

maintain full employment,” Hansen wrote in 1939. Rather than wait for an uncertain future, however, Hansen argued for public policies to ease dependence on private capital. Although Gordon proposes ways of mitigating the languishing effects of slowed productivity growth, none of them are as bold as his analysis indicates. Waiting soberly without illusions is still waiting.

As of this writing, the president-elect’s infrastructure program does not appear to consist of any substantial public investment. His website promises a “to help attract new private infrastructure investments through a deficit-neutral system of infrastructure tax credits.” Business has not been forthcoming with the new capital outlays necessary for growth, but perhaps the combination of a release of corporate taxes and the presence of an ally in the White House will persuade enough boardrooms to raise investment spending. Corporate cash holdings in 2016 rose to \$1.84 trillion, nearly double the incoming administration’s promised infrastructure investment price tag. Unless they can be deprived of the privilege or shocked into action, the future will ultimately depend, as usual, on the whims of business leaders.

### Author Biography

**Andrew Elrod** is a graduate student and teaching assistant in the history department at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

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### In Our Hands Is Placed the Power

*The Fight for \$15: The Right Wage*

*for a Working America*

By David Rolf

The New Press, 2016

ISBN: 978-1-62097-113-0

*No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power*

*in the New Gilded Age*

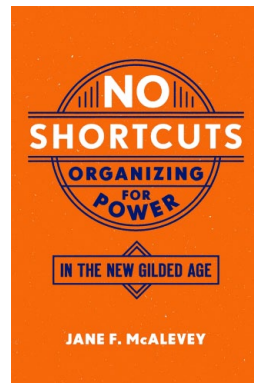
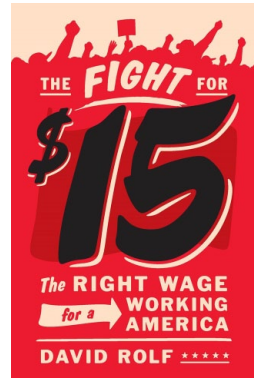
By Jane F. McAlevey

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The agonizing debate over how to revitalize the U.S. labor movement now has a history about as long as the labor movement’s twentieth-century heyday itself. Just under four decades have passed since Ronald Reagan crushed the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO) strike, and that was just over four decades after the Flint sit-down strikes. Twenty years have gone by since an insurgent leadership seized control of the AFL-CIO on a promise to organize its way out of the decline. That is as long as the CIO existed on its own. And in recent times, we, too, have seen a new union federation rise, but it quickly withered, torn asunder by internecine warfare as the most monumental economic collapse since the Great Depression left people all over searching for an alternative vision, and for some leadership to help them get there. Now we approach the third decade of the twenty-first century while bracing for a Trump administration. Is the question of how to revitalize organized labor even worth asking anymore? It seems not to have produced much other than wistful nostalgia, along with some academic commentary on whether there is anything to be nostalgic about in the first place.

David Rolf, the president of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) 775, which represents 40,000 long-term care workers in Washington State, does not think it is. “The reality,” he writes in his new book, *The Fight for \$15: The Right Wage for a Working America*, is that “the twentieth century’s model of American labor relations is gone,” and it is not coming back. Decades of neoliberal restructuring sucked the life out of private-sector unions, and the renewed offensive by right-wing state legislatures, governors, and judges is now doing the same to their public-sector counterparts. “Even the most ambitious and successful attempts to extend the life of the old collective bargaining model”—Rolf has in mind the SEIU’s famed Justice for Janitors and homecare campaigns, both of which he participated in—“seem to be swimming against an increasingly strong current.” The American people, he concludes, cannot wait for the old unions to reverse the irreversible. Too many are suffering too badly. So his book, as its straightforward title suggests, proposes a more direct, and one might say more modest, way forward: a movement to raise the minimum wage.

Rolf is hardly the first to suggest that unions as we have known them are a thing of the past. But he is a longtime labor official whose union’s membership includes thousands of homecare workers, for some time the fastest growing occupational classification and a group once thought almost impossible to organize. His perspective should not be ignored.

