

Portside

Published on *Portside* (<http://portside.org>)

[Home](#) > Who Will Lead the U.S. Working Class?

Who Will Lead the U.S. Working Class?

<https://monthlyreview.org/2013/05/01/who-will-lead-the-u-s-working-class>

Portside Date: May 5, 2013

Author: Michael Yates

Date of Source: Saturday, May 4, 2013

Monthly Review



The U.S. labor movement is in disarray, with declining union density and fewer members each year. There have been positive signs of movement revival, such as the revolt of public sector workers in Wisconsin in 2011 and the Chicago school teachers' strike in 2012. But overall, the future of the labor movement does not appear very bright. In what follows, we examine the state of organized labor through the lens of the recent history of two unions, as seen by a rank-and-file worker and an itinerant union organizer. We ask what kind of people might lead the U.S. working class.

The United Auto Workers

Gregg Shotwell, now retired, was for more than thirty years a rank-and-file machine operator for General Motors and Delphi, one of the world's largest auto parts manufacturers. Angry with the UAW's increasingly cozy relationship with the companies, he started an in-plant broadside, *Live Bait & Ammo*, which he hoped would be bait for the bosses and ammo for the workers. His provocative and lively prose, combined with good fact-based analysis, struck a chord with his fellow unionists, and the newsletter gained a wide circulation in union auto plants. His book is an organized collection of *Live Bait & Ammo* essays, covering developments in the UAW and the automobile industry from the late 1990s until the Federal government's bailout of General Motors and Chrysler in 2009. The wonderfully rendered essays are cries from the heart of workers degraded daily by their employers and betrayed by their union.

Some background on the UAW will put Shotwell's dissidence in historical perspective. The UAW was forged in the courageously fought and radically led sit-down strikes of the Great Depression. Its members, their families, and their communities built upon these bitter struggles to make the UAW a militant industrial union. Not only did those who labored on the assembly lines and in the shops transform themselves from factory serfs to class-conscious workers, but they also took control of the shop floor from a management notorious for oppressive treatment of its "hands."

Shotwell tells a story on the first page of his book that illustrates the power of the union:

I hired into GM and joined the UAW in 1979. I didn't know much about how unions worked. I soon learned. At six thirty one morning, we were sitting around sipping coffee and trying to wake up to a new day of the same old shit. A foreman who was new to the area told us to get up and get to work. "Right now," he said. "I'm the boss." We said, "Yes sir, boss." We went right to work. Thirty minutes later, every machine in the department was down. The skilled trades came out, tore the machines apart, and went off to look for the missing parts. They didn't come back. There was no production that day. Every department behind us went down like a domino.

The next morning, the same foreman said, "Good morning, gentlemen." Then he left us alone to do our jobs.

The shop floor was our turf. We controlled the means of production because we were the masters of the means. We didn't plan this direct action. It was automatic. It was natural. We called it "showing the boss who's boss." That's what old timers taught me about unionism.¹ [1]

As his book makes clear, this does not happen today. The UAW has hit hard times. Membership has plummeted from a peak of 1.53 million in 1979 to 380,719 in 2011. Most commentators point to the decline of domestic manufacturing in the United States and the corresponding increase in the foreign operations of U.S. car companies, along with a ruthless anti-union strategy begun by employers when profit margins fell sharply in the mid-1970s, as the reasons for this. However, Shotwell provides many examples of how the failure of the UAW to organize the foreign "transplant" automobile manufacturers in the United States and the auto parts segment of the industry has also played a major role.

Much of Shotwell's book shows why the UAW has not organized the nonunion sections of the industry, and worse, how it has become complicit with capital in making certain that these will not be organized. The union has, in effect, become the junior partner of the companies. As he says about former UAW president Ron Gettelfinger:

Gettelfinger is a corporatist: that is, he believes our fortunes as union members are tied to the company's apron strings. At the Ford sub-council, where union members convened to devise a bargaining strategy, he invited Lord Ford and his stooges to explain how sacrifices would be necessary. Ford's problems are not the fault of union members or union wages. Does Ford invite UAW members to Board of Directors meetings to advise them how they should make

sacrifices for the good of the community?

