-based

movements, and nonreligious community efforts. Self-selecting groups rely on the mobilizing approach, and many of these groups grew out of, or in response to, the New Left project of the 1960s.¹³ In self-selecting work, most people show up at meetings because they have a preexisting interest in or a serious commitment to the cause. As Skocpol says, “[M]any of the key groups were not membership associations at all. They were small combinations of nimble, fresh thinking, and passionate advocates of new causes.”¹⁴ In self-selecting work, movement groups spend most of their time talking to people *already* on their side, whereas in structure-based work, because the goal is building majorities of a bounded constituency, organizers are constantly forced to engage people who may begin with little or no initial interest in being a part of any group. In fact, in the beginning of a unionization campaign, many workers see themselves as opposed to the very idea of forming a union, just as many parishioners may be opposed to a more collective-action orientation in their church when first approached about joining or helping to build a new faith-based group. Consequently, organizers and the organic leaders they first identify and then develop

13 — John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, “Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory,” *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 82, No. 6, May 1977, 1212–1241.

14 — Theda Skocpol, *ibid*, Kindle Locations 1762–1763.

devote most of their time to winning over people who do not self-identify as being “with progressives.” Structure-based organizing deliberately and methodically expands the base of people whom mobilizers can tap in their never-ending single-issue campaigns. Han’s book reinforces my argument that self-selecting groups develop an activist-based approach, whereas structure-based groups develop a strong, more scalable grassroots base, because they focus on developing organic leaders who themselves can mobilize to reach majorities.

Unions as the Hardest Test of Social Movement Success

There are very significant factors, however, that differentiate union and faith-based efforts, despite each being structure-based. The best lessons emerge from success in the hardest tests. Real union fights are always high-threat and high-risk—as were the fights of the civil rights movement.¹⁵ A crucial distinction is that most faith- and broad-based organizations are known as OofOs, that is, “organizations of organizations.”

15 — Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of the Black Insurgency, 1930–1970*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.

The O of Os more often than not are religious entities—individual churches, synagogues, and mosques—and the initial recruitment happens between an organizer and the leader, who in this model is an official, generally full-time position holder, typically a person with a title that confers a more formal style of leadership: priest, minister, rabbi, imam. Once that more formal leader has been won over to the project of building a broad, faith-based organization, he or she gives the organizer full access to the congregation. Today's organizers of faith-based groups don't face conditions anything like today's union organizers; there is no well-funded effort to prevent them from engaging individual people of faith in their effort to win over a majority of the flock. On the contrary, faith-based organizers are generally welcomed with open arms.¹⁶

When the structure is the workplace, the official leader of that structure, the company's chief executive, declares war on the employees at the first hint of a unionization effort, using tactics that often include threatening to fire any worker who talks with the organizers.¹⁷ Organizers, whether paid professionals or

16 — Heidi J. Swartz, *Organizing Urban America: Secular and Faith-Based Progressive Movements*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008; and, Mark Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

17 — Bronfenbrenner, K., Friedman, S., Hurd, R. W., Oswald, R. A., & Seeber, R. L. (1998). Introduction [Electronic version]. In K. Bronfenbrenner, S. Friedman, R. W. Hurd, R. A. Oswald, & R. L. Seeber (Eds.), *Organizing to win: New research on union strategies* (pp. 1–15). Ithaca, NY: ILR Press. <http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/188/>.

volunteers from another, already organized facility, are forbidden by law from entering an unorganized workplace. This alone is a radical difference from faith-based settings; it means union organizers have to be really good at the art of what is called the one-on-one conversation, often the first engagement between organizers and potential recruits.

There also isn't a do-or-die hard assessment of whether or not faith-based organizers have succeeded in winning a majority of congregants, since there are no government-supervised elections in each church to reveal the number of new organization members. Dues collection, through tithing, incentivizes faith-based organizers to push for as many new members as possible, but the legal structures around union organizing make winning a majority in a union election or a strike a matter of absolute necessity.

Timing and urgency also matter. Faith-based organizations do not have externally imposed deadlines; unionization efforts do. The byzantine legal structure that dictates the rules for union formation and union governance imposes multiple deadlines, like so many obstacles to be overcome, starting with the union membership card, which expires in twelve months if the required level of unionization has not been won in that period.

