



# DSA Fund

The Democratic Socialists of America Fund

A 501(c)(3) Non-Profit dedicated to political education and engagement

## **Study Guide for Jane McAlevey's No Shortcuts:** **Organizing for Power in the New Gilded Age**

Jane McAlevey's book No Shortcuts is about how and why unions need to focus on building "actual power" through organizing rather than "pretend power" through advocacy and mobilizing.

This Study Guide is focused on understanding McAlevey's analysis and applying it to democratic socialist organizing inside and outside unions. It is suitable for everyone, whether for the general public at a community event, an entire DSA chapter, coworkers wishing to consider organizing their workplace, a labor working group, or other working groups.

The Discussion Questions for each chapter could be copied and distributed to large or small study groups that have read the book, at least in part. Study group leaders could use the Discussion Leader Guides for each chapter to guide and inform the discussion. To welcome people who have not had the opportunity to do the readings, Discussion Leaders may wish to lead with a short summary of the chapter in question.

Ideally, everyone would read and discuss the whole book, but time constraints might narrow the focus to the first two chapters and the conclusion, plus whatever other chapters seem most important to the study group.

## Chapter 1 Discussion Questions

- I. What is **power structure analysis**, and how do **theories of power** differ for liberals, progressives, and leftists (including democratic socialists)? (2-6)
- II. McAlevy says on page 20 that “unions still successfully engaging in mass 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.” Why does she differentiate between “**mass strikes**” and “protests”?
- III. What does McAlevy mean on page 6 when she says that people need to “go from **object to subject**”?
- IV. What are **organic leaders**? (13)
- V. On the very first page of the book, McAlevy emphasizes the point that **the labor movement is a social movement**. Why is this point important and what does it mean for DSA in relationship to labor unions?
- VI. Is there anything else in this chapter that you found intriguing and want to discuss?

## **Chapter 1 Discussion Leader Guide**

**I. Power structure analysis** involves conducting research on who has power and why in order to run effective campaigns. Marshall Ganz summarizes the resulting strategy as “turning what you have into what you need to get what you want” (5). The **liberal theory of power** is an **elite** theory of power that leads to **advocacy**; the **progressive** theory is primarily an **elite** theory that leads to **mobilizing**; the **left theory of power** believes that power is contestable by the **working class**, which leads to **organizing**.

**A. Why does McAlevey differentiate between analyzing elite power and the power of the working class?**

Just understanding the elites can lead to paralysis (if people feel overwhelmed) or bad strategy (if they don't understand what power they could possibly leverage and how.)

**B. What is the scale of power structure analysis?**

It can be anything from one workplace, to one community, to an entire country or industry, or the entire globe.

**C. Who needs to be involved in power structure analysis to make it useful?**

If ordinary people themselves are involved, they feel empowered and may also have information no one else does, so it should not just be professionals doing research.

**D. What is the difference between advocacy, mobilizing, and organizing?**

Advocacy doesn't involve ordinary people, just privileged people pressuring decision makers on behalf of others; mobilizing brings larger numbers of people to the fight, but they are usually the same people (dedicated activists); organizing places the agency for success with a continually expanding base of ordinary people. Go over the table on pages 11-12.

**E. Can you think of examples from DSA or elsewhere of these different ways of making change?**

Advocacy: Litigation like suing to prevent abortion restrictions from taking effect, lobbying, and petitions; Mobilizing: Abolish ICE encampments, PR stunts, and most other protests; Organizing: People organizing all of their coworkers into a union then all going on strike, also tenant unions.

**II. Mass strikes** involve tons of work to organize the majority of ordinary people in a workplace to withhold their labor, whereas protests are symbolic, involve far fewer people, and don't stop capitalist production. Mass strikes are much more powerful.

**A. What contrasting ways of making change do these two types of action represent?**

Mass strikes require organizing. Protests require mobilizing. Organizing requires a large-scale effort to get people who others trust to agree with the strategy and to lead their followers into high risk situations. Mobilizing can be small-scale because it only requires getting people who already feel strongly about something to do something.

**B. Why does it matter that the kind of organizing required for a mass strike occurs from the bottom up?**

It's how people transform themselves into fighters; capitalism eventually absorbs our wins, so we need to totally transform the structures of our society and that will take all of us working together collectively. If we don't do so, we will never reach the high numbers of participation needed to win.