The beginning of the UAW's demise can be found in the employer backlash against the radicalization of much of the labor movement during the Great Depression and the tremendous strike wave after the Second World War. The latter, along with the onset of the Cold War, provided good public relations cover for the corporate counteroffensive, as a war-weary public wanted to buy the commodities they were not able to purchase during the war (and still could not because of the strikes) and also began to succumb to relentless Cold War propaganda against the Communists. The first big postwar victory of capital was the Taft-Hartley legislation, which, among other things, compelled union officers to sign an oath stating that they were not Communists.

Most union officials signed the oaths, and many leaders used refusals to sign as an excuse to purge radicals from their ranks. The UAW was home to a large number of reds, and they were among the best, most class-conscious members and leaders. Unfortunately, Walter Reuther, one of the leaders of the agitations that helped form the union in the 1930s, used Taft-Hartley to red-bait his left-wing opponents and win power.

Reuther and his successors parlayed the postwar prosperity of the industry into pacesetting wages and benefits for autoworkers. At the same time, they built a UAW political machine, the Administrative Caucus—Shotwell refers to it as the “Rollover Caucus”—which has been called accurately a “one-party state.” They worked out an “accord” with employers: the union promised to let the bosses manage free from the threat of wildcat strikes and work slowdowns. In return, the corporations agreed to regular wage increases, cost-of-living adjustments, and generous health-care and pension benefits. UAW leaders used the power of incumbency to contain any challenges to their control of the organization.

As democracy in the UAW waned and members chafed at the union's concession of workplace control to management, rank-and-file movements arose. The union suppressed these efforts, but it was impossible to eliminate dissent altogether. One of Gregg Shotwell's UAW mentors, the late Jerry Tucker (who wrote the Foreword to the book), engineered several “work-to-rule” campaigns at UAW plants in the Midwest. Patient education convinced workers to slow down production by sticking strictly to the letter of their collective bargaining agreement and their supervisors' instructions. Workers refused to show the initiative that makes every workplace run smoothly and efficiently. Inevitably, production fell dramatically. As Shotwell notes, each of these “in-plant” work stoppages succeeded; all concessions that management wanted were denied, workers won better contracts, and none lost their jobs.

Tucker became so popular that he was elected a Regional Director. But when he brought his rank-and-file empowerment strategy to the national union leadership, they mounted a vicious campaign to unseat him (union staffers were forced to give part of their salaries to his opponent's campaign). He lost his directorship, but then helped form the New Directions movement to wrest control of the union from a leadership now far removed from the shop floor. These efforts failed, but the New Directions spirit lived on. Shotwell and other union dissidents began Soldiers of Solidarity, to return the UAW to its members. Work-to-rule, national strikes, solidarity, an end to concessions, and union transparency are the weapons Soldiers of Solidarity argues are needed if automobile workers, and by extension all laborers, are to reverse the downward spiral in which the working class finds itself.

There are startling revelations of UAW autocracy and disdain for the rank-and-file in *Autoworkers Under the Gun*, which the author describes in vivid language but can be simply summarized here:

- Members cannot democratically influence what the union does. The union's conventions are run dictatorially, and most of the delegates are appointed staff persons. The chair silences the microphone when dissidents make critical comments or ask embarrassing questions. “You're done brother, shut off the mic,” UAW president Yokich said to Shotwell at a union convention when he had had enough of Shotwell's trenchant analysis of the union's self-imposed weakness.

Dissidents are spied upon, and the top officers routinely lie about what they have done in collective bargaining. Shotwell gives especially detailed examples for his employer, Delphi. Union leaders guaranteed Delphi workers that they would always have the same contract provisions as GM employees, that GM would still be the majority owner of Delphi after it was spun off by GM. Not only were Delphi workers soon earning a fraction of what those at GM earned, but they lost all their GM pension credits. Things only got worse when Delphi declared bankruptcy.