If unionization is won, then the clock is reset: a first collective agreement or contract must then be achieved, again within twelve months. Collective agreements themselves expire, triggering another round of deadlines. Faith-based organizing has no such exigencies, and faith-based organizers and organizations often take several years to build to something like an initial majority or to take a first action.¹⁸

For all of these reasons, union organizers, much more than faith-based organizers, must hone their skills in identifying organic leaders, persuading constituents, and developing what union organizers call structure tests. Of course, since the McCarthy era, most unions haven't even attempted to organize unorganized workers, run strikes, or win high-participation contract-ratification votes.¹⁹

This book's purpose is to draw lessons for power building from the best examples of success under the most difficult conditions. This book is not about union organizing; it is about organizing. That unions are the focus is a hint to social scientists and the intelligentsia that the failure to study or understand unions as social movements has resulted in a lack of understanding of the most effective way to

18 — Swartz and Warren, *ibid.*

19 — Steven Henry Lopez, *Reorganizing the Rust Belt: An Inside Story of the American Labor Movement*, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2004.

build power. In the new millennium, as in the past, meaningful union success requires building to majorities in the workplace, a setting that does represent the most difficult conditions. As Dan and Mary Ann Clawson said, mechanisms in union organizing “offer social movement scholars an underused resource: the opportunity for systematic study of widely practiced, and often highly risky, forms of collective action.”²⁰

It sometimes seems there is a forged, collective resistance to seeing the best of labor organizing today as being every bit as moral, legitimate, and strength producing as the sixty-year-old civil rights movement. Charles Payne illustrates this indirectly in the preface to the 2007 edition of his masterful book on organizing in the civil rights movement, while commenting on the many reviews of his book. “By far, the chapter in *Light of Freedom* which has been least commented upon by reviewers is chapter 12 with its discussion of various corruptions within the movement.”²¹ When the discussion is about the labor movement, the reverse is almost always true: The focus seems to be mostly on internal corruption and rarely on the movement’s moral crusade for worker dignity in a viciously antiworker economy. Yet

20 — Dan Clawson and Mary Ann Clawson, “What Has Happened to the U.S. Labor Movement? Union Decline and Renewal,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, Vol. 25, 1999, 95–119.

21 — Charles M. Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, xviii.

high-participation organizing under high-risk conditions, using high moral standards, has continued; the lessons abound.

New Labor's Response to the Crisis of the Union Movement

Unions in the United States are experiencing a profound crisis. In 1995, the biggest shake-up in the U.S. labor movement in more than fifty years took place when a new generation of unionists forced the first contested election in the history of the American Federation of Labor–Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL–CIO). The victors, called the New Voices slate, promised revitalization through aggressive new organizing. Two decades and hundreds of millions of dollars later, union ranks had declined even more, from 10.3 percent to 6.7 percent in the private sector and from 14.9 percent to 11.3 percent overall.²² The unions aligned with the elections' winning team were mostly service-workers' unions, and I will refer to them throughout this book as New Labor.²³

22 — Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 1996 and January 2014.

23 — Which unions constitute New Labor? I combine a few: CTW is short for the Change to Win Federation. Technically, the UBC and the UFW were also on the CTW list initially. Another commonly used list was developed by Kate Bronfenbrenner and Roger Hickey

Why has New Labor failed to reverse the decline of union power?

U.S. unions are not monolithic. Most unions have not been trying to organize the unorganized; mostly, they’ve been managing their own decline.²⁴ In 1995, though, one set of unions declared they would reverse the tide of their ebbing membership. This book focuses on that set of unions.

CTW
Bronfenbrenner–Hickey

SEIU	X
UNITE HERE	X
AFSCME	X
UAW	X
CWA	X
UFCW	X
LIUNA	X
IBT	X

The grouping is slightly porous but contains a core that self-identify as unions trying to change and grow their ranks. I rely on several

in Ruth Milkman and Kim Voss’s *Organizing and Organizers in the New Union Movement* (Cornell ILR, 2004), accessed here through the digital commons. I also factored in the list of which unions in 1995 initially voted *not* to back Kirkland in the AFL–CIO election, and then the slightly different list of which unions ultimately backed Sweeney. In the end, I combine them to arrive at a rough list of the most common unions that might be called New Labor.