**III. When ordinary people go from “object to subject”** they experience their own power through action and thinking/analyzing their situation. We’re accustomed to having little control in our lives, so we have to unlearn the ways we’ve been objectified and become confident subjects.

**A. What does McAlevey mean later on the same page when she says “people participate to the degree they understand – but they also understand to the degree they participate”?**

Unless people themselves actively help develop the analysis of their own collective power and the strategy for collective action, they are less invested in and understand less what they are doing.

**B. How does this dynamic sometimes play out in DSA’s work?**

When decisions are not made with high rates of participation by membership, often this means there is low participation in carrying out strategies and opportunities for strengthening the strategy are missed.

**C. What questions does McAlevey say that we need to ask regarding power, strategy, and engagement to analyze the potential for success in the change process?**

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 and not just the resulting collective action?

**D. Based on the ideas outlined in this chapter, why do democratic socialists believe that we need a movement from below?**

People become agents of change when they understand their role. People have knowledge and power that should shape movement strategy, and if they aren’t part of setting strategy, in the war room so to speak, that info isn’t unlocked.

**IV. Organic leaders** are people who other people respect and trust and if asked might follow into action. They might not even be elected - they often do NOT have titles or positions and often resist getting involved. They are usually undecided on the issue or campaign unless and until we help them see their role as key to improving things.

**A. How are organic leaders different than we sometimes have a tendency to think of them in our work?**

Sometimes we mistake someone who is vocal, supportive of our campaign, visible, responsible, thoughtful, or passionate, as an organic leader. But if they don’t lead people, they can’t bring people with them in high risk situations of collective action.

**B. Why are true organic leaders necessary to scale up our work?**

They bring the people who follow them into the struggle. Most important, they help people overcome fear and take risks, which is important in all union campaigns and most other serious efforts to challenge power.

**C. How would we identify organic leaders in DSA?**

Do other people admire or respect them and talk about them, especially unprompted? Are they able to recruit others to do things?

**D. Do you feel that having people they already lead is the only thing that matters about a leader?**

We hope that leaders feel accountable to the struggle or to the people that follow them, and that they choose to act in ways that build unity rather than division.

**V. If the labor movement is a social movement**, then there is room for, and it is necessary to engage, a broad range of actors, including friends & families, religious institutions, advocacy organizations, political groups like DSA, social groups, and in fact the whole community.

**A. Why does McAlevey believe this means we need to look at people not just as workers?**

Because the very idea of a movement consciously merges agencies that have often been kept separate. People are workers, and family members, and congregants, and political actors (including socialists), and a variety of things we have to understand if we are to engage the whole person.

**B. How do social movements create an opportunity for DSA?**

Social movements rely on a variety of organizations working in coalition to effect change. DSA can position itself as a significant partner in such coalitions and bring to the table an explicit critique of capitalism and our theory of power. DSA can also learn from the experiences of other organizations and their membership if it is different than our own and improve our own analysis of the conditions.

## Chapter 2 Discussion Questions

- I. What are **Structure Tests**, and why do they matter? (34-40)
- II. Though Saul Alinsky is often credited as the person most responsible for codifying the idea of community organizing, why does McAlevey critique **Alinskyism**? (40-58)
- III. What is **Whole Worker Organizing**, and why does McAlevey advocate for it? (58-70)
- IV. Is there anything else in this chapter that you found intriguing and want to discuss?

## **Chapter 2 Discussion Leader Guide**

**I. Structure tests** begin by measuring individual power and grow to measure collective power.

### **A. How are structure tests traditionally used in union organizing?**

They typically are used to gauge how effectively and efficiently a worker identified as an organic leader can get a majority of their unit to a public, and therefore, high-risk action, followed by increasingly challenging tests. Structure tests are also the only way workers know if and when they are genuinely ready for battle, meaning that 90% of them are participating in each structure test, as the risk factor increases. Effective unions would never call a strike without having previously used many structure tests, so that when it's time for the strike vote and, if needed, strike everyone knows they are ready.

### **B. What are examples of structure tests that are used by unions and how are they administered?**

Structure tests used in union organizing include majority petitions, photo posters, sticker days, wearing t-shirts with union emblems, rallies, and, ultimately, strikes. Organizers administer the tests by having one-on-one organizing conversations using the tools of “framing hard choices” and “the long uncomfortable silence.”