Autocracy in the UAW is so blatant that the Administrative Caucus voted to transfer tens of millions of dollars from the union's seldom used strike fund to pay the salaries of the national staff. Interest on the strike fund is similarly diverted.

- The UAW sells its locals short. It does not inform them about national negotiations; complex issues are presented to members at the last minute, with dire warnings that failure to agree will lead to disaster. The union settles national agreements before local agreements have been completed, leaving the locals with little leverage over their employer.

A particularly egregious example Shotwell gives of the union's betrayal of its locals concerns Local 2036 in Henderson, Kentucky. The UAW sanctioned a strike against wheel supplier Accuride in 1998. When the workers rejected a company proposal but agreed to return to work, the corporation locked them out. A dance then began in which the union paid strike benefits, then stopped payments, threatened the local with trusteeship, and, in 2002, when at least 100 employees were still holding solid against Accuride, disavowed any interest in representing the workers. The disavowal letter was sent to the company but not to the long-suffering strikers. The union never organized solidarity actions by union members who were installing the scab wheels in Ford and GM assembly plants. The best it did was urge GM, Ford, and Chrysler to convince Accuride to settle. Shotwell contrasts the UAW's (in)action with that of the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW), which seceded from the UAW in 1984: “When Navistar attempted to bust a Canadian Auto Workers (CAW) local, CAW president Buzz Hargrove said, ‘We are prepared to shut down all of our operations. We are not going to allow them to scab our plants and steal our members' jobs.’ The CAW kept scabs out and won a fair contract.”

- As capital's anti-union campaign accelerated in the 1980s, the UAW rejected a militant counterattack, as New Directions was demanding. Instead, they embraced class collaboration—more benignly called partnership, or “jointness.” The union and the corporations would work together to ensure the profitability of their joint enterprise. If workers labored hard to make their plants more profitable, employers would share some of the money with them. The union agreed that foreign competition, mainly from Japanese manufacturers, was the source of industry distress. To beat the foreigners, UAW members would have to work harder, smarter, and in cooperation with their employers. The tacit deal was that if the workers did not go along with this, the union would discipline them itself.

To sweeten the pot, the corporations agreed to pay several cents per hour of employee labor into jointness funds, set up as independent corporate entities and administered by union and management. These funds, which soon contained millions of dollars, are not subject to the financial disclosure obligations that unions have under the Landrum-Griffin Act, and the UAW has refused to show the members how the funds' monies are used. Shotwell tells us that they, in part, pay the salaries of hundreds of union staff persons who work in the plants as the union counterparts in labor-management teams that deal with all manner of workplace

issues.

With jointness and the jointness funds, the UAW committed itself fully to a class-collaboration strategy. Corporations have as their aim the accumulation of capital, made possible by the exploitation of wage labor. The latter is realized by management's attainment of as much control as possible over the labor process, that is, of how work is performed. Labor-management cooperation means that the union is an ally of its class enemy, committed to helping it achieve its goals.

The first targets of the union-employer partnership were Japanese automakers, who were accused of unfair competition. The degree to which the company-union partners vilified the Japanese can be seen in an early program paid for by the funds, a week-long educational, with mandatory attendance by every union member. I witnessed this firsthand when I taught economics in a one-day session in such a program to groups of Pittsburgh autoworkers; the session held just prior to mine was an eight-hour orgy of Japanese bashing, with the most blatant stereotyping of Japanese culture and behavior.

Once the competitive ethos began to be instilled in union members, the focus shifted from foreign competition to that between domestic automobile companies. Workers at GM were now in competition with those at Ford and Chrysler, even though they were in the same union. From there, it was a short step to pitting employees at one plant against those at another of the same company. So as the corporations began to close plants to remain competitive, workers were forced into a competitive mode, doing whatever they could to keep their particular plant open. Solidarity went out the window, replaced by a war of all against all.

Shotwell predicted what would happen:

Competition between workers will decimate, not solidify, our ranks. A Competitive Operating Agreement is a Trojan horse loaded with three lethal concessions:

1. the expanded utilization of temps, which is in effect two-tier;
2. the implementation of nonunion labor into the plants;
3. the manipulation of union members as "team leaders" in supervisory roles.

