

## Cushnie Study Guide for Students

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### **Preface: Lessons in Power**

While introducing the normative framework of the book, Rosenblum argues that at the heart of the struggle for workers’ recognition and rights is a battle over power. The following questions ask you to engage with this concept as well as begin thinking about the case study for analysis:

- 1) When Rosenblum states that, “the rights of working people...are only meaningful to the extent we’re capable of defending them” (x) what does this assume about the nature of legal rights? Is this true of all fundamental rights that citizens enjoy?
- 2) What is civil disobedience? What are the costs/benefits of its use as a tactic of resistance? Why is it specifically important to the labor movement as an instrument for worker empowerment?
- 3) When Rosenblum states that, “...the balance of power is always in play” (xi), what does this assume about the agency of workers? What examples does Rosenblum provide to support this claim?
- 4) What are the significant factors leading to rising or declining union membership? What are the potential costs/benefits of expanding union membership for those already unionized?
- 5) Why is it important to understand the self-inflicted wounds of organized labor alongside the political and economic pressures from the outside? Which do you think are more important and why?
- 6) What are the potential positive/negative consequences of unions forming stable relationships with the corporations they work within?
- 7) What are the alternatives to a workforce represented by unions? What are the potential societal costs of the continuing decline of union membership?
- 8) How do new narratives about work focusing on independent, on-call, and flexible workers counterintuitively remove power and control for workers over their employment?
- 9) Are movements focused on raising minimum wages meant to be a replacement for organizing workers into a union? How can we understand wage-based movements as complementary and/or antagonistic to organized labor?

## Chapter 1: An Introduction to Power Inequality

Chapter 1 establishes the changing conditions and associations with work in the United States. Specifically, Rosenblum combines the stories of new immigrants with marginalized workers already struggling in the country. The following questions ask you to consider issues of inequality in a shifting labor market:

- 1) Why does Rosenblum start the chapter with a narrative about a new immigrant experiencing poverty in the United States?
- 2) What were the unique challenges facing organizers of the \$15 wage campaign in Sea-Tac? Consider answers in terms of both organizing workers and forces of opposition.
- 3) Rosenblum argues, “We had to uncover the root causes of economic misery, because only by exposing the causes could we begin to articulate a clear path forward” (3). Why is this approach important and how does it link to the larger themes of the text?
- 4) How do stereotypes of “deserving” versus “entry-level” workers construct the public’s understanding of a fair wage? What are the most important changes in the modern employment for workers? How have stereotypically entry level jobs become permanent spaces for non-entry level workers?
- 5) Rosenblum argues, “By focusing the conversation on wages, the mainstream discussion short-circuited a more fundamental exploration of the forces that produced this level of inequality in the first place” (7). Why is this perspective so important to the thesis of the book?
- 6) What predictions can be made about the changing power relationships between business and workers based upon the historical examples Rosenblum offers? What factors help to structure and change this relationship?
- 7) What is the thesis of *Beyond \$15*? What themes does Rosenblum present to support the main claim of the book?

## Chapter 2: Power Shift

Rosenblum considers how workers’ downgraded status to minimum wage contract positions in American airports came into being, focusing on the example of Sea-Tac Airport in Washington state. He identifies the national and the global shifts allowing for this changed status. The following questions ask you to consider issues of the consolidation of corporate power and the implications of these changes for marginalized workers:

- 1) How and why do certain sectors of the economy (such as airports) lose living wage jobs? Is this process inevitable? What are the most important factors leading to this loss of power for workers?
- 2) According to Rosenblum, why are wage policy and income inequality critiques inadequate in response to larger issues of workers’ rights?
- 3) How do national crises offer opportunities for corporate interests to consolidate power?
- 4) How does the deregulation of the airline industry provide a case study for the merger of the interests of political and economic elites at the expense of workers? In other words, how can the political realm which is responsible for fulfilling the interests of voters allow for citizens to disproportionately suffer while a small number reap large financial rewards?
- 5) Why did the United States government bailout airlines rather than nationalize them in the wake of the September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 attacks? What are the potential costs and benefits of nationalizing a private industry which provides a public utility? How would your reaction to the deregulation and consolidation of industry power change if the public utility was electricity, water, and/or internet access?
- 6) Considering the airline industry example, why is worker solidarity important in the struggle for rights? How do airline bargaining techniques demonstrate the need for workers to support each other?
- 7) In the story of Alex Hoopes, Rosenblum points out that Hoopes understood Alaska Airline’s tactics as, “...more about power and control,” than the company’s bottom line (32). Why? How does this argument align with the thesis of the book? Why are personal narratives important in the analysis and understanding of macro-level economic shifts?
- 8) How can changes at the industry level lead to chain reactions affecting a community’s social, political, and/or economic participation in the world around them?
- 9) Why is the free market assumption of risk and reward not applicable to the airline industry as it is currently structured? As you observe the economy, is that free market risk/reward assumption applicable or not in other industries?