### **C. What are some examples of ways structure tests could be used by political groups like DSA?**

They are likewise used to gauge the effectiveness of organic leaders in getting a majority of their members to engage in public actions. The same techniques (having one-on-one organizing conversations and “framing hard choices” and “the long uncomfortable silence”) can be used to cultivate the ability of organic leaders to motivate members to participate in meetings, rallies, organizing campaigns (including political campaigns and causes like Medicare For All), coalition building (including supporting union organizing efforts), and other productive actions. Chapter/group leaders need to keep track of and chart such structure tests, similar to the way we train chapter leaders to do “list work.”

### **D. What does McAlevy mean when she says that what has long been “labeled *structure* is actually human *agency*”? (39)**

She means that talking about structure and structure tests is really a technical way of talking about whether individuals (workers, DSA members, campaigners, ...) have developed their sense of agency to the point where they are capable of doing what is needed to win the fights they engage in.

**II. McAlevy believes that Alinskyism compromised** the CIO organizing model by: 1) delinking the method from the mission of radically altering the power structure itself; 2) bifurcating the unskilled worker from the semiskilled and skilled members of the working class; 3) abandoning the original CIO organizing model for a John Lewis-style mobilizing model

### **A. What are some of the other reasons that McAlevy critiques Alinskyism?**

She argues that Alinsky had no leadership identification theory, so he was not capable of identifying and cultivating organic leaders. As she writes, “Leadership development without previous leadership identification is a bicycle without wheels. It severely limits how far that movement can go—the success it can and should achieve” (48). She also criticizes Alinsky for developing what is now called the corporate campaign, which puts the employer at the center

rather than workers. In short, she traces the emphasis of New Labor on mobilizing rather than organizing to the influence of Alinsky. **Walk people through the figure on p. 52, table on 54-55, and summary on 56-57.**

**B. How might this critique be applied to DSA organizing?**

It points to the importance of identifying and cultivating organic leaders in organizations like DSA as well as identifying organic leaders of people outside DSA so that they can bring them into the organization. It also counsels that political organizers focus on building power within the organization rather than worrying about, or worse yet collaborating with, the perspective of the corporate interests with which we struggle.

**III. Whole Worker Organizing** restores and builds on the CIO model for a new economy by not just organizing within the workplace but also within the larger community. It recognizes that workers are individuals who are not defined solely through their work but also through their familial, social, religious, and community connections.

**A. What does McAlevy mean when she talks about concession and disruption costs, which she renames the “*cost of settlement*” and the “*ability to create a crisis*”? (61)**

Concession costs are the power required to win, which is affected by greater or lesser costs of settlement in relation to ideological resistance. Disruption costs are the power groups can generate, which is affected by the greater or lesser role of the worker inside the workplace and inside the community. Go over Table 2.2 (p. 64) and Table 2. 3 (p. 67). Though these terms and tables were developed for unionization campaigns, they could be adapted for any political actions that seek a concession from a powerful entity through the ability to disrupt the function of that entity.

**B. What do you notice when comparing the Figure 2.3 (Whole Worker Charting: Social Networks) on p. 69 with Figure 2.2 (Typical Corporate Campaign Research Schematic) on p. 52?**

The latter is a mobilizing model that puts the employer at the center and creates weaker unions, while the former is an organizing model that puts workers at the center and creates good unions that “engage the broader community in the fight, so that the community of which the workers are an organic part, transforms along with the workplace” (69).

**C. How does Whole Worker Organizing apply to DSA?**

Like union members, members of DSA also need to be approached, and think of themselves, as members of communities that can be transformed and empowered along with individual members. Members of DSA aren’t just democratic socialists at meetings, but also in their families, workplaces, religious institutions, and larger communities, all places where there are new people we could organize. This model also applies to how we think about, treat, and interact with other individuals with whom we work in coalition or opposition.

### Chapter 3 Discussion Questions

- I. What criticisms does McAlevey offer of the **Stern-Rolf Plan** used in organizing SEIU Local 775? (73-84)
- II. What does McAlevey praise about the **Davis-Brown Plan** used in organizing SEIU 1199 New England (1199NE)? (85-92)
- III. What other **differences between the two plans** does McAlevey point to? (92-99)
- IV. How might understanding the contrast between these two organizing plans be **helpful for DSA**?
- V. Is there anything else in this chapter that you found intriguing and want to discuss?

