

The Organizers

Jane McAlevey, *Raising Expectations (And Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement* (Verso, 2012) ISBN 978-1844678853

Stewart Acuff, *Playing Bigger Than You Are: A Life in Organizing* (Levins Publishing, 2012) ISBN 978-0985397227

Reviewed by Penny Lewis

“When you have a union, you don’t have to take bullshit from the boss. You can just send him to his room and tell him he can come out when he’s ready to behave” (p. 203). I wonder how many union members would read this depiction of a muscular, you-know-who’s-in-charge union and say, “Yeah, that *is* what it’s like to have a union.” My guess is not that many—and certainly nowhere near enough. The signal strength of Jane McAlevey’s bracing, provocative, fantastic-read of a book is that in the act of reading it you begin to feel the kick-ass power that strong organizing can help create. For union members (and those aspiring to union membership), *Raising Expectations (And Raising Hell)* does just that: raises our expectations of what organizing can do, and what our unions can be.

McAlevey’s memoir, subtitled *My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement*, gives us an on-the-ground, insider/outsider perspective on a series of labor campaigns she led or helped lead during the Bush years: campaigns that were won, despite the anti-union climate and increasing polarization of class power during the period. (Though it tells McAlevey’s story, this book was written with Bob Ostertag, a writer and labor activist.)

On the one hand, McAlevey tells her story as a union insider, organizing first for the national organizing department of the AFL-CIO, and then for the Service Employees International Union—on campaigns run through the national office, in work with locals, as a consultant, and finally in Las Vegas as the executive director of their Nevada local. Her work in Las Vegas forms the core of the book, beginning when she was called in to “revamp” a local that “couldn’t organize lunch for two, let alone campaign for new workers” (p. 88). In her years there, McAlevey, along with her team of organizers and rank-and-file activists, organized thousands of hospital workers in the private sector and government workers in the public sector into what became known as SEIU Nevada, winning strong contracts and political power along the way.

Ultimately, however, McAlevey positions herself as an outsider to the unions she works for, in part because she spent many years as an activist and organizer prior to her time in labor. As an environmental justice organizer working nationally and internationally, in the leadership of the Highlander Center, and a program officer for a progressive foundation, McAlevey’s vision of what it takes to do good organizing was forged outside the labor movement.

But McAlevey's outsider status runs deeper than the techniques and perspectives she brought in from other work. Early on, McAlevey runs into trouble with SEIU leadership in a political campaign in Pittsburgh, after which she is "banished" from the region. This dynamic, what she describes as the "yo-yo" effect, repeats throughout the book: you are reeled in when your work is seen as good and necessary, and thrust far away when your work becomes troubling to leadership.

McAlevey ascribes dual objectives to her book. Telling the story of how organizing works, and how it can be successful, is her first goal. But her second is "to present the stories in this book as Exhibit A in the case against [Andy] Stern, SEIU, and the 'shallow mobilizing' vision for American labor that they have come to personify" (p. 17). The problems she finds in the contemporary SEIU (and some other unions) are the focus of her final chapter, but they hover over, and direct a lot of the action of the rest of the book: "turf wars" and raiding; seeking growth over standards and depth; trading the power of engaged members and direct action for electoral politics and deals with corporations; and a tendency in labor to protect its own, abandoning allies when it is expedient to do so. It's her fights within the union that prompt her departure in 2009—which she describes as "hell, really devastating" (p. 310).

Despite her meteoric rise in the organization—she becomes a member of the Executive Board of the national union during this period—she is in, but not fully of, the group. And given her broad experience within progressive politics, and the professional options she has, the choice of exit is always there too. At the end of the book, McAlevey reflects that writing it has likely "cut my string" (p. 311), banishing her from the house of labor permanently. But she had an eye on the door throughout.

McAlevey explicitly or implicitly weighs in on a number of debates and issues common to today's labor movement, all of which arise organically in the narrative: the role of professional staff in the unions and the role of the rank-and-file in organizing and leadership; the relationship of unions to the community; pattern bargaining; craft-model versus wall-to-wall organizing; the effectiveness of the grievance procedure; how labor laws constrain organizing and union strength; labor-management cooperation; and more.

Unlike academic discussions of the movement, this book does not systematically explore many of these themes. Instead we read thought-provoking and just plain provocative slices of analysis, some a paragraph long, some expanding to a few pages, some weaving across the stories of the book. The strength of the memoir as an exciting ride through McAlevey's battles with employers and SEIU leadership is also its shortcoming in its critical mode. While McAlevey, to her credit, does not attempt to make her account seem objective, a full assessment of the issues that McAlevey raises would of course need more context, and viewpoints other than her own. (Many of the reviews that precede this one provide such counterpoints.) As I read I thought of dozens of ways this book, supplemented with other voices and academic treatments, could be used in the classroom or in workshops to take up all of these, and more, issues that arise.