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

Chapter 3 considers three important institutions implicated in the necessity of a living wage campaign at Sea-Tac Airport. First, are the specific conditions present in the city of SeaTac for individuals as workers and residents; second, is the modern trajectory and shortcomings of unions in the United States; and third, is the important role that state and local politics play in empowering or disempowering workers. The following questions ask you to consider the various strategies available to contest powerful institutions and stakeholders:

- 1) What are the multiple impacts on surrounding communities when industry shifts the union worker model?
- 2) How can the circumstances in Sea-Tac linked to new immigrants provide parallels to other eras of immigration in the United States? Specifically, how does the utilization of immigrant labor follow a consistent pattern across time?
- 3) How are the causes of poverty in the United States typically explained? How do Rosenblum’s examples of poverty in the SeaTac community challenge these assumptions of who is responsible for impoverished communities?
- 4) In reference to the responsibility of unions, Rosenblum asks the question: “Was it their job to accommodate to capitalism and get the best deal possible for their members, or were unions needed to challenge the profit system and fight for the interests of the entire working class?” (43) What are the costs and benefits of each approach? Is there another way we can understand the responsibility of unions outside of this binary?
- 5) According to Rosenblum, why did unions choose to pursue legal reform over organizing campaigns? What are the consequences of this choice?
- 6) What are the benefits and detriments to unions of aligning with political parties?
- 7) Why would initial participation in protest, regardless of its relative success, be important to forging larger and continuing movements?
- 8) What unique hurdles were present in the campaign to organize workers at and around Sea-Tac airport? What strategies could be utilized to overcome these challenges?

## Chapter 4: Bridging the Trust Gap

Frequently cultural considerations are largely absent from movements to organize workers. Due to the prevalence of immigrant labor at Sea-Tac Airport, organizers had to adapt to the conditions present in the community. The following questions ask you to engage with the issues surrounding religion, culture, and diversity at the heart of the book’s case study:

- 1) Rosenblum critiques overall union apathy toward organizing campaigns in recent decades, and the challenges that attitude created in the Sea-Tac campaign. How can unions overcome their historical baggage moving forward?
- 2) Why would a more general campaign against inequality be ineffective within the new immigrant community described in the book?
- 3) What role does previous experience in protest and/or activism play in finding campaign leaders and willing participants? Why is overcoming the initial hurdle of participation both difficult and so empowering once achieved?
- 4) What role does religious faith potentially play in organizing workers? Why have unions and faith-communities been both allies and potential opponents in the United States?
- 5) Why is a multiple-front approach (legal, protest, media, member actions, etc.) necessary to sustain a successful campaign for workers?
- 6) How are messages of worker solidarity altered by the setting in which they take place? Why is location and setting important to the process of organizing?
- 7) What is the difference between the contractual duty of representing workers and the activities that might be necessary to fully support their needs and interests? How does this mirror the argument about unions becoming complacent over the last few decades?
- 8) Why was the mobilization of values based upon justice more important than focusing on the singular, contractual issue of breaks for workers at Hertz?
- 9) What is the process outlined by Rosenblum to move from the launch of an organizing campaign to restructuring power into the hands of workers?
- 10) Rosenblum argues that, “employers over the years have skillfully exploited divisions among workers to break insurgent organizing” (72). What are the ways in which those in power are able to manufacture an adversarial relationship between those who should have shared interests as workers? What important role do culture and ethnic/religious identity play in organizing workers?