He was right. The end result was a sequence of corporate demands and union concessions: lump-sum wage increases instead of percentage raises built into the base wage; two-tier wage agreements in which new hires earn much less than senior workers (now less than half as much); fewer benefits, with workers paying more and more for them; defined contribution pensions instead of defined benefit plans; pensioners sacrificed to ease the pension cost burdens of the businesses; and on and on, with no end in sight.

Union givebacks ultimately led to the decimation of the UAW during the Great Recession. GM and Chrysler declared bankruptcy, and the federal government demanded—and received—draconian concessions from the union in return for a bailout, in which the owners suffered nothing. And in a final blow to workers and the union, partnership and the resultant worker demoralization helped make possible the recent enactment of a right-to-work law in Michigan, the very cradle of industrial unionism.

Throughout all of this, the automobile manufacturers continued unilaterally to pursue their interests. While the union bashed the Japanese, the corporations partnered with Japanese companies. They took the profits they made from union concessions and invested them in foreign operations, which, the author informs readers, are now the major source of their profits, and where corporate assets are not subject to U.S. bankruptcy laws. They began to spin off their parts components, converting them into quasi-independent corporations that now supplied modular components to them (such as steering wheel assemblies and seats). These new entities either operated union-free or, with UAW cooperation, remained union but with much lower wages and benefits, and weaker work rules.

A union that collaborates with employers, must, by definition, be hostile to the rank and file. In any workplace, laborers face a relentless enemy. Management continually imposes new stresses on the workers, routinely violating the collective bargaining agreement. A cooperative union must then either negotiate ever-weaker contracts or ignore the grievances that workers file. As Shotwell documents in the latter case, when workers grieve they must confront the union-management teams in the plant, both parts paid for by the employer, who have a stake in shunting the grievance aside or settling it jointly in a corporation-friendly manner, regardless of the needs of the aggrieved employees. When this fails and grievances accumulate, the national union simply concedes them in the national bargaining. When workers protest, the one-party state votes them down.

What then should workers do? How do you wage a struggle against both your employer and your union? Shotwell is a proponent of "work to rule," which he correctly sees as a potent form of sabotage that both pressures employers to settle disputes with workers and helps workers stop and reverse the erosion of their control over the labor process. But to put this into practice will require much patient organizing both inside and outside the workplace. It will be a difficult process, but really there is no other choice, except complete capitulation. As he poetically puts it:

Strike back.
 Strike back because your brothers and sisters are laid off.
 Strike back because you hate the bastards.
 Strike back to redeem your dignity.
 Strike back for full employment.
 Strike back to abolish inequality.
 Strike back because your job is a bore and your boss is an ass.
 Strike back for freedom.
 Strike back to restore the balance of power.
 Strike back because you are human and care about life.
 Strike back to break the corporate chokehold.
 Strike back to get the leeches off our backs.
 Strike back for more democracy.
 Strike back because they never listen to you.

Strike back to control the means of production.
 Strike back because Medicare doesn't cover prescriptions for your mother.
 Strike back because politicians retire in splendor.
 Strike back because injunctions are only against unions and never
 against management.
 Strike back because judges are the lackeys of industry.
 Strike back because no one believes in the system.
 Strike back to show we can strike back.
 Strike back.

The Service Employees International Union

Unlike Shotwell, Jane McAlevey was never a rank-and-file worker. She was appointed to various union staff positions after working in a number of social-change organizations. Most of her book describes her tenure as executive director of a large local of public and private sector workers in Las Vegas. She tells readers that *Raising Expectations* is about organizing; it is, but it is also a memoir centering on herself and her wars with the SEIU's top leadership. Nonetheless, she has much of interest to say about both how successfully to help workers organize unions and negotiate good collective bargaining agreements and why most unions do neither.

