

"Beyond \$15:"
Discussion and action
guide

A handbook for activists

Preface: Lessons in Power

Rosenblum describes how, in surveying the decline of unions and work standards in the last 30 years, he “came to see that corporate America was only half of our problem. The other half was the union movement itself.” (xii)

1. Why is it important to understand the shared responsibility of both corporate America and unions for our present circumstances?
2. How does this claim compare to your experience, education, or stereotypes constructed around union-corporate relationships in the United States?
3. What can and should be done to alter both corporate America and modern unions?

Chapter 1: An Introduction to Power Inequality

Rosenblum argues that much of the recent attention on income inequality misses the root cause of society’s ills: power inequality. He likens the focus on income inequality to treating a fever with aspirin “without going after the underlying disease” and argues that to make lasting change we must “ask the simple but vital question of why we have such inequity in our society.” (8)

1. How is this focus on power inequality, and not income inequality, different from traditional social and economic justice rhetoric of possibility? What are the potential benefits of focusing on structural power rather than policy change?
2. Why do you think there is less discussion about power inequality than Rosenblum thinks there ought to be?
3. If there was a greater focus on power as an explicit goal in movement work today, how would those movements be different in terms of strategy, composition, and goals?

Further exploration: Start a discussion in your organization, group, neighborhood, or congregation that examines power relationships in your community: Read Jane McAlevey’s [article](#) on how workers and allies in Stamford, Connecticut determined their campaign by first engaging in a power structure analysis. Consider doing a similar analysis in your community.

Chapter 2: Power Shift

Rosenblum describes how business and government leaders collaborated to dramatically shift power in the airline industry to satisfy their profit interests through privatization, contracting out, and union-busting. His views are aligned with those of Sen. Bernie Sanders, who frequently asserted in 2016 as he ran for president that “the system is rigged” against working people.

1. How does the description of great change in the airline industry compare to other major industries, changing expectations for worker flexibility, and even your own personal experiences and observations?
2. Do you think this concentration of money and power in the hands of the few is inevitable under our current economic and political system? Why or why not?
3. What other options did workers have to combat the consolidation of power within the airline industry? What is the most significant factor leading to the loss of power for workers?

Rosenblum identifies 1978 as a pivotal year in which Congress passed laws that set the stage for dramatic disruption in the airline industry in the decades that followed.

4. Could a different legislative outcome (one that would have ensured a just economy for airline industry workers, while improving air service for customers) be possible? What would that different industry structure look like?
5. In retrospect, what would workers and community allies needed to have done differently over the years in order to prevent what happened in 1978 and ensure a just economy for airline industry workers?

Further exploration: Explore inequality further by studying materials at [United for a Fair Economy](#), Hedrick Smith’s [Reclaim the American Dream](#), or similar websites. Read competing arguments about whether today’s vast inequality is [inevitable under capitalism](#), or [not inevitable](#), and lead a discussion on this question.

Chapter 3: Game Changer: Sea-Tac and the Fight for a Fair Economy

Through the eyes of two women – Mia Su-Ling Gregerson and Reverend Jan Bolerjack – Rosenblum describes the profound community changes in SeaTac that followed airline industry disruption. He describes a huge influx of new immigrants, soaring poverty, increasing hunger and declining health.

1. Which of the changes discussed in the text – in demographics, health, income, economic opportunity – are present across American communities in the last 5-15 years?
2. How are these changes connected to shifts in the economy, local industry and work opportunities?

Rosenblum asserts that unions banked on – and have repeatedly been disappointed by – Democratic Party political leaders who pledged to deliver labor law reform, universal healthcare, and other social advances, but failed to do so.

3. What are the problems or limitations in dependence on the “inside game” political strategy?
4. If you could roll the clock back to 2007, as Barack Obama was emerging as a presidential candidate, what would you advocate the labor movement do differently?