*Fight for \$15* is not just about the eponymous campaign that Rolf’s union has helped to bankroll and lead. It is a manifesto for a new outlook in the struggle to combat inequality, which Rolf is right to see as a crisis of vast historic proportions. The book begins with a recap of the business attack on working people that started in the 1970s and a discussion of how it has left us in a dark world of “fissured, flexible, insecure” work. Not only is it hard to come by employment, hard to make ends meet on it, and hard to attend to other responsibilities while preoccupied with its demands, it is also often hard for one to know for whom—or even with whom—one technically works. As Rolf notes, it is “incredibly time-consuming and expensive to organize” a union under such circumstances. Resources are already in short supply, and it is

almost certain that aggressively anti-labor legislation and case law will squeeze union treasuries further still in the years to come.

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This point has not been lost on those in and around the labor movement, and Rolf devotes an entire chapter to assessing the creative methods that alternative pro-worker formations have devised to fight back in an adverse climate. The laundry list of organizations, campaigns, and upheavals he presents—the Working Families Party of New York and the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, the Coalition of Immokalee Workers, the New York Taxi Drivers Alliance, the Seattle World Trade Organization (WTO) protests, and Occupy Wall Street, along with several more—stands as an encouraging reminder of just how much resistance there has been to the neoliberal onslaught all along. And if the question of whether these efforts add up to more than the sum of their parts remains open, Rolf sees in them “the emergence of a new resistance to the impoverishment of work and the exclusion for workers from the social contract.”

The highlight of this new resistance, Rolf feels, has been the struggle for a \$15 hourly minimum wage, which in a few years turned a pipe dream into a credible political demand. He is at his best when he draws on his experience with the minimum wage campaign in the Seattle area, where a coalition of unions, community groups, and local politicians achieved some of the earliest such ordinances. Rolf’s chapter on the struggle for a living wage in SeaTac, the small suburb that exists to house the Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, is the most useful study yet written on that case, illuminating in detail how the victory grew out of a protracted unionization drive. And in the following chapter, on the fight for \$15 in Seattle proper, Rolf admirably credits not only the SEIU-led fast-food and retail work stoppages that put the issue in the national spotlight, but also the critical leadership

role played by independent socialists, above all the insurgent City Council member Kshama Sawant. Anyone thinking about how to leverage local politics in workers' struggles would profit from engaging with his account.

But while it is obvious to anyone reading these pages that raising the minimum wage is a good thing—and Rolf does a fine job at dispelling the right-wing shibboleths against it for the unpersuaded—our problems do not end with the minimum wage. Since the 1970s, wages have been stuck for everyone, not just the poorest. This is a problem not just of dollars but of power—the ability to hire people, fire them, and determine the conditions of their work; to decide when and where capital will, or will not, be invested and toward what ends; to dictate the terms on which cities and states (not to mention ordinary people) can borrow and spend; and to influence policy and shape discourse. The story of the past generation has been the investor class' success at eliminating almost any check on their power to do all of that and more. Rolf's book touches on just about everything pertaining to the minimum wage except this—how does it help us confront the other side's overwhelming power?

What is most troubling about Rolf's book, however, is not that he fails to address this basic question—*Fight for \$15* was clearly written as a campaign tool, and for the audience he has in mind, the narrow focus may be appropriate. It is that the fundamental imbalance of power in our society does not seem to concern Rolf much. He repeatedly points to the support minimum wage hikes have received from elites—Michael Bloomberg, among others—as one of the signal strengths of the proposal, without ever pausing to ask why they might support it or what their support may mean about its expected impact. Even worse, he rehearses an argument that one might hear from a member of the libertarian right—that a higher minimum wage “would substantially reduce dependence on government welfare programs.” It is no doubt a travesty that even full-time work at the prevailing minimum wage does not provide enough income for a household to live on, but since when does our side consider “dependence on government welfare programs” a bad thing? Couldn't more robust government welfare programs enable

people to opt out of accepting such horrible wages to begin with? Even considering as much requires grappling with the question of power, which Rolf's book does not do.