Just as with Shotwell's book, McAlevey's account of her time with SEIU should be put into historical perspective. Founded in 1921, the Building Service Employees International Union (BSEIU) initially organized janitors, elevator operators, window washers, and doormen. It eventually began to organize other types of workers and to merge with other unions. In 1968, it became the SEIU, and since then it has continued to grow and to merge, most notably with a majority of the locals of the left-led hospital workers' union, 1199. Today the SEIU is one of the largest labor organizations in the country, with about 1.8 million members. It is a major union in health care—where McAlevey did most of her SEIU work—with nurses, hospital staff persons, nursing home employees, and home health-care workers among its members.

The two persons most associated with SEIU's rapid growth are John Sweeney and Andrew Stern. Sweeney led the large New York City local of SEIU, the often-corrupt Local 32BJ, and moved from there to the presidency of the national union, where he helped engineer the famous Justice for Janitors organizing drives. Not long after Sweeney became president of the AFL-CIO in 1995, Stern was elected SEIU's president.

Stern believed that only by raising union density, through organizing in a particular market, could a union gain enough power to improve the lives of its members and achieve enough political leverage to gain further improvements, for its members and the entire working class. However, Stern's other ideas undermined this model's logic. Like most top union leaders, he was a proponent of labor-management partnership and an enemy of the strike. He said that strikes and class struggle were remnants of a bygone era; the modern union had to offer employers "added value," that is, a bigger bottom line. As we saw with the UAW, such a philosophy ultimately weakens the union and stifles democracy.

As in the UAW, the SEIU's partnership strategy faced internal resistance. And like the UAW, the SEIU is a one-party state, intolerant of internal rebellion. Stern demoted or fired those who opposed him and trusteeed (took over) dissident locals. When one of the largest, most militant, and successful locals, California's United Healthcare Workers (UHW), led by Sal Rosselli, was trusteeed in January 2009, SEIU's UAW-like class-collaboration trajectory reached its logical conclusion. Rosselli was an Executive Board member; a great organizer; had work experience as a SEIU member; had helped workers win pacesetting wages, benefits, and working conditions; and was a strong advocate for patients in the hospitals his local had organized. However, in 2007–2008, he began to question SEIU's partnership approach and to argue in favor of greater membership control over the national union through direct rank-and-file election of its top officers and board members, rather than the convention selection method used by SEIU that was more easily controlled by Stern. This won him Stern's enmity. Rosselli then defied Stern further by bringing a platform of reforms and constitutional changes to the union's convention in Puerto Rico in 2008. He ran as an independent for election to the Executive Board, but was defeated by the Stern slate. A few months later, Stern trusteeed his local. Rosselli and his allies left the SEIU and formed a rival health-care workers' union, the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW). This organization has achieved considerable success, but it has faced unrelenting hostility from SEIU, which has spent millions of dollars filing lawsuits against NUHW and individual members of it, and has actively colluded with employers to defeat NUHW in certification elections.

Jane McAlevey's account of her labor union work begins during the exciting early days of John Sweeney's New Voice team, which took charge of the AFL-CIO in 1995. The new officers were committed to organizing, and the author tells us that she was tapped to help lead an innovative project in Stamford, Connecticut, one that would build union power by concentrating on what she calls in her book, "whole worker organizing." Unions would aim to organize the "whole worker," that is, not just in the workplace but in all of the institutions and structures that constitute working-class life.

The major tool McAlevey used in Stamford, and in all of her organizing efforts, was Power Structure Analysis (PSA). She describes the PSA as follows: "You identify the real power players in a given community or area, determine what the basis of their power is, and find out who their natural allies and opponents are. Based on that knowledge, you formulate a plan for enhancing the power of your allies and neutralizing that of your opponents."

The "quantitative phase" involved an "exhaustive study of demographics, voting trends, political donations and the like." To this, she added "the qualitative phase," an "equally exhausting pooling of the collective knowledge of our members." The quantitative part of the PSA was conducted by professionals, hired by McAlevey, while the second was done by the members themselves.