Rosenblum notes that in 2011 his union, SEIU, was deeply concerned with “the growing gulf in wages and rights between the overwhelmingly nonunion private sector and the higher union density public sector” and that adversaries – such as Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker – were skillfully exploiting those divisions to break union power. (47-48)

5. What are common divides between union and nonunion workers? Between one group of workers and another (e.g. native born vs. immigrants)? Why are those divisions important to understand in crafting strategies for organizing?
6. How do corporate executives and their political patrons exploit differences among workers? Which are most effective and why?

Further exploration: Lead a discussion in your organization, group, neighborhood or congregation about divisions you experience or see in the workplace or community. Discuss what you or others can do differently, or better, to confront and overcome racial, ethnic, language, or other divisions.

Chapter 4: Bridging the Trust Gap

Rosenblum describes how, in order to build trust with one another, unions and the Muslim community had to move beyond their “comfort zones.”

1. How important is trust in building a social or economic justice movement? Can a campaign succeed without building complete trust?
2. What experience do you have in going outside “comfort zones”? What happened?
3. What role do shared cultural understandings play in organizing workers? What are the potential benefits of organizing across faith communities? What are the potential pitfalls?

Zainab Aweis was one of the Hertz workers who was suspended for praying. “I like the job,” she said, “but if I can’t pray, I don’t see the benefit.” (63) On its face, that doesn’t seem like a very practical decision – Aweis surely had bills to pay.

4. What do you suppose was going through Aweis’s mind when she decided to risk her job by going to pray?
5. How can the fundamental truths of faith-based communities be mobilized in resistance to worker oppression? How can those faith-based doctrines be understood alongside human rights and civil rights doctrines?
6. Are there times in your life when you’ve made decisions that were principled but not practical? What happened?

Rosenblum notes how workers historically have been weakened through division, saying, “The fault lines within the working class are many – gender, education level, race, language, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation and identity, citizenship status – and employers over the years have skillfully exploited divisions among workers to break insurgent organizing.” (71-72)

7. What are some examples of the “fault lines” that we see in the workplace and in civil society today?
8. Which of these “fault lines” are most potent in dividing workers, and why?

Further exploration: Seek out a dialogue with someone from a faith that you are not familiar with. If you’re not a Muslim, find someone to speak with at a local mosque. You can find out about local mosques by contacting local affiliates of the [Council on American-Islamic Relations](#). Ask about the Five Pillars of Islam and compare them to teachings from your own faith background. Come up with an activity – as simple as sharing a meal or organizing an event together – that will deepen your relationship and mutual understanding.

Chapter 5: A Moral Movement

Rosenblum describes that to win the economic and political fight at the airport, “we had to alter the terrain of struggle” and “turn the right to organize at the airport into a moral question.” (76-78)

1. What were the economic and political obstacles that the campaign was facing?
2. What made these obstacles so difficult to overcome?

Rosenblum describes the confrontation at the 2012 Alaska Airlines shareholders meeting between the company CEO and airport workers, community allies, and faith leaders, and notes how the speeches by faith leaders were impossible for the CEO to brush off. He goes on to observe: “The subtle but crucial distinction that some of us were beginning to grasp was the power, not of the moral argument in service to political demands, but instead political demands made on the basis of a moral foundation.” (84)

3. Why do you think the “moral foundation” in the Sea-Tac campaign was so powerful?
4. Consider Rosenblum’s description of the Sea-Tac fight in comparison to other advocacy efforts that you are familiar with. How can a strong and visible moral foundation be developed in other campaigns? How would a strong moral foundation strengthen those campaigns?

To take on Port authorities and Alaska Airlines, airport workers and their allies – especially clergy – engaged deliberately in law-breaking activities like trespassing, sit-ins, and leafleting passengers and demonstrating in prohibited areas.

5. How did breaking laws at Sea-Tac help the campaign and why was that approach necessary?
6. In the emerging power struggle between the airport workers and Alaska Airlines and the airport authorities, what role did the law play?
7. How does law serve to maintain the power and economic status quo? How should movements take that into account in designing campaigns for social and economic change?
8. Rosenblum suggests that it is alright – and even necessary – to break laws. Do you agree with that? If so, then under what circumstances is it OK to break laws?

