

McAlevy, Jane with Bob Ostertag. 2012. *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labour Movement*. New York and London: Verso Books, ISBN: 1844678857. Hardback: 25.95 US. Pages: 318.

**Reviewed By Joel Harden**  
**Activist and Independent Researcher**

Given today's dismal realities for unions, both in Canada and around the world, it is best not to mince words about Jane McAlevy's recent book. *Raising Expectations* is, quite simply, the best thing on organizing I've read in a decade. Maybe that is because I have worked for organized labour, and seen first-hand its potential in winning the victories workers deserve. I do not think unions are tired relics of postwar history. But even if that is your view, this book might convince you otherwise.

If you want a progressive strategy that can win in tough times, this book is for you. If you are looking to inspire participation in your union, this book is for you. If you are sick of being pummeled by bosses, this book is for you. McAlevy will spur head-nodding and a range of emotions. Her story is inspiring, sad, and instructive. Above all, *Raising Expectations* is a reminder of workers' power, and the role unions can play in organizing that power. It affirms that workers want organizing victories, and that victory creates its own momentum. It is also honest about union failures, and the way defeat, all too often, gets snatched from the jaws of victory.

McAlevy's work experience does not fit the usual script. She held top union organizing jobs in the US (first at the AFL-CIO and later with Service Employees International Union) after a decade of work in student politics, Latin America, popular education, progressive foundations, and grass-roots environmental movements. Because she has worked in a variety of places, and participated in organizing at an activist and leadership level, she offers unique insights about strategy and tactics.

McAlevy is highly critical of (what she calls) 'shallow mobilizing', where union leaders, staff, and consultants design campaigns while activists get talking points. At the same time, she is also harsh with local union activists who build narrow fiefdoms, and alienate union members or community allies in the process. Instead, McAlevy supports a 'deep organizing' approach that builds on the experience of union members. *Raising Expectations* chronicles efforts, in challenging circumstances, to identify workplace leaders, recruit them to union work, and develop their capacities as skillful organizers. That training is informed by a 'power structure analysis' of the workplace and community in question, an analysis produced after hundreds of interviews with union members.

Importantly, this work is not done by third parties (e.g. pollsters or consultants), but by union staff and worker activists themselves.

With this analysis in hand, McAlevy thinks unions gain a sophisticated sense of the workplace, and the links between union members, community charities, local politicians, clergy, and even business leaders. She describes this as ‘whole worker organizing’ which appreciates a worker’s entire life, both on and off the job. As such, no artificial divisions are made between “union” and “community”. Instead, the organizer looks for the relationship between union and community concerns. They soon realize union members care about community issues like decent housing, well-funded schools, religious values, affordable child care, or clean air and water.

These issues are then championed by the union, and new relationships with community allies are built in the process. All the while, organizers track success by “charting” workplace and community power dynamics, and this helps the union understand its aims and goals. In the end, what gets produced is an organizing strategy that grasps the potential of union power. Also unearthed are the obstacles the union faces as it struggles to build influence. On several occasions, for example, McAlevy talks about the impact of racism which distances workplace leaders from the union. On one occasion, during an organizing stint in Stamford, Connecticut, she encounters local white union leaders who have alienated potential allies in African American churches. This example (and there are more) illustrate why a commitment to equality must guide union organizing, for doing otherwise ignores dangerous weapons in the boss’s toolkit.

But how successful, you might ask, has “deep organizing” been? The proof is in the practice. As unions suffer diminishing returns, McAlevy documents a string of organizing successes, even in right-to-work states like Nevada or Missouri. Her strategy transformed once-dormant locals into fighting organizations, capable of winning industry-leading contracts and fielding successful candidates for local elections. There is no sensible reason why similar results cannot happen elsewhere. Of course, this assumes union organizing is informed by “common sense”. Common sense would dictate unions embrace organizing that builds power, mobilizes members, and wins victories. But all too often, as McAlevy experienced first-hand, many union leaders place a far higher emphasis on organizing efforts they can control. Loyal officials or consultants are tapped for advice, who then offer leaders “message tested” campaigns or organizing strategies. These points are then handed to activists, who are expected to repeat them with minimal training. Members, if consulted at all, are an afterthought, and do not look to their union for answers. Unions then fade into the furniture of mainstream politics, their irrelevance once again reassured.

McAlevy knows her opinions are not popular – but that is because most unions, in her view, are not serious about organizing at all. In a recent interview, she claimed the majority are surfing off gains made in the postwar years, and content to muddle through losing battles with employers. Her hope lies with progressive union leaders, staff, and

activists willing to take risks. That was the engine for her success with ‘deep organizing’, and her source of hope for campaigns to come.

Raising Expectations is a welcome tonic to the worrying direction in which unions are headed. Its embrace of bottom-up organizing has the potential to renew the labour movement, something I experienced first-hand when similar strategies were used during the CLC's recent pension campaign. Without question, “deep organizing” requires work. It requires resources, is far more time-intensive, and harder than letting consultants do the heavy lifting. But rather like junk food, nothing substantial gets produced from such shallow efforts. It is time unions rolled up their sleeves, mobilized their members, and tapped the potential of workers’ power. Our unions, our communities, and our children deserve nothing less.

James, Carl E. 2012. *Life at the Intersection: Community, Class and Schooling*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, ISBN 978-1-55266-470-4. Paperback: 18.95 CAD. Pages: 136.

#### **Reviewed By Kimalee Phillip**

Despite many communities in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA) experiencing ongoing socio-economic problems, somehow, the community of Jane and Finch stands out in the minds of Torontonians and the broader Canadian public. By centering his book on what has been labeled as one of Toronto’s most ‘troubled neighbourhoods’ — Jane and Finch — Carl James does an extraordinary job of applying a critical race and class analysis to the realities faced by those living within that neighbourhood, confronting and complicating the ways in which that community and its members have been constructed by mainstream Canadian media and the general public, as different from Canadian values, morality and lawfulness. James uses these realities and stereotypes to illustrate to the reader that communities such as Jane and Finch can and do rise above the racist, classist and monolithic boxes to which they are typically confined.

James divides this short book into six main chapters where he touches on issues such as the labeling and stigmatization of the Jane and Finch community to the significance and meaning behind physical space and how that affects ideologies and shared perceptions and goals. He also focuses on the use of educational programs within the community; the importance placed on education by members of the community; the media’s portrayals of violence that further concretize the pathologies associated with