Two themes that get sustained attention are, not surprisingly, organizing and her critiques of the SEIU. The former gets more space than the latter, and is also where the book is most powerful. If you have been, or have ever worked with, a high-intensity work-around-the-clock soup-to-nuts organizer you will recognize a lot of what happens in these pages. Up front she says that “one could look at this entire book as an explanation of . . . organizing” (p. 13), but later she offers part of a definition, stating that “‘organizing’ means bringing workers into a deep personal engagement with their union, their fellow workers, their boss, and their community, and all of the social and political issues that shape their lives” (p. 109). This description begins to capture what she calls “whole worker organizing,” the approach that she sees as distinguishing the style of organizing she embraces, writes about, and refers to throughout the book.

Many sections read as pithy how-to guides: what you need to do a “sticker-up,” how to identify the leaders in a workplace, how to keep the momentum going in a campaign. In reading this comprehensive and gripping narrative of the blow-by-blow, you can imagine how tight the corners you’re forced into can become, and she shows you many escape routes.

She is attentive to the language of organizing. One of her earliest union experiences was working for the AFL-CIO in the Stamford Organizing Project, a geographically based initiative “conceived as a multi-union, multi-sector project in which member unions were to pool resources, share lists, and adhere to collectively made decisions” (p. 35). (This project, and the power structure analysis they conducted to ground their work, sound like great ideas that should be taken off the shelf today.) Working with McAlevee, the organizers there stopped talking about “collecting cards” and began talking about “signing up members.” Questioning the language of “community and labor” in their coalition work, McAlevee suggests that a framework of “workplace/non-workplace” issues better captures the fact that the workers who live in communities and are in unions experience many issues that should rightly be the province of both. The “community/labor binary,” as she calls it, creates a wall between the two that does not significantly exist for workers, and should not exist as much as it does for unions (p. 58).

Reading her first-person narrative, you track the sensitivities of a good organizer to the tempo of meeting and the feelings in a room, experiencing the emotional pitch of collective action. One such moment occurs in the opening session of bargaining between the nurses at Desert Springs Hospital and Universal Health Services, one of the for-profit hospital chains working in Las Vegas. The nurses had been nervous going in—they were going to present the union’s bargaining framework by reference to the conditions they faced every day on the job. Using slides, each nurse spoke to her own experience and areas of expertise. “An hour later, the nurses were rock stars.” At the end, McAlevee suggests that the bosses might want to caucus to discuss the presentation, but writes, “what I was really thinking was that if I felt like exploding then so did the nurses. . . . I thought we needed a *human emotion break*” (p, 120). McAlevee shares the collective exaltation, and keys the reader into the transformative power of these moments.

Raising Expectations also offers itself as an argument against unions the author sees as working in the opposite direction—of tamping expectations down. Readers familiar with protagonists on all sides of the SEIU fights—SEIU’s Stern, Anna Burger, Dave Regan, Sal Rosselli, as well as Rose Ann DeMoro (of the California Nurses Association)—will find here critiques of all, for “empire building” and sustaining turf wars whose intensity, McAlevey argues, too often precludes new organizing.

She develops sustained critiques of SEIU strategies for growth, contrasting its national strategies with the negative fallout such strategies can produce at the level of the locals, offering important testimony on this vexing problem of the best relationship between national objectives and local needs. In her time with the SEIU, national labor accords signed between the union and corporations for “free and fair” elections served to open workplaces to the union (including the hospitals she bargains contracts in), but also bargained away members’ rights to things like contract campaigns and locals’ rights to organizing other workplaces. McAlevey and the team she built in Vegas seemed to be doing precisely what those accords were touted as making possible for the union: once the union got its feet in the door, a “real union” could be built—top down and bottom up organizing combined.

According to McAlevey, the SEIU repeatedly disabled the creation of such strong unions by leaving little support in place at the local level once the election was over. In contrast, McAlevey argues that in Nevada they didn’t sacrifice strong unions or strong contracts for representation rights. Echoing other critics, like former SEIU local president Rosselli, McAlevey argues that the sacrifices of standards and strength she sees as too often linked to a “growth at any cost” SEIU strategy are in fact sacrifices of the soul of the project of organizing, and her case is compelling. (It’s also clear from her tale that even though she vehemently disagreed with the strategies of the national union, and Stern’s leadership style in particular, the organization was not a monolith in her eyes. The very fact of her long-term employment, the support she frequently received, the allies she had in the organization—McAlevey gives enough detail for a complex assessment of the different currents that exist in that influential corner of U.S. labor.)

Raising Expectations is told through McAlevey’s lens, and it is not always revealing. Some moments in campaigns are given moment-to-moment attention, others are covered more quickly, and the reader is left to wonder about decisions made and actions taken. Her audience of labor activists, educators, and people who aspire to be both can read the book against their own experiences and knowledge, and join their own opinions to those offered in these pages. Like a good organizer, she’s telling it like she sees it, but we get to decide what we’ll take or leave, work with and reject.

In the book’s concluding pages McAlevey notes, “writing about the role of the organizer violates the organizer’s creed” (p. 310). What she likely means is that organizers do not put themselves at the center of the story. The story of the organizer is what happens when she walks away—the strength of the organized group that she leaves behind. If this is the creed, “organizer memoir” is an oxymoronic project. McAlevey does tell the story of what she helped build and how she helped build it, but in a strong

first-person voice; with very few exceptions, the dozens of fellow organizers, member activists, local and national leaders get little biographical development in these pages, beyond how they interact with McAlevy in these organizing efforts. But a second aspect of the “organizer’s creed” could be that organizers, and people in the labor movement more broadly, don’t tell tales out of school. Hers is a rare book in a world like labor, where most of the players are still in the middle of the fights or organizations they’re a part of, and unlikely to write anything that might jeopardize their positions or goals.