Further exploration: Read Dr. Martin Luther King’s [Letter from Birmingham Jail](#), paying special attention to his distinction between just laws and unjust laws. Consider what laws you would be willing to break today, for which causes, and under what circumstances.

Chapter 6: If You Want Change, You Need a Big Idea

Rosenblum describes how one worker, Samatar Abdullahi, thought the campaign strategy ought to involve demanding union recognition – the opposite of plans developed by SEIU headquarters staff.

1. Why do you suppose these views about strategy were so divergent?
2. In thinking about campaigns, how should activists weigh the perspectives of people “on the ground” versus people who may not be as close to the day-to-day campaign but who have significant professional organizing experience? How should important strategic conflicts between these two groups be resolved?

The wheelchair attendant Saba Belachew encountered skepticism from her co-workers when she first broached the idea of forming a union; this is a commonplace reaction in most workplaces in the United States.

3. Why do you think initial worker skepticism to the idea of organizing a union is common in the US?
4. How did Belachew overcome that resistance? How did she effectively frame the choice that workers faced?
5. How did Belachew talk about power to her co-workers?

The delegations of workers and allies who confronted Alaska Airlines management and the bosses at the contract firms knew in advance that the companies would reject the call for union recognition and bargaining. Yet they still proceeded with presenting the demand for union recognition.

6. Why was it important for the workers and allies to make the union recognition and bargaining demand, even knowing they would be rejected by the companies? How did the act of presenting the demands shift power at the airport?

Further exploration: With colleagues and allies, consider making a demand on political and business leaders in the same way that the Sea-Tac Airport workers did. How would you organize it? Read a copy of Labor Notes’ [Secrets of a Successful Organizer](#), a practical how-to organizing manual, or take the companion Labor Notes online training course, [Beating Apathy](#). Then make a plan for a “demand action” as part of a campaign that your community is involved with.

Chapter 7: Speaking Truth in the Halls of Power

Rosenblum describes how Alaska Airlines CEO Brad Tilden, speaking at the company’s 2013 shareholders meeting, warned against the \$15 initiative, saying, “I’ve watched the movie of airline after airline after airline not honor the requirement to make a profit, and what they do is they file for bankruptcy. And hundreds of thousands of people lose jobs, pensions get cut.” (117) This economic “trickle down” theory is a common argument advanced by corporate executives in response to demands for higher pay.

1. Why is this a prominent argument and where is it regularly voiced?
2. How prevalent is this argument in US society today, and why?
3. Tilden talks about “the requirement to make a profit” as if it’s an accepted truism. Is this accurate? Why or why not?

Rosenblum describes the difficulty that organizers faced in trying to persuade workers to join a campaign “that had no analog or precedent.” Organizers, he said, “had to apply a measure of faith – a belief within themselves and in their conversations with others based not on proof or precedent – in cajoling people to take a step into uncharted territory.” (123)

4. What experiences have you had in doing something you’d never done before?
5. How did you manage the challenge of stepping into “uncharted territory”?

Tea Party members Vicki Lockwood and Kathleen Brave gave passionate speeches at SeaTac City Hall against the \$15 initiative. Rosenblum observes that for these two women, who came of age after WWII, “it wasn’t just the presence of reactionary media that shaped them, but also the absence in their lives of any countervailing working-class ideology that put people’s needs before profits, that preached class solidarity and mutual aid.” (131)

6. What do you think about the author’s assertion that the labor movement’s failure to advance “a countervailing working-class ideology” after WWII is partly responsible for today’s Tea Party ideology?
7. What role does racism play in the economic perspectives of Lockwood, Brave, and other working class people who are pro-Tea Party?

