



## **RAISING EXPECTATIONS (AND RAISING HELL) My Decade Fighting For The Labor Movement” by Jane McAlevey with Bob Ostertag, , copyright 2012 Verso Books, 315 pages**

Reading the title of this book would, at first glance, suggest that its appeal wouldn't extend much beyond a rather narrow constituency of trade unionists and labor organizers. While the problems unions face might find some sympathy in the wider, general audience, really, who needs the details? That probably would have been my reaction had I come across *Raising Expectations* browsing in a bookstore.

But I happened to hear Jane McAlevey interviewed on the radio and as I listened to her describe her battles not just with management but with the hierarchy of Big Labor, I heard a much larger story of a struggle for empowerment against the institutional powers that dominate our society. McAlevey is a tough woman and this is a powerful and engaging book for anyone concerned with any of the social struggles across the spectrum on the national scene.

In the book the author chronicles her roughly 10 years as a labor organizer, beginning in Connecticut and then through four tumultuous years organizing nurses in Las Vegas for the SEIU. In the end she would sever her relations with SEIU and in particular its then president Andy Stern with whom she endured regular clashes.

The book has both a Prologue and an Introduction which are used effectively to set the stage and introduce all the fundamental concepts that will be developed in the rest of the book. In the Prologue she recounts her experience in November of 2000 when she was urgently summoned by the AFL-CIO to go down to Florida and help with the post-presidential election chaos that was unfolding. For weeks she tried to match the Republican mobilization effort but was consistently restrained with barriers from the very people who had called for her help. In the end she was frustrated and finally concluded:

*“The Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO leadership smothered the movement moment in Florida, snuffed it right out. The state was Gore’s to lose and.....the labor elite and the Democratic Party leadership crushed their own constituents’ desire to express their political passions (and) cost us the election.” Pg. 11*

Her disillusionment with insular, top-down leadership is an important and recurrent theme in the book. In the Introduction she explains what else the book is about.

*“this is a book about organizing. And organizing, at its core is about raising expectations: about what people should expect from their jobs; the quality of life they should aspire to..... About what they have a right to expect from their employer, their government, their community, and their union.” Pg. 12*

And McAlevey definitely has her own ideas about how to organize workers. She calls it “whole worker” organizing because she sees it as indispensable that unions concern themselves not exclusively with the bread and butter issues in the workplace but consider the entire community context in which workers live and work.

*“Whole worker organizing begins with the recognition that real people do not live two separate lives, one beginning when they arrive at work and punch the clock and another when they punch out at the end of their shift.” Pg. 14*

This is a core concept that McAlevey demonstrates in her work beginning in Connecticut where as a union organizer she reached out to local ministers and forged a partnership to understand racial issues that were at play and to challenge a city housing project that would have adversely affected many of the people she was trying to organize. By joining the housing struggle and winning against the city, she not only brought many new unorganized workers into the union but also reversed a negative image that unions had previously had in the community.

While her success in Connecticut was recognized by the Labor leadership, it didn't necessarily change their way of thinking. Her next assignments took her to Pittsburgh, Kansas City, and Washington D.C. where she would continue to achieve success but not without bumping heads with the national leadership over her methods. Despite her success, as a maverick she was still looked at with some alarm by the hierarchy.

All of the conflicts in theory and practice that McAlevey experienced in these preliminary tasks would seem like nothing in comparison to what she encountered in her next big assignment; organizing healthcare workers in Las Vegas. There, every problem imaginable for a union organizer was magnified and would coalesce to make solutions appear impossible. Indeed, the bulk of the book focuses on the huge struggles of the Las Vegas experience.

To begin with, Nevada is a "Right To Work" state, the cynically named legislation designed for the sole purpose of frustrating union organizers. Different strategies and resources are required for organizing in those states. Another problem was that the local union was lacking initiative, membership was low, and just one faction of the total workers it represented controlled it. Solidarity among workers is an issue that is as old as unions themselves. As McAlevey explains in a useful historic digression, the interests between skilled workers and unskilled or semi-skilled workers do not necessarily line up. The AFL was born as a federation of skilled craftsmen who had natural leverage with employers while the CIO represented the emerging assembly line workers who had little. Those kinds of tensions were at play throughout the four years spent in Las Vegas.

Las Vegas has two hospital systems; the private corporate chain and the public County system. Different laws govern each and different strategies are required. With the public system you have to deal with politicians and all the attendant public pressures that weigh on them. With private corporate chains you have to confront the fact that over the past 3 decades or more Law Firms specializing in union busting techniques and strategies have become an enormous growth industry. They are powerful, have tremendous resources, and can easily make any union organizer's life hell.

