



## ORGANIZE FOR THE LONG HAUL



Annette Bernhardt. (CC BY-SA 2) bit.ly/1L7D0G8

You've been reading about thousands of people who are organizing with their co-workers to take control of their work lives. It's not easy. Our employers—and too often our elected officials—have been bearing down on us for decades. It's almost all we can do to hold our ground. But some have been able to push back.

**We have the power to beat employers at their own game.**

There's a lot we can learn from these troublemakers. First and foremost, when ordinary workers act together, we have the power to beat employers at their own game.

When you're doing the day-to-day work of an organizer—talking to your co-workers, passing out leaflets, going to another union's picket line—you can't always see how you fit into the big picture. You're too close.

But if you step back, you'll see that our movement is built on millions of little actions just like yours. They're all part of shifting the balance of power in our direction.

### GRAINS OF SAND

In Mexico there's a saying, "*Traigo mi granito de arena.*" It means, "I bring my little grain of sand." Each of us brings our own little grain of sand to the project of building a better world.

What you are doing every day when you start that conversation at work, or circulate a group grievance, or show a co-worker it's okay to stand up to the supervisor, is adding your bit of grit.

No matter the frustrations, don't give up. We may lose a lot more than we win—but sometimes our victories change everything.

And although history is often recorded as the story of great men acting individually, we know that almost everything working people have ever won has been the result of thousands of ordinary folks acting together, with the courage to bring their own grains of sand.

### EVERYDAY PEOPLE

Leaders like John L. Lewis, head of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, are often given credit for

the great labor victories of the 1930s. But Lewis was propelled by the thousands of workers who risked their jobs to sit down in auto plants, steel mills, and Woolworth stores.

Movements  
emerge after  
years of  
spadework.

When we think of the civil rights movement, we think of Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, Jr. But they were propelled by thousands of African American maids, field hands, factory workers, and teenagers who stood up to police dogs and fire hoses, together with thousands of allies of all races who believed in justice.

Those movements, and every other movement, were created by all the individuals who went up to someone else and said, “Let’s *do something*.”

### THINGS CAN CHANGE QUICKLY

In 1937, more than 3 million workers joined the labor movement and close to 2 million went on strike. It seemed like things changed overnight.

But movements like that don’t just emerge out of thin air. The ground had been prepared by years of spadework, by person after person bringing their grains of sand.

The labor upheaval of the 1930s was born out of decades of prior organizing. Activists from the Wobblies, the Farmer-Labor Party, and the old American Federation of Labor mixed in with radical immigrants and homegrown socialists on the shop floor. They developed reputations as trustworthy leaders.

Some of them kicked off the wave of strikes and organizing. Others were there to lead it when it spread to their factories.

The same thing is true of the civil rights movement of the 1960s. It grew out of long-term work by the NAACP, African American churches, and a host of community groups in both the North and the South.

Rosa Parks was not just a tired woman on a bus. She was a trained organizer, part of a group who had made a strategic decision to take on Jim Crow.

### BE READY

That’s the common denominator across the strike wave of the 1930s, the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and even the Occupy Wall Street movement a few years ago. When the opportunity presented itself, organizers were ready—and were willing to aim higher than anyone thought possible.

Dorret (CC BY 2.0) [bit.ly/dorretphoto](http://bit.ly/dorretphoto)



Nothing fuels a movement like victory. After the Montgomery bus boycotters won in 1956, the civil rights movement spread like wildfire. When the winds shift, the little campaign we lead today can swell into a powerful movement tomorrow.

Chicago's example touched off a national wave of teacher, student, and parent activism.

The next upsurge will call for legions of skilled, far-sighted activists. We sharpen our skills by getting into fights, and hopefully winning some.

Convincing co-workers to have each other's backs against a common enemy is essential practice for the kind of organizing it takes to change the balance of power in our communities and our whole society.

### LONG-DISTANCE RUNNERS

This book includes scores of tactics and strategies. They're not guaranteed to produce victory. Sometimes the employers are stronger than we are, and they win. Or we win a round, but it's only round one in a much longer fight.

Movements need long-distance runners. We have to be in it for the long haul.

It took activists in the Chicago Teachers Union years to transform their passive union into the fighting organization that pulled off a winning strike in 2012. And as electrifying as the strike was, it was only one chapter in a much longer story.

The year after the strike, the union's nemesis Mayor Rahm Emanuel slashed back, closing nearly 50 schools at once, the most any U.S. city had ever seen. As we write in 2016, the union is in the midst of its next intense contract campaign, battling attacks on teachers' pensions and preparing for another possible strike. Teachers and their community allies continue to inspire with brave hunger strikes and civil disobedience.

But the Chicago teachers have found that they're not alone. Their example touched off a national wave of teacher, student, and parent activism. Dozens of teacher unions have launched their own campaigns for "the schools students deserve." They've upped the ante by boycotting tests, working to rule, and conducting rolling strikes.

What keeps people going despite the reversals is the knowledge that you are part of something bigger than yourself. Folksinger Pete Seeger used to describe a giant seesaw. One end is weighed down by the rich and powerful. At the other end, activists are adding sand, one teaspoon at a time.

"One of these years, you'll see that whole seesaw go *zoop* in the other direction," Seeger said. "And people will say, 'Gee, how did it happen so suddenly?' Us and all our little teaspoons."