Further exploration: Make a list of the experiences and beliefs that you have in common with people like Vicki Lockwood and Kathleen Brave. Then make a list of the differences you have with them. Then, keeping those lists in mind, make a plan to talk with someone who holds different political views – a relative, neighbor, etc. – with the goal of finding areas of agreement or common experience.

Chapter 8: Union Troubles, Community Win

Rosenblum describes the internal upheaval in the Sea-Tac campaign eight weeks before the election when the main campaign funder, David Rolf, unilaterally sought to shift from the workers and coalition building into a focused vote turnout effort.

1. Why was it important for the other union leaders to resist the shift away from the workers and coalition building? What would have been the short-term and long-term consequences if the focus had been shifted?

Rosenblum notes that Rolf drew inspiration from Silicon Valley entrepreneurs and “approvingly quoted Intel CEO Andrew Grove’s advice to him to focus on outcomes above all ‘and treat everything else—laws, strategies, structures—as secondary.’” (137)

2. What are the costs and benefits of Grove’s advice being applied to social change work?
3. How are unions and other social justice organizations different from Silicon Valley startups?
4. In quoting Grove, Rolf suggests that the result of a campaign matters more than the relationships or coalitions that develop over the course of campaign work. How do examples from the book challenge this assumption?

Today’s media tend to describe contemporary labor fights through, as Rosenblum calls it, “the frame of institutional battle – unions on one side, big corporations on the other.” (146) Rosenblum argues that such a viewpoint misses out on the grassroots perspective. In SeaTac, for example, “a workforce largely made up of immigrants, backed by unions and progressive community forces, was organizing for dignity and power against the region’s most entrenched business interests.” (147)

5. How is the grassroots framework different from the institutional framework?
6. Why do you think the media tend to downplay or outright ignore the grassroots perspective in social justice campaigns?
7. What strategies can be adopted to combat this perspective?

Further exploration: Lead a discussion in your community, based on movements that the community has been involved in, about the tension between achieving results in a campaign versus building relationships and coalitions. Discuss what best builds lasting power, and from this discussion develop written movement-building principles that you will apply in the future.

Chapter 9: Beyond the Ballot Box

Rosenblum writes that community leader Mohamed Sheikh Hassan "saw the Sea-Tac campaign not just in economic terms; it was about raising people's expectations and cementing their roles as civic activists in a new land." (158)

1. In what ways did the Sea-Tac campaign raise expectations and train new civic activists?
2. Think about other campaigns you've been involved in or are familiar with. How does campaign involvement change an individual's perspective, political analysis, or motivation?
3. When evaluating the success of movement-building work, why is it important to consider not just campaign outcomes, but factors like raising people's expectations?

In the Seattle campaign to achieve a \$15 minimum wage, Rosenblum describes the tension between two divergent approaches: the grassroots movement led by Socialist Alternative, and the insider negotiations.

4. To what extent was this tension good or bad?
5. Do you think a closer alliance between Seattle union leaders and Socialist Alternative would have produced a different outcome? Why or why not?

At the end of Chapter 9, Rosenblum argues that the 2016 presidential election "laid bare the deep alienation and pain felt by broad swaths of working people and exposed the full scope of the union movement's existential crisis." (172)

6. What do you think about this characterization of the 2016 election?
7. In the wake of Donald Trump's election, how would you describe the "existential crisis" of the union movement? How does this crisis manifest in the broader community?

Further exploration: Invite speakers to your community who match the divergent approaches described in this chapter: Someone who is focused on negotiating with the power structure to achieve change, and someone who is focused on grassroots organizing and outside pressure. Then lead a discussion in your group about the benefits and challenges of each approach. Develop written principles of how to calibrate inside versus outside approaches that you will apply in the future.

Chapter 10: Beyond \$15: The Social Movement Union

Rosenblum argues that “the union movement as it currently exists isn’t capable of building and sustaining the kind of power needed in today’s economic and political reality,” and on Pages 174 and 175 he offers four reasons for this: ebbing numerical strength, limited vision and outmoded structures, outdated models that fail to meet the needs of a growing number of workers, and failure to tap the full potential of union members.