24 — Lopez, Reorganizing the Rust Belt.

intersecting groups of unions to constitute the universe I investigate: a list generated by Kate Bronfenbrenner, one that she used in her enormous body of union research; the list on the winning side of the AFL-CIO victory in 1995; the unions that broke from the AFL-CIO in 2006, known as the Change-to-Win (CTW unions); and, very recently, the two main national teachers' unions, which have gone through significant leadership changes. Owing to the ferocious national attack on teachers, these two unions—historically go-it-aloners that eschewed close ties to the larger house of labor—have become active participants with other unions for the first time in decades.

Dominated since 1995 by unions in the servicesector, these overlapping lists include the Service Employees International Union (SEIU); Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) and Union of Needle Trades Employees (UNITE), which merged to become UNITE-HERE; American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME); United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW); United Auto Workers (UAW); United Brotherhood of Carpenters (UBC); Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA); the United Farm Workers (UFW); the American Federation of Teachers (AFT); and the National Education

Association (NEA). Who is in and out of the overlapping list depends on the exact months and years of various complicated turf wars.

Although the external environment of all unions is extremely hostile, unions could be winning much more. The reasons for the ongoing decline of union membership lie mainly in how unions engage with their existing members and with unorganized workers. Despite its now decades-old rhetoric about organizing, New Labor mostly uses a mobilizing approach. Much labor history and analysis focus on external factors to explain union decline—the employer offensive, hostile courts, globalization, automation, and a changing employment structure—ignoring strategy and methods for engaging workers. This book focuses on something movement actors can actually and easily control: their own strategy.

A critical factor in the failure of the union revitalization effort after 1995 has been the strategic choice made by key leaders of New Labor to move away from workers and the workplace. Because of adverse labor laws and unfriendly court rulings, these leaders decided they could no longer win traditional union elections. They shifted their strategy to securing so-called card-check and neutrality deals and fair election procedure accords with

employers. Such agreements are anchored in a core idea: getting the employers to stop fighting unionization. New Labor unions invented new mechanisms for what they deemed carrots and sticks. Carrots included rewarding corporations by helping them increase their government subsidies and decrease their taxes, and also promising to cede control of the workplace and instead focus narrowly on wages and material benefits. If these carrots failed, there was the stick: the union's ability to impose potential costs on the employer. This might be done through a "corporate campaign," including publicity offensives against the employer's brand and stockholder actions ("brand damage"); by lobbying to have various public subsidies that flow into the so-called private sector decreased or cut off; by adding lawyers to press for environmental and other reviews; or by delaying or preventing zoning changes. Many of these tactics rely on politics, and so unions also invested more money in politics—not politics as in voters-to-the-polls, but politics as in million-dollar check writing and backroom "gotcha" deals.

Corporate collaboration isn't new, but when the labor-run corporate campaigns first developed in the 1970s as a response to the degeneration of worker protections under U.S.

labor law, they were designed to complement worker organizing. By the early years of the new millennium, they had all but replaced it.²⁵ The strategy of weakening employer opposition to union organization through corporate campaigns made employers—not workers or their communities—the primary focus of New Labor’s energy. Today, corporate campaigns continue to locate the fight in the economic arena by threatening to disrupt profit making, but not through workers withholding their labor. Instead, a new army of college-educated professional union staff bypass the strike and devise other tactics to attack the employer’s bottom line. New Labor’s overreliance on corporate campaigns has resulted in a war waged between labor professionals and business elites. Workers are no longer essential to their own liberation.

New Labor’s leaders, many of whom self-identify and are seen as progressives outside the union sector itself, have rationalized “carrots” and accords reached with big business that have stripped workers and their communities of the tools to defend themselves against their employers.²⁶ Moreover, New Labor’s adoption

25 — Julius G. Getman, *Restoring the Power of Unions*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010; Richard Hurd, “The Failure of Organizing, the New Unity Partnership, and the Future of the Labor Movement,” *Working USA*, Vol. 8, September 2004, 5–25.