Not only was the PSA important as a descriptive device, pinpointing who had power, but it also served as an educational tool. With it, McAlevey taught workers about power and showed them how to increase and use their own strength. In Stamford, the PSA-inspired mobilization of the members of the unions participating in the project succeeded in increasing union membership in the area, stopping the planned demolition of a large tract of public housing (where many union members lived), and winning millions of public dollars to improve that housing. And in nearly all of the places McAlevey worked in her ten years as an organizer, the PSA technique proved exceptionally useful: in identifying public housing as a key concern of workers in Stamford; in mobilizing support in Kansas City to stop the sale of a public hospital; in figuring out in several places which local politicians could be compelled to support her organizing efforts and which could be defeated in elections; and in

how to pressure employers to meet bargaining demands.

Most of McAlevey's organizing was done for the SEIU. She agreed to work for the SEIU because it had the money to make organizing possible, but she tells readers that the union was riven with "turf wars" waged by various powerful union chieftains, and that these hampered her efforts wherever she went.

McAlevey was an unusually talented organizer. So, even though she frequently ran afoul of union turf wars, she always managed to have powerful allies who sought out her skills. In 2004, she was appointed Executive Director of SEIU Local 1107 in Las Vegas. Her four years there were tumultuous. The local had 9,000 members—some were county public employees and others worked at private and public hospitals—but many of the workers under contract were not in the union. The local's officers were not much concerned with organizing; finances were in disarray; contracts were expiring; some negotiations had stalled; prosperous private hospitals remained unorganized; and member morale was low.

McAlevey set about bringing 1107 to life and making it grow. She had considerable success. Her account of what she did, and why, makes for riveting reading and valuable "how to" lessons for organizers. It is what anthropologists call "thick description," so detailed that the description itself becomes an analysis. How does an organizer identify the persons in each department of a workplace who are its natural leaders? How do you get them to lead the union, or in some cases, become union members? How do you meld the leaders into a coherent team? How do the leaders organize the workers? How do you prepare workers for inexorable employer antagonism? How do workers show the employer that they are not afraid? How does the union win allies politically and in the community who will help it defeat adversaries? How does an organizer negotiate the tensions that might exist between local and national union strategies? These and many other questions are effectively answered by the author as she tells readers what she and her allies did in "Sin City." McAlevey's ability to think and act creatively is graphically and humorously portrayed in her description of her first bargaining session with a large private hospital. Breaking with typical bargaining protocol, which limits the union negotiating team to a few members, she had scores of nurses at the bargaining table, with individual nurses making the initial union proposal to the flabbergasted management team. Not only was the employer thrown off guard, but the workers felt a sense of empowerment that carried over to future sessions.

The Las Vegas chapters of the book are exceptional in terms of the nuts and bolts of organizing and bargaining. In them, she conveys a message of utmost importance to those who want to rebuild the labor movement. Workers can be organized. They are willing to join unions in large numbers, even when they face hostile labor laws, brutal employer opposition, and considerable personal risks.

McAlevey's work in Las Vegas was short-circuited, according to her, by the endless turf wars in SEIU. She says,

I operated on the assumption that, if you just kept winning in a principled way, the work you were doing would create the conditions for its own continued existence. The people at the top might not like you...but if you consistently succeeded at the assignments they gave you, ultimately they would give you more assignments and the work would go forward. I was wrong.... Past a certain point, winning actually becomes a liability, because the people at the top will feel threatened by the power you're accumulating unless they can control it; they cannot imagine that your ambition would not be to use that power in the same way they use theirs. It took ten years of banging my head on a wall to finally knock that into it.

The militant local she had built was, in her view, just too much for Stern, who was more interested in partnering with the employers against whom McAlevey was waging war. The pretext for her departure took place in 2007 when she faced charges by members of her local of illegally interfering with elections to the local's Executive Board. She writes that she was unaware that she had violated any laws. She says that she was so burned out from the constant turf wars and several years of nonstop work that she was simply "off her game" and caught off guard. To keep the peace, she agreed to resign her post in June 2008, as did the local's president, who had been her long-time adversary.

While *Raising Expectations* contains much of interest, it contains critical flaws: problems that are reflective of what is wrong with organized labor in the United States, and are associated with the intra-union power struggles and top-down governance criticized by the author.