1. What do you think about his overall critique, as well as each of his four reasons?
2. How do his critique and the reasons he gives compare to your own experiences and understandings?

Beginning on Page 179, Rosenblum describes three “bedrock principles” for building a new labor movement. His first principle is that unions must “Aim higher: articulate a bolder vision of a just society that stands as a stark counterpoint to capitalism.”

3. What do you think about this “aim higher” principle? Must unions articulate an alternative to capitalism in order to remain relevant in the long run?
4. What are the potential difficulties of shifting normative perspectives of those already working within labor movements?

Rosenblum writes that the 2011 Occupy movement “opened up an important space to imagine a new social order. But unions missed an opportunity by failing to build upon Occupy’s critique, instead diverting energy into pragmatic battles—like Obama’s 2012 reelection campaign—that raised the justice banner but steered clear of any serious discussion about what an economy built to fulfill human needs, not profit, might look like.” (179)

5. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Why or why not? What would a much deeper union involvement with Occupy look like?

Rosenblum argues that a renewed labor movement must be shaped not just by political and economic demands, but must also have a “moral framework.” He maintains that this “foundation of spiritual morality is widely underappreciated or downplayed in most quarters of today’s union movement.” (180)

6. Do you agree or disagree with this assertion? Why or why not?
7. Why has spiritual morality been downplayed in many movements, particularly economic justice movements? How should we work to overcome that?

Rosenblum’ second principle is “Reach wider: redefine who constitutes ‘the labor movement’ to include all workers.” He describes tenant rights organizations, immigrant and civil rights groups, faith institutions, and others as “unions in the community – part of the core of the labor movement.” (181)

8. What do you think about his definition of a “labor movement” that includes more than workplace unions?
9. What would the strengths of this new labor movement be? What would some of the difficulties or challenges be?

Rosenblum’s third principle is “Build deeper: cultivate the ideas and leadership of workers.” He asserts that “Most of what passes for worker involvement today just touches the surface of tapping true worker intelligence and leadership.” (184)

10. What do you think about this “build deeper” principle?
11. If you are in a union, or know someone in a union, how does that description compare to your experience or what you’ve heard?

In this final chapter Rosenblum argues for experimentation to build a new labor movement, and he argues that most of this experimentation will take place outside of existing unions. He quotes Mark and Paul Engler as saying, “Because organizations have to worry about self-preservation, they become adverse to risk-taking. Because they enjoy some access to formal avenues of power, they tend to overestimate what they can accomplish from inside the system. As a result, they forget the disruptive energy that propelled them to power to begin with, and so they often end up playing a counter-productive role.” (189)

12. What do you think about the Englers’ description of organizations and their aversion to risk-taking? How does it match up to your experience?
13. Do we, as individual activists, sometimes overestimate what we can accomplish “from inside the system”? If that’s true, then how should we think about working inside and outside the system?
14. How can existing organizations do better at supporting “disruptive energy” and risk-taking, and avoid the trap of just working within existing channels of power?

Rosenblum lists a number of contemporary struggles that he says contain element of social movement unionism – worker centers, Uber drivers organizing, groups taking direct action against evictions and foreclosures, schoolteachers. Each of these efforts, he says, “contains at least a rudimentary recognition that the fight is about power, each offers a critique of modern-day capitalism, and each contains bold strategies and new relationships that we can employ in building a formidable new labor movement.” (190)

15. What other struggles that you are involved in, or are aware of, might also be included in this list?

Further exploration: Read more about social movement unionism (also called social justice unionism), like Bill Fletcher’s blog about [the Chicago teachers’ strike](#), or [the primer](#) issued by the Philippine Alliance of Progressive Labor, or view [Tyree Scott speaking on workers and trade](#). Lead a discussion in your union, community, or congregation about what social movement unionism should look like in your community.