26 — Many of these accords include language that constrains future action by workers and their community. For example, in a particularly well publicized agreement between SEIU and nursing home operators in California, the union leaders agreed to surrender the future union members’ right to arbitration or strike, and the union also agreed to block workers from testifying or speaking about poor conditions inside California nursing homes.

and fetishizing of corporate tactics stands in contrast to the organizing style at the root of many of labor's great victories, won during an even more hostile period of industrial relations than that of the past four decades: the 1930s, which saw the successful establishment of the union of the Congress of Industrial Organization (CIO). A key aspect of the CIO organizers' craft was identifying organic worker leaders in the shop and anchoring campaigns in the "whole worker," understood to be a person embedded in a range of social relationships in the workplace and in the community.²⁷

The loss of the strength gained through whole worker organizing was one serious consequence of the alliance of business unionism with McCarthyism, which drove most organizers skilled in the CIO-era method out of the labor movement. Today, like World War II veterans, many CIO veterans have died, leaving few to tell their war stories. On the heels of the McCarthy era, union leaders adopted an increasingly accommodationist strategy that for a few decades achieved material gains and union security, but at the price of surrendering the option to strike and, often, all other real rights on the shop floor. Once the production-crippling strike weapon was abandoned, union

27 — William Z. Foster, *Organizing Methods in the Steel Industry*, New York: Workers Library Publishers, 1936.

leaders no longer saw a need to build a strong worksite-based organization among a majority of workers—one powerful enough that a majority decides to walk off the job, united, together, with common goals. New Labor doubled down on strategies that involved fewer and fewer workers, reinforcing instead of challenging the mistakes of the generation of leaders they replaced. As a result, wage increases and improvements in working conditions have come to a halt. Workers as the primary leverage of their own salvation have been replaced by the corporate campaign, a method of tactical warfare that takes union action away from the shop floor and away from the rank and file.



The Search for Black Swans: Unions that Still Run Successful Majority Strikes

Workers can still win substantial victories by building and holding majority participation—a very different strategy from the one deployed by New Labor or any national groups today. Because the most powerful strikes—those that shut down or cripple production—rely not on staff but on an overwhelming majority of workers to engage in collective action, the use of labor’s strongest weapon requires an approach to workers that facilitates majority participation in the union. The preponderance of cases I examine in this book involve successful majority strikes carried out since 2000. Drawing an analogy to the industrial-era factory of the past, but updating the shop floors and the workforces that occupy them, I focus on cases in the dominant industries of today’s service economy: health care and education, both fields in which many workers with a wide range of skill and education constantly collaborate in the same buildings. Unlike those of the past, the workforces in my case studies are mostly comprised of women

(many of them women of color), and in the work they do, emotional labor and technical skill are equally crucial to success.

The transition from a manufacturing to a service economy radically altered traditional worker–consumer relations. Are there strategy implications here for unions? Does the strike strategy of a female-dominated, service-oriented workforce look different from the old one? Does labor need to view the public differently in contemporary strike strategy? Does the relationship between these workers and their patients or students (and the patients’ and students’ families) demand a different relationship between the workers’ unions and the community? Yes to all. Strikes are essential to restoring the power of the working class, not just for the better standards strikes can produce, but also because they reveal high-participation organizing. Unions still successfully engaging in massive strikes—not simply protests borrowing the name “strike”—are concrete proof of highly successful methods that can challenge the root of all inequality: the inequality of power in society. The corporate class has been driving a wedge between the public and unionized workers; now the public in our neoliberal service-heavy economy must become an extension of the workers in the fight against the employers. The

stories in this book tell how to restore strikes to prominence again in the United States, and demonstrate that doing so successfully will depend on labor adopting a radically different relationship with workers and the consuming public—a relationship that can only be built by the workers themselves.

These case studies represent a small section of union and community organizing. They include some failures, but most demonstrate successes, successes won in a period of massive decline for both unions and civil society. My aim is not to produce a theory that explains successes and failures in toto, but rather to explain in depth the dynamics, strategies, and contexts in which particular victories were achieved. Understanding these successes is key to rethinking and revitalizing a powerful progressive movement in the U.S.²⁸

The twelve post-2000 cases I analyze involve one classic SMO, two national unions, and two local unions, one of them a local of one of the nationals—an outlier with an approach very different from its parent. The unions span the so-called private and public sectors (the distinction is a strategic frame more than a reality); the cases involve trade jobs and service jobs, filled by workers harder to replace

28 — Dan Clawson, *The Next Upsurge: Labor and the New Social Movements*, Ithaca and London: ILR Press and Cornell University Press, 2003.