In addition to the grueling struggle against management, unions historically, and it continues today, have fought against each other. Turf wars can be mean and harsh. Union decertification campaigns that open the door to a "raid" from a rival are particularly bitter. Things are exacerbated when union rivalries are nothing more than the projection of personal rivalry between union leaders as happened in Las Vegas.

But perhaps the most bitter pill of all for McAlevey to swallow happened when her own SEIU president Andy Stern, began to openly undermine her efforts even though she was again having enormous success. When that happened the central conflict between the national leadership and the grassroots organizers was clearly exposed. At the heart of the issue is a fundamental philosophic difference in the approach that labor takes in the current political environment. Sitting in Washington D.C. developing strategy for dealing with large national hospital chains such as Hospital Corporation of America (HCA), determines the priorities of Andy Stern. The interest of any specific local becomes subordinate to the national strategy. In that national strategy, national politics becomes more important than the traditional tools in the labor toolbox such as strikes and slowdowns to win better contracts.

*"In Stern's view the long battle on the shop floor between boss and worker was over and the boss had won. Workplace struggle was out; political deal-making was in."* **pg. 137**

How this played out went like this. HCA was also having a battle against a small SEIU local in Florida. It was Stern's decision that since Florida was a much more important state in national electoral politics than Nevada, SEIU's resources should go there instead. He not only was willing to lose in Las Vegas against HCA but he even left them vulnerable to a raid by the California based Nurses Association. At one point he actually prohibited SEIU organizing.

*"The national SEIU had officially prohibited the workers at the Mountain View hospital from organizing a union that would affiliate with the SEIU.*

*I was done with SEIU right there. As far as I was concerned my journey trying to build that union was over."*

**Pg. 236**

Last year the Governor of Wisconsin, Scott Walker, beat back a recall vote that was heavily backed and organized by the state's unions, government employees in particular. The issues driving the effort couldn't have been more clear. Walker was eviscerating all the collective bargaining rights for labor that had been fought for and won over decades. An astonishing statistic from that election was that about one-third of union households did not back the recall and supported Walker. There are many different explanations and interpretations for that but if it did not serve as an awakening for Big Labor that something's wrong, then dark days are surely ahead.

I've heard Jane McAlevey talk about the Wisconsin recall vote and it is clear where she identifies the problem. The leadership at the top of the Labor hierarchy has, like so many other institutions, become at best remote, estranged, and disconnected from the broad rank and file constituency it claims to serve. At worst it is cynical, manipulative, and self-serving. The folks at the top want to be power players in Washington and that means that the quantity of union members, not the quality of contracts is what matters,

*"not deep organizing but shallow mobilizing" pg, 16 ...as she puts it.*

This estrangement between top and bottom was not always there as McAlevey points with some nostalgia to the early years of the Labor movement when a more passionate and idealistic ethos pushed against the system and won its historic victories. Today the passionate idealists fighting the good fight can quickly become pariahs even when they are having success.

*" Past a certain point, winning actually becomes a liability, because the people at the top will feel threatened by the power you are accumulating unless they can control it". Pg. 312*

*".... Good organizing will not be tolerated because it cannot be controlled. That's what makes it good organizing: It puts real power in the hands of workers". Pg. 312*

Jane McAlevey can be described as one of those passionate idealists but I would also add visionary to the list. Her instinctive feel for what is needed and what works in any given situation comes from her deeply held conviction of what is right. She sees workers as persons, as adults who should be listened to and be trusted to determine what their needs are. They must be participants in their struggles rather than passive beneficiaries of energy from above.

*"Organizing means bringing workers into a deep personal engagement with their union, their fellow workers, their boss, their community, and all of the social and political issues that shape their lives." Pg. 109*

Raising Expectations was written with Bob Ostertag. It is fascinating that the style is so plain and simple because the narrative that emerges from these pages is so moving and powerful. Just by letting the facts flow naturally without literary gimmickry the book reads at times like a high tension thriller. Despite the disturbing ruptures in the final chapters of the book that culminate in McAlevey's decision to leave SEIU, and despite the foreboding admonitions she directs towards Big Labor, she refuses to sink into despair.

*“The most important lesson I came away with was that workers in this country are always ready to engage in militant struggle if given half a chance, and with good leadership and sufficient resources they can win. The widespread view that the political, economic, and technological changes we condense into the single word ‘globalization’ have made it impossible to build militant and successful unions is simply not true.”* **Pg. 314**

Amen

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