Jane McAlevey, a veteran community and union organizer turned scholar, addresses this challenge directly in her book *No Shortcuts: Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age*. McAlevey's connection to Rolf, it must be noted, is more than academic. McAlevey worked for the SEIU for years, a tenure that included participation in an impressive hospital-worker organizing campaign in right-to-work Nevada. After leaving the SEIU, McAlevey wrote her first book, *Raising Expectations (and Raising Hell): My Decade Fighting for the Labor Movement*, which took former international union president—and Rolf mentor—Andy Stern to task for subordinating the deep organizing model she was a part of building to the imperative of immediate membership growth. *No Shortcuts* continues with that argument, and both Stern and Rolf are subjects of the bracing criticism that results.

But the contrast between McAlevey's and Rolf's perspectives is more instructive than any personal beef between them. And the difference starts with their understanding of the necessity of a labor movement. Unions, McAlevey stresses from the outset, have been “the most effective way to build power,” and her book sets out to explain how they might do so yet again.

A central theme running through *No Shortcuts* is the distinction between what she understands as mobilizing and organizing. Mobilizing is a staff-driven process by which committed activists are corralled “for a photo good enough to tweet and maybe generate earned media” and then left in the lurch until the next action. Mobilizing can amplify something already there, but it cannot create anything new. Organizing, in contrast, “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.” And while anyone can mobilize for a rally, the same does not go for organizing. Organizing requires leaders, and, thus, involves the painstaking process of identifying those who have organic standing,

whoever they are, cultivating relationships with them and persuading them to join a cause. That is, there is no correlation between willingness to attend a rally and ability to organize one. The labor movement's problem over the past few decades, McAlevey concludes, is that unions have done more and more mobilizing and less and less organizing.

Her first substantive chapter situates the mobilizing and organizing approaches historically, starting with the legacy of the CIO, moving to the effects of the McCarthyite backlash, and ending with a critique of the foundation-funded community organizing complex that emerged in its wake. The consequence of all this, McAlevey observes, was to drive a fictitious wedge between the workplace and the community, one that has left more than a generation of progressives viewing the two as independent rather than mutually constitutive sites of struggle. But of course all workers are community members, and while their leverage against the boss inside the workplace is limited by a host of factors, once outside the shop, they have a lot more options—whether through faith-based institutions, civic groups, local politics, or whatever else. Unions ignore this vast potential power at their peril.

**McAlevey concludes, . . . that unions have done . . . more mobilizing . . . and less organizing.**

The heart of *No Shortcuts* is composed of four case studies that show how those unions still committed to organizing have managed to do it. Some of this, like her treatment of the Chicago Teachers Union, will be familiar, but there is much that is new. For instance, her account of the heroic United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW) campaign to organize a sprawling Smithfield Foods pork plant in the small town of Tar Heel, North Carolina—a story that went largely unreported because of a gag order imposed on the union—uncovers one of the most inspiring episodes in recent labor history. In 2008, in a rural corner of a right-to-work state with the lowest union density in the country, 5,000 private-sector low-wage workers who toil under the most exacting conditions won a union contract complete

with a \$15 an hour wage, health and retirement benefits, and job security.

How was that possible? The Smithfield Foods workers, McAlevey shows in moving detail, succeeded because a committed core of rank-and-file leaders, with support from UFCW staff and allied organizations such as Jobs with Justice (without whom an important part of the campaign, the boycott, would have been difficult to conduct) along with some legal and political good fortune, were able to harness enough power inside and outside the workplace that the corporation had to listen. And the victory did not stop at their plant—veterans of the campaign were before long meeting with other local workers attempting to organize. One of the community leaders most closely involved, Reverend William Barber, went on to lead the Moral Monday movement against the reactionary North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory—leading to his ouster in November 2016.

The Smithfield Foods fight was arduous, taking fifteen years from start to end and involving two devastating defeats along the way. Few workers, and fewer unions, have the patience or ability to sustain a campaign through so much and for so long. But not all sectors are as daunting as meatpacking. Two in particular stand out to McAlevey as the most strategic way forward: health care and education. These jobs, she notes, are not going anywhere, at least not yet, and the work they require is still largely performed in big, shared spaces. They are for us what the steel mills, auto plants, and coal mines were to the CIO generation. Moreover, these jobs put workers in direct contact with the general public and provide clear opportunities for the kind of inside-outside, “whole worker organizing” that the workers in Tar Heel demonstrated.