(teachers and nurses) and easier to replace (factory hands, teacher's aides, nurse's aides, cooks, and cleaners). One case involves a mostly male workforce of diverse backgrounds, slaughtering and preparing pork in a right-to-work Southern state. Others involve mostly female workforces, teaching and caring for the young and tending to the sick and infirm in at least partly unionized Northern states. Multiple cases originated *within* each of these organizations. In one of the national unions, the United Food and Commercial Workers Union (UFCW), three separate campaigns to unionize workers in the same factory spanning more than a decade resulted in two defeats and one big victory. In *all* of the cases, losing and winning a little or a lot can be correlated with one common factor: the beliefs and motivations, or purposefulness, of the leadership team.²⁹ Table 1.2 provides a summary of the cases.

29 — What some people call ideology others call beliefs or world view, and Marshall Ganz uses the words motivation and purpose.

TABLE 1.2 — Cases in the New Millennium, 2000 to 2014*

Organization Type & Name		Union: SEIU Service Employees International Union	Union: UFCW United Food & Commercial Workers	Union: AFT American Federation of Teachers
Sector & Type of Profession or Employment	Poor, “precariat,” and small worksites. Most fights in community terrain	Private sector, service. Nursing homes	Private sector, manufacturing. Pork production	Public Sector, service. Education
Location	New York City	<i>National</i> strategy: Washington state <i>Local</i> strategy: Rhode Island, Connecticut	Tar Heel, North Carolina	Chicago
Legal Framework	Outside labor law framework (mostly)	Union security	Right-to-work	Union security
Demographics	Latin American immigrants, documented and undocumented	Mostly female African Americans and documented immigrants	Mostly male African Americans, whites, and undocumented immigrants	Mostly female whites and African Americans, a few Latin Americans and Asians
Numbers of Workers	Varies: from very small groups to statewide impact	6,000	5,000	30,000
Type of Effort	Litigation, statewide legislative change, blocking enforcement	Employer accords with neutrality agreements, National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections, collective bargaining, and strikes	NLRB elections, employer accords, and strikes	From decline to renewal strategies, collective bargaining, and strikes

*The two losses came in 1994 and 1997.

Methodology

I employ mixed qualitative and quantitative methods. I conducted fifty-eight semi-structured interviews with rank and file workers, civil society leaders, members of local media organizations, current and former lead strategists in the campaigns, and long-time active as well as retired union leaders and organizers. I analyzed data sets from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Services (FMCS) work-stoppage databases from the year 2000 to present. I did archival research on each case's strategic planning documents; analysis of the current collective bargaining agreements of each local union; read published newspaper stories and internal memos; and I conducted a line-by-line content analysis of the key Saul Alinsky texts as well as the organizing training manuals of numerous Alinskyist organizations and unions. I utilized participant observation for chapter three, first as a young organizer being apprenticed at 1199 New England and later as national deputy director for SEIU's Healthcare Division, where I participated in numerous discussions leading up to the launch of what became known nationally as the Nursing Home Industry

Alliance, which the Washington State case represents. I was trained as a community organizer in one strand of the Alinsky tradition prior to my years as a labor organizer and contract negotiator.

Relying on what John Gerring's³⁰ calls "crucial" cases, I interrogate the relationship between rank and file worker agency and success. Gerring describes "crucial cases" as "paradigmatic" and within each of the four chapters I deploy the crucial case method (the approach to nursing homes in Washington state versus Connecticut, the achievements of one worker center, Make the Road New York as against all other worker centers, the massive and defiant strike by Chicago's teachers in a period defined by surrender by most teacher's unions, the abuse of labor law by one employer in the Deep South).

30 — Gerring, John, *Social Science Methodology: A Critical Frame*, (New York: Cambridge University Press) 2001, see especially Chapter Nine, Methods.

The Chapters

Chapter Two dissects the relationship between power and strategy and goes deeper into comparing and contrasting what have become two distinct approaches to social change, the dominating mobilizing approach and the underused organizing approach. I propose a blended approach called whole worker organizing. This approach is informed by the stories in this book as well as my own experiences. It tightly integrates workplace and nonworkplace issues, action, and learning in a holistic strategy. It responds to and attempts to overcome the challenge posed by Ira Katznelson in *City Trenches*:

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.* [author emphasis]³¹

31 — Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981,

Whole worker organizing, laid out in Chapter Two and depicted in some aspects in all the subsequent empirical chapters, demonstrates that where unions understand their members and unorganized workers to be class actors in their communities, and when the workers systematically bring their own preexisting community networks into their workplace fights, workers still win, and their wins produce a transformational change in consciousness.