On neither account does Stewart Acuff’s memoir, *Playing Bigger Than You Are: A Life in Organizing*, push the boundaries of the organizer’s creed. This is in part an effect (and quite possibly a cause) of its brevity—though issued as a book, it is more a long, subdivided essay, with brief sketches of Acuff’s experiences over a long life of organizing. Where *Raising Expectations* is told from the ground, sometimes narrating the action with the pacing of a thriller, Acuff’s book is told from much higher up, with airy and reflective distance. Contrasted to McAlevy’s dense narrative, Acuff’s is a more episodic story, punctuated by vignettes that provide colorful descriptions of his colleagues, campaigns, and the places he travels, as well as space for some philosophical musing. While their style and level of detail are dramatically different, these books tell parallel stories, and are intriguing to read together.

Acuff takes us, quickly, from his upbringing in Tennessee and Missouri, raised by a teacher and a Southern Baptist preacher, through his early days working for ACORN (the now disbanded Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now) in Texas in the late 1970s, and a progressive statewide political group in New Hampshire at the dawn of the Reagan era. In 1982 Acuff was the first organizer hired by John Sweeney after he became President of SEIU, and was sent back to Texas to successfully organize a chain of nursing homes. This was a “strategic organizing campaign,” part of the SEIU’s efforts to “build a movement union” (p. 23).

Acuff goes on to head up an SEIU public sector local in a right-to-work state—Atlanta’s Local 1985—just like McAlevy did. Like McAlevy, he and others brought in thousands of members, winning both strong contracts and considerable power in local and statewide politics. He goes on from here to become the elected president of Georgia’s AFL-CIO, helping win the campaign to make sure the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta were built union, and to take on Newt Gingrich after the 1994 “Contract with America” election. The stories of his time in Atlanta depict a local labor movement where community and labor never seemed very far apart, and this proximity was clearly supported by Acuff’s own grounded conception of the interdependence of the workplace, community, spiritual, and material needs of the union workers he helped lead.

After many years in Georgia, Acuff went back to the AFL-CIO, eventually becoming its national Organizing Director under Sweeney in 2002. With typical humility, Acuff remarks, “I could say it was the realization of a dream, but I’d never dreamed I’d rise to such a position. . . . My goal was simple in all those years: I always had worked to be the best organizer I could be and to be in the place I could do the most good and make the most happen” (pp. 84-85).

This thin volume is peppered with tales and advice of what a good organizer learns. Working for ACORN, Acuff recalls wisdom he himself learned from another organizer, “that if you wanted to find the best neighborhood leaders, you needed to look for the houses with the most flowers in the yard” (p. 8). Active listening, accepting conflict, hard work, building community, starting (as Saul Alinsky argued) “where the folks are” (p. 121): all these practices and more are the hallmarks of a good organizer. His final chapter brings together his overall advice for young organizers setting out on this as a career—and like much of the book, its concision makes you want to know much more.

Acuff has been an organizer his whole adult life, and part of the story he tells is how to make such a life a sustainable one. He describes life on the road, the personal toll of the job on one’s health and relationships, the importance of taking on new challenges (such as his stint as an election observer in Sierra Leone), all with an eye to the long-term question of how a life in the service of organizing can be maintained.

The point in his story when that life seems least sustainable comes toward the end, and again parallels McAlevey’s account. As Organizing Director of the AFL-CIO, Acuff is there when the SEIU and other unions leave to form the rival federation Change to Win. We get very little of Acuff’s own views on these developments—earlier plans hatched by the breakaway unions “did not make sense” (p. 86) strategically to him, though we’re not told why. What we are told is how hard this break hit him, as his longtime colleagues across the movement were now sundered from him, on opposite sides in the increasingly angry turf wars between the federations, replete with jurisdictional fights, raids, and slugfests in the hot spotlight of the national media. Anticipating McAlevey’s feelings a few years later, Acuff writes “the year 2005, more than any other in my life, left me exhausted and heartbroken” (p. 107).

Despite the deep distress these organizers experienced as a result of labor’s infighting, these books offer hopeful tales to those wanting to effect social change. While fighting a decertification attempt, McAlevey describes the futility the bosses want workers to feel when they’re trying to establish power. Though they offer cautionary tales as well, these books are antidotes to that futility, bred not just by the union-busters, but sometimes by unionists themselves. Against such currents, these are two people who know deep in their bones that “organized people can change the world” (Acuff, 1).

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Pull Quotes:

The strength of [*Raising Expectations*] as an exciting ride through McAlevee's battles with employers and SEIU leadership is also its shortcoming in its critical mode. [2]

Where *Raising Expectations* is told from the ground, Acuff's memoir is told from much higher up, with airy and reflective distance. [5]