For example, the author has a limited sense of history, of the truth that we all build on the efforts of those who came before us. Nothing that McAlevey did was new, but she often writes as if it was. She makes it appear that she invented Power Structure Analysis, at least its adaptation to labor organizing, when in fact such techniques have often been used by labor unions. Jerry Tucker did a sophisticated PSA in his 1978 defeat of a right-to-work initiative in Missouri, and in many other campaigns. Similarly with "whole worker organizing," she ignores a long history of union efforts to integrate workplace and community organizing. Packinghouse workers in the 1930s spread their organizing from the meatpacking plants into the workers' communities, leading the drive for the racial integration of local businesses. Unions have built hospitals and housing for their members. The UAW strongholds in Michigan and Ohio created entire "union towns," in which victories in the factories translated into the creation of local working-class democracies. This history escapes McAlevey, who gives the impression that every situation in which she finds herself is a *tabula rasa*, to be filled by her innovative strategy and tactics, always in the face of ignorant and recalcitrant labor leaders.

McAlevey also often fails to see that building a labor movement is a collective effort. She makes much of her isolation in the right-to-work state of Nevada. However, Las Vegas is not an isolated town in the nonunion South. It is home to a strong labor movement, with a vital and large union of culinary workers, and considerable political muscle. Furthermore, California, with strong unions facing the same employers she did, was just across the border. Private-sector hospitals in California had been organized, with workers winning superior wages, benefits, working conditions, and patient protections. She would not have been able to win good contracts with the private hospital corporations in Las Vegas without the prior success of her California counterparts. Yet, she gives them no credit and seems to go out of her way to say that they did not help her at all, which, I have learned since reading her book, is not true.

Finally, a reasonable reader might question the depth of her commitment to rank-and-file workers. She frequently denigrated the local's officers, but instead of doing a PSA of the local to find out how they could be won over to her vision, she illegally tried to overthrow them. She argues that a modern union needs a paid professional staff, presumably comprised of people like her, recruited from outside of the local union. But it seems not to have occurred to her that the rank-and-file members could be trained to be professionals, to do anything she could do, and with the advantage of having performed the work of the members they represented.

I was surprised to find out, again after reading the book, that despite all of her sharp and accurate criticisms of Stern and the SEIU leadership, she agreed to serve on the national union's Executive Board in 2007; in fact, she was appointed by Stern. Then in 2008, she ran (and won), on Stern's team, in Executive Board elections, after the SEIU had long since gone down the path of UAW-like partnership. How is it possible that you can be a champion of member empowerment and serve on the very executive body of a union that opposes it?

Conclusion

The trajectories of the UAW and the SEIU tell us something profoundly depressing about organized labor in the United States. Despite their radically different histories and recent growth rates, both unions embraced labor-management partnership with gusto, with the attendant autocratic leadership, member disempowerment, and limited gains from collective bargaining. How can this be? Consider something I once wrote:

organizations workers form to combat their oppression will find it difficult to avoid being influenced by the hegemony capitalism seeks to impose over society. It has been the rule rather than the exception that labor unions become bureaucratic and conservative, even if they were radical in the beginning. The labor movement in the United States, for example, was an active participant in the anti-worker Cold War, purging and persecuting its left-led unions and radical union leaders. Unions in the rich capitalist countries have actively supported the imperialism of their nation's businesses and governments. Unions around the world have been sexist, racist, and homophobic, dividing workers just as surely as have the employers they fight against.² [2]

Capitalism brings forth behaviors and modes of thought in its own image and likeness. We are forced to act in certain ways if we want to survive and prosper. But these cannot liberate us; they only help to recreate an oppressive system. Unions might raise wages, improve working conditions, and force governments to enact worker-friendly laws. These are good things, but they do not challenge the rule of capital. And if unions come to mirror their class enemy, they would not even be able to achieve these victories. If the UAW and the SEIU hold themselves up to a mirror today, the faces they see will be those of GM and Health Corporation of America.