## **Chapter 3 Discussion Leader Guide**

**I. McAlevey criticizes the Stern-Rolf Plan** used in organizing SEIU Local 775 for 1) Relying on Alinskyist models of mobilizing, at best, and often on advocacy; 2) collaborating with employers rather than engaging workers; 3) in exchange for increased numbers of dues payers, agreeing to unreasonable employer demands (including limits on the rights of future union members tying incentives to lobbying by the union on behalf of rate reform, tort reform, and status quo management rights, all of which are defined on p. 82).

**II. McAlevey praises the Davis-Brown Plan** used in organizing SEIU 1199 New England (1199NE) for 1) relying on organizing, rather than mobilizing; 2) working democratically with workers and engaging them in the process of negotiations rather than making back-room deals with employers; 3) building for and engaging in strikes as a necessary tool, rather than agreeing to no-strike clauses.

**III. Other differences between the two plans** include the higher wages and better benefits won for 1199NE; Washington's 3 Sides as 3 Sides approach vs. Connecticut's From 3 Sides to 2 approach; WA's shallow advocacy vs. CT's Deep Organizing

**A. What does McAlevey mean by the "3 Sides as 3 Sides approach" and the "From 3 Sides to 2 approach"?**

Washington State's local 775 treated the employer, the union, and the worker as three separate entities. Worse yet, they saw the interests of two sides—the union and the employer—as lying closer together, in opposition to the primary needs of the workers. 1199NE, by contrast, sees the workers and the union aligned as one entity because their organizers "understand that real fights for life-changing gains can be won only by the workers themselves, led by organic worker-leaders" (98).

**B. What do the 1199NE team means when they call the 775 approach "class snuggle, not class struggle" (99)?**

They mean that concessions can only be won from employers through struggle, recognizing that this is the nature of capitalism. The employer alliance model of 775 ignores these facts at its peril, snuggling up to employers and driving a wedge between the union and workers.

**IV. Understanding the contrast between these two organizing plans might be helpful for DSA** in thinking about how to choose the union organizing campaigns that best suit our political orientation as organizers and not merely advocates. It might also help us think about how to organize our own campaigns, focusing on class struggle rather than trying to snuggle up to opponents and cut deals. Finally, it might help us see DSA members as united together against a common external enemy.

### Chapter 4 Discussion Questions

- I. What **weakened the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU)**, turning it from “militant to milquetoast” (104), in the years before the strike?
- II. What **strengthened the CTU** in the years leading up to the strike?
- III. What **barriers remained for the CTU** at the time this book was written?
- IV. What **lessons** can unions and DSA learn from the experience of the CTU?
- V. Is there anything else in this chapter that you found intriguing and want to discuss?

## **Chapter 4 Discussion Leader Guide**

**I. Factors that weakened the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU)** include anti-teachers' union legislation, such as the Chicago School Reform Law (1988), the Amendatory Act (1995), and No Child Left Behind (2001); the increasingly collaborationist/mobilizing model of the union; and neo-liberal opponents like Mayor Richard M. Daley, Daley's CEO of the Chicago school system Arne Duncan, and Mayor Rahm Emanuel.

### **A. What features did this anti-teachers' union legislation have in common?**

The legislation featured privatization; shifting resources to charter schools and closing regular public schools; adopting anti-democratic business models of governance (the Board of Education became the Reform Board of Trustees); placing limitations on teachers' rights and union power (including outlawing strikes); and even potentially positive features, such as decentralization, excluded teachers and marginalized the School Board.

### **B. In what ways was the union itself at fault?**

The union leadership was conflict averse; collaborationist; oligarchical; and unchecked by internal democratic processes, including caucuses and other forms of internal debate.

**II. In the years leading up to the strike, the CTU was strengthened** by community organizations filling the power gap left by an ineffective union leadership; the formation of a militant opposition within the union (Caucus of Rank-and-File Educators—CORE), which eventually took over union leadership; and an emphasis by the new leadership on organizing and mass political education.

**III. Barriers that remain for the CTU** include Chicago's ingrained culture of Alinskyism (124); the ongoing opposition of conservative legislators and neoliberal leaders; inadequately maintained relationships between teachers, the union, and the larger community (including the need for an ongoing internal tracking system); the nefarious impact of right-wing think tanks with deep pockets, such as Stand for Children (126).

**IV. Lessons that unions and DSA can learn** from the experience of the CTU include and fact that "the strike remains the working class's most powerful weapon" (142); the deployment of the strike, and any successful political action, is contingent upon developing deep relationships with the wider community; the crucial importance of broad democracy; the need for ongoing organizing training & mass political education; and the importance of organizing, structure tests, and mass political education.