Chapter Three takes two similarly situated union locals—members of the same national union, SEIU—and examines the wildly different strategies each deploys in private-sector nursing homes. One local represents the best expression of Andrew Stern, whom the national media for years called the leading figure of New Labor and whose imprint still dominates the Washington state local's present culture and strategies (and those of the national union). The national media has begun to reify David Rolf, Stern's protégé at the Washington local, as the new future of labor, despite his many public pronouncements that he thinks unions are a twentieth-century concept. The other local is an outlier of the national SEIU and represents the past militant traditions of the CIO. The local is commonly known as District 1199 New England, a local through which workers in more

than 100 nursing homes have waged strikes in the new millennium. This chapter lays bare the differences among the advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing approaches in the workplace, and demonstrates the superiority of the latter.

Chapter Four analyzes the history of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) during the quarter century from 1988 to the union's recent strike in 2012, a strike that captivated the nation. I show the CTU's slow and steady decline from a once mighty union—even in 1988—into a fairly typical weak, unimaginative organization that had lost the faith of many of the best teachers. I then trace the evolution of the steps that those disillusioned teachers took to rebuild their union to beat one of the nation's most powerful mayors at that time, Rahm Emanuel, who set out to break the CTU in the context of a broader and bipartisan assault on public-sector unions. Chapter Four shows how quickly a union can go from decline to renewal and the profound difference between a union leadership that enables the rank and file to fight and a leadership that uses staff as dutiful administrators in a top-down union that constrains the will of its own members.

Chapter Five returns to the private sector: the case of a big factory much like the factories that dominated the twentieth century. Most

academics have long assumed organizing the unorganized might be possible among low-wage service workers, but this chapter, like the others, demonstrates that motivation and strategy may have more to do with failure and success across *all* sectors of workers than previously thought. This is a case study of the world's largest pork production facility, a Smithfield Foods plant in rural North Carolina, the state with the lowest rate of unionization in the United States. The workers are mostly men, and racial and ethnic tensions among them are exploited so profoundly, it is hard to believe Jim Crow is not still alive legally as well as culturally.

The workers in this factory are twice defeated in their attempts at unionization. On the third try, they win—and win big, bringing massive change to plant operations and to their own lives. Their story suggests a path forward for other large manufacturing plants in the South, a path where workers unite their workplace and community relationships into a single struggle for decency and respect. Chapters Three, Four, and Five, all provide evidence that when a union strategically engages the broader community, new and strong leaders develop within and outside the factory walls.

They also show that Robert Michels’s “iron law of oligarchy” isn’t actually iron, and suggest that the motivation and/or ideology of key leadership is a crucial factor in whether or not a union turns oligarchic. Additionally, all three chapters show that there are key structural features that can institutionalize governance models that help to thwart oligarchic tendencies in large organizations like unions.

Chapter Six explores a group that organizes the working class as a class, but is not itself a union. Make the Road New York is a social-movement organization that is also a worker center, but it locates the worker center inside an organization that has managed to come as close to a modern union as any nonunion group in the United States today. With over 155 full-time staff, the organization combines direct services, advocacy, and mobilizing into a tight blend, and it has enjoyed more success than most similarly situated groups. Interestingly, many of the group’s specific legislative victories, as well as their workplace efforts, largely rely on the continued strength of New York City’s unions. While their work is impressive, it raises a fundamental question of whether groups like this can continue producing wins if the unions they rely on—which exist as key players in only a handful of states—get weaker.

The concluding chapter sums up the lessons of the case studies and argues that to reverse today's inequality requires a robust embrace of unions—but of unions that are democratic, focused on bottom-up rather than top-down strategies, and place the primary agency for change in workers acting collectively at work and in the communities in which they reside. The losses of the past fifty years, decades when the corporate right seized firm control of the power structure, can be recouped, but only by readopting and modernizing the methods and strategies deployed by the old CIO and the civil rights movement. ●



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