And still, capital's power is never absolute, and this is what gives us hope. The brutality of its rule always calls forth rebellion. Shotwell and McAlevy show us two kinds of rebellion. Shotwell's is rooted in the daily misery of his fellow workers. He expresses what they feel and helps make them conscious of the sources of their subjugation. His essays reflect their desire for escape from the bosses' control and to use democratically what is rightfully theirs—the union they and their forebears sweated to create. When automobile laborers look at Shotwell, they see themselves. When they read his words, they feel what he expresses. He is an organic intellectual, risen up from the ranks to give voice to his class.

Shotwell grasps that it is only through the power workers have in their workplaces that they can challenge capital. Work-to-rule is his preferred method of class struggle, but he is not averse to anything that might defeat the employers. Upon the intelligence and efforts of the Shotwells of the world, and with their leadership, a working-class movement worthy of the name might yet be made, one that both the employers and their union junior partners will fear.

McAlevy's rebellion, however, centers too much on herself. Her actions were not rooted in the daily work experiences of those she helped organize and whom she represented at the bargaining table. This was not just because she did not have such work experiences. She simply does not have a working-class consciousness, a sense of herself as an interchangeable part of a collectivity. Her sensibility is essentially bourgeois—individualistic and narcissistic. Collective give-and-take, much less self-criticism, are not in her vocabulary. When workers see her, they do not see themselves, just her. In the end, capital and the union chieftains are not afraid of such people.

While these two books chronicle the specific experiences of two people in two unions, they contain the seeds of several general lessons for building a labor movement. First, unions as presently constituted are hostile to the attainment of class power. They are often nearly as much the enemy of workers as are employers. Second, people from outside of the working class can ally themselves with workers, but they cannot comprise the bulk of its leadership. Such persons cannot understand what it means to be a worker, to feel the stress and alienation of the assembly line, the hospital ward, the office cubicle. Unless they at least spend time laboring in such places, they are bound to be separated from those they lead. Third, the most important thing experts can do is teach workers to become experts. Workers must lead themselves, and there is no reason why they cannot learn whatever is necessary for them to do so. Fourth, a labor movement has to concern itself with every aspect of working-class life: jobs, unemployment, community, politics, family, the environment. Fifth, while workers can be organized and unions can make their lives better, unless these efforts are part of an explicitly anti-capitalist project, victories will always be partial and temporary. Human liberation will never be at hand unless we strive for the abolition of the working class, for an end to wage labor, for a society in which the empowerment and improved circumstances of each is but a moment in the struggle for the collective betterment of all.

Notes

1. ↪ [3] Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from the Shotwell or the McAlevy book.
2. ↪ [4] Michael D. Yates, "Removing the Veil," from *In and Out of the Working Class* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring Publishing, 2009).

googleplus

Source URL: <http://portside.org/2013-05-06/who-will-lead-us-working-class>

Links:

- [1] <https://monthlyreview.org/2013/05/01/who-will-lead-the-u-s-working-class#en1>
 [2] <https://monthlyreview.org/2013/05/01/who-will-lead-the-u-s-working-class#en2>
 [3] <https://monthlyreview.org/2013/05/01/who-will-lead-the-u-s-working-class#fn1>
 [4] <https://monthlyreview.org/2013/05/01/who-will-lead-the-u-s-working-class#fn2>

We ask what kind of people might lead the U.S. working class. The United Auto Workers. Gregg Shotwell, now retired, was for more than thirty years a rank-and-file machine operator for General Motors and Delphi, one of the world's largest auto parts manufacturers. Not only did those who labored on the assembly lines and in the shops transform themselves from factory serfs to class-conscious workers, but they also took control of the shop floor from a management notorious for oppressive treatment of its "hands." Shotwell tells a story on the first page of his book that illustrates the power of the union. Because the main illness of the working-class movement is a treachery of working-class interests inside of it. Only rare local organizations survive and do not decay and only because there are leaders, guides who cannot simply regenerate, turn over by virtue of their personal qualities - such they were born by their father and mother. The general picture is the following - the higher is the level of the working-class organization, the more hopeless is position: the top floors of trade unions, committees, strike committees are already toothless, peacefully existing with management of anti-work...