**Chapter 5 Discussion Questions**

- I. After years of failure, **what finally enabled the successful unionization of Smithfield?**
- II. **What can unions and DSA learn** from the successful unionization of Smithfield?
- III. Is there anything else in this chapter that you found intriguing and want to discuss?

## **Chapter 5 Discussion Leader Guide**

**I. The successful unionization of Smithfield was enabled** by an organizing strategy informed by a left-wing politics of class struggle (153); a strategy balancing a “ground war” (high levels of worker engagement and agency) and “air war” (exploiting any type of vulnerability a corporation might have outside the workplace) (153); focusing on worker agency, not just as workers but also as consumers, religious practitioners, and members of various communities (154); developing close relationships with the community (166); working with allied political organizations (principally Jobs with Justice) (170); and generally building an organizing culture (176).

**II. From the successful unionization of Smithfield, other unions and DSA can learn** that there is a need to infuse union organizing with class struggle; when political organizations work in coalition with unions, it helps both parties achieve goals; and unions should avoid gag orders because they negatively affect collective bargaining and the ability of other unions to replicate one union’s success (144).

**Chapter 6 Discussion Questions**

- I. What is **Make the Road New York (MRNY)**, and how has it achieved some successes?
- II. What are some of the **limitations of MRNY**?
- III. Is there anything else in this chapter that you found intriguing and want to discuss?

## **Chapter 6 Discussion Leader Guide**

**I. Make the Road New York (MRNY)** is the largest nonunion membership organization of immigrants in New York City; it is a self-selecting group that works on many different kinds of immigrant issues. It has had some successes by using the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) for on-the-job grievance handling, organizing unions, and working to change the law to protect immigrants through wage theft legislation and the Secure Communities Campaign (186-189). Its greatest assets are its strategic capacity (which Marshal Ganz, of the United Farm Workers, describes as “leaders who take part in regular, open, and authoritative deliberation and are motivated by commitment to choices they participated in making and on which they have the autonomy to act” (182)) and its commitment to participatory democracy (Make the Road’s “High Touch Model”).

**II. The Limitations of MRNY** are its reliance on foundation funding (which can create dependency on philanthropic elites who set strategic and tactical restrictions on the types of activities the organization can undertake); its dependency on unions (some of which are risk adverse and lack faith in the intelligence of ordinary people); the dubious portability of its model to other areas; and accusations of insider politics/deal cutting and being limited to an advocacy model. McAlevey dismisses these allegations and argues that MRNY has achieved a lot, even if it has not gone beyond a mobilizing model.

**Chapter 7 Discussion Question**

I. What **conclusions** does McAlevey reach in her research of these case studies?

## **Chapter 7 Discussion Leader Guide**

**I. McAlevey concludes** that unions (and, by extension, Left political organizations) need to focus on building “actual power” through organizing rather than “pretend power” through advocacy and mobilizing.

**A. According to McAlevey, what forces stand in the way of realizing “actual power,” and how might democratic socialists label these forces in slightly different ways?**

McAlevey says that the biggest barrier to realizing actual power is the Right’s strategy of using “self-blame” to demobilize people. Democratic socialists would be more likely to call this barrier “individualism”, “neoliberalism” or, more accurately, “anti-socialism.” As McAlevey notes, this has been a highly successful Right-Wing strategy developed for at least the last fifty years, leading to a deep mistrust of government and collective solutions to the point that most Americans trust business leaders and corporations more than politicians and government (200).

**B. According to McAlevey, what forces provide the most hope for achieving actual power, and how might democratic socialists label these forces in slightly different ways?**

McAlevey labels this positive force as “human solidarity,” though we might prefer to call it socialism. As McAlevey notes, the best ways to build this positive force are through programs and strategies for people to experience collective struggle. She writes, “The craft of organizing helps people connect the dots between the critical, solidarity-affirming moment and the larger system it challenges, giving the workers in crisis a new way of seeing themselves and a newly formed sense of the society’s political economy” (201). It is up to Left unions and political organizations like DSA to work with workers and the communities of which they are a part to build class solidarity, which McAlevey argues will be greatest when “all the workers struggle together as one force—one union—up against their employer in a united front” (205).

**C. How does McAlevey summarize the “core argument of this book” (206)?**

The core argument is that there is no substitute for a real bottom-up organizing model; production-crippling majority strikes are unions’ most successful strategy; and the union’s best hope lies in a Whole Worker model.