## Chapter 5: A Moral Movement

As the campaign at Sea-Tac Airport was building momentum by bridging cultural divides, a moral component of the movement began to grow. Faith leaders from the social justice community became involved, granting a new source of bottom-up, ethical legitimacy to the coalition of workers, activists, and organizers. The following questions ask you to consider the role of moral and ethical claims in social movement struggles:

- 1) How did airport workers invent new protest tactics considering the unusual environment that an airport provides for resistance?
- 2) How can ethical and moral platforms develop within pragmatic campaigns to improve the conditions for workers?
- 3) Why are community and faith leaders important to organizing campaigns? How are these individuals traditionally utilized by campaigners? Why is the approach towards the clergy in the Sea-Tac campaign different? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this organizing approach?
- 4) Why was the port commission as a democratic institution able to be coopted by non-democratic entities? Where else do we see this problem in American politics?
- 5) Rosenblum argues that, “...the presence of faith leadership shifted the fight from workplace issues...to a struggle based on values” (78). How were faith leaders able to catalyze this shift?
- 6) What is the difference between bringing in faith leaders late in a campaign versus formulating a campaign with faith leaders from the ground up? Why is this difference important?
- 7) Why was the confrontation with Alaska Airline’s CEO Tilden empowering rather than intimidating? What does direct access to powerbrokers provide for social justice campaigns?
- 8) Rosenblum states that: “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). What is the importance of this distinction?
- 9) What is “collective action”? Why is it a foundational element of successful organizing campaigns?

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

The growing utilization of contract, part-time, on-call, and various other forms of precarious labor in the modern job market, creates difficulties in implementing traditional union organizing strategies. This chapter looks at the innovative solutions utilizing local political processes to make an end-run around unfriendly labor laws. The following questions ask you to analyze labor law and strategies to empower workers in modern organizing campaigns:

- 1) Why did differences exist between union and worker strategies for the Sea-Tac campaign?
- 2) Why was the Justice for Janitors campaign an innovative and ultimately successful approach for contract workers? What were the costs and benefits of this approach for Sea-Tac workers?
- 3) How and why are moving labor struggles into official federal channels a potential problem for workers rather than a protective transition?
- 4) What is a ballot initiative? Why do initiatives to raise base pay not fully address the issues of Sea-Tac workers?
- 5) How can the power of citizens as voters be mobilized to help marginalized workers? How can the opposite also occur?
- 6) Why would the support and attention of local politicians be important for a union campaign and/or a ballot initiative?
- 7) How can individual workers make a substantial difference in a union, card-signing campaign? What examples does Rosenblum offer of this phenomenon?
- 8) How did the unique perspectives of new immigrant workers involved in the Sea-Tac campaign help and/or potentially impede the process?
- 9) What is the difference between institutional expertise within a union about campaign strategy and community expertise of workers on the ground? What role did both play in the Sea-Tac campaign?

## Chapter 7: Speaking Truth in the Halls of Power

As the initiative campaign became a political reality, workers and activists participated in direct discourse with power brokers in public and private forums. They utilized tactics including moral suasion, humor, law, and organized resistance to directly confront decision-makers in powerful roles. The following questions ask you to address the strategies and philosophies utilized on either side of the issue:

- 1) What are the key differences between political campaigns and union organizing drives?
- 2) How was prayer utilized as an insurgent tactic for exposure, and why was it effective?
- 3) Why and how can creativity and humor be important to a movement? How was it utilized in the Sea-Tac campaign?
- 4) How are impersonal “market” arguments utilized to justify continuing worker oppression? Where else do you see these arguments advanced in political discourse today?
- 5) What were the threats presented by organized labor to Alaska Airlines? According to the author, what was the most important of these threats?
- 6) What was necessary to turn community skepticism of the initiative into support and campaign assistance?
- 7) What role does race and immigrant identity play in the SeaTac ballot initiative campaign? How did the SeaTac city hall meeting put these issues on display? Why is it difficult to traverse racial and cultural divides to forge solidarity between similarly situated economic groups?
- 8) How are the larger demographic shifts present across the United States illustrated in the Sea-Tac case study?