But strategy matters more than sector, and for McAlevey, the contrast between two locals in her old union—Rolf's SEIU 775 and the Connecticut-based 1199NE—is a case in point. While public employees account for the majority of membership in both unions, the two also represent a substantial number of private-sector nursing home workers. McAlevey focuses on how each union came to represent this latter group, and her conclusion is clear enough from the chapter's subtitle: “Class Snuggle vs. Class Struggle.”

SEIU 775 was established in 2002, with Rolf at the helm, after a Washington ballot

initiative established a statewide authority overseeing home health care. Its subsequent growth, McAlevey argues, was indicative of much that is wrong with the SEIU mobilizing model. To win union contracts at nursing homes in his jurisdiction, Rolf along with the SEIU's national nursing home director, David Kieffer, entered into agreements with employers that included a pledge of support to the bosses' political and managerial prerogatives in exchange for card-check neutrality agreements. On the one hand, this might be the kind of pragmatic dealmaking that establishes a foothold and allows for some organization building in an otherwise politically toxic climate. On the other hand, which McAlevey feels was the actual outcome, it places "severe limits on the rights of future union members" to make democratic decisions about what they want to achieve and how they want to achieve it. Either way, this much we know: None of the workers at the twenty-three nursing homes SEIU 775 represents have gone on strike.

Things are different in Connecticut. In all but two years since 2000, members of SEIU 1199NE have walked off the job in more than one hundred strikes. These fights were not just over bread and butter issues—in 2001, they struck for increased staffing, and in 2012, to extend a hand to workers in non-union facilities. This has not been an accident—the union has a history of militancy going back to its founding leadership, communists Leon Davis and Elliott Godoff, and to this day, 1199NE's organizers make it a point of principle to stress the strategic importance of the strike weapon to new recruits early on in their campaigns. And they count on those new recruits to make the struggles their own. "The 1199 tradition," as McAlevey puts it, is "based on identifying *pre-existing* worker-leaders and connecting with them and coaching and apprenticing them through the employer fights." That is, it is about slowly and steadily attempting to build the kind of working-class power that can take on the other side.

Perhaps the clearest way to see the difference between the two unions, however, is in their contracts. Members of 1199NE make anywhere between 14 and 28 percent more than

their counterparts in SEIU 775, and they enjoy substantially better health care and retirement plans. That difference was won.

The grand narrative that the labor movement has been in irreversible decline for decades cannot account for remarkable struggles that McAlevey traces. Nor can it explain the great diversity that exists within the labor movement, and even within unions—another point that comes through in each case study. Yet in spite of having written a book that does much to counter it, McAlevey is still wedded to that narrative. The kind of organizing described in *No Shortcuts*, she laments, has been the exception to the rule of conservative business unionism, superficial mobilizing, or some combination of the two. But fortunately, McAlevey concludes, the answer is right before us—unions simply need to do more organizing. Those that fail to do so have no one to blame but themselves.

It is an important point, but not an original one. There are few people in the labor movement who would disagree with McAlevey's outlook on organizing, and there are many who have been trying to do exactly what she proposes. Most of these efforts, like some of those covered in her book, go unnoticed—even when they succeed.

More often, though, they do not succeed. But lack of success is not necessarily the fault of those who try. Organizing strong, militant unions has always been hard, and historically, the ability to do so on a mass scale has depended upon a favorable political climate. Even at the height of the New Deal, the CIO had barely achieved a toehold among industrial workers. Only with the wartime maintenance-of-membership policy did those unions achieve the kind of growth that made them a force to be reckoned with in the years after 1945. Since the 1970s, that kind of state support has not just been absent—it has been going the other way. The question of how and why that happened is a big one, and it is about much more than what the labor movement has or has not been doing.

In the immediate term, then, it may indeed be counterproductive to ask how we might revitalize the labor movement. We know what we need to do. Given the intensity of the attacks on the horizon, a better question may be how

unions are going to survive at all—to meet the needs of their members, to retain their institutional memory and some of their resources, and to keep on organizing the unorganized when and where they can. The hard work of doing that is only going to get harder, and for the foreseeable future, it may not look like much to those on the outside. But in 1930, few union

organizers had much to show for their efforts, and they had even less of an idea about what was to come. Still, they kept at it. We should do the same.

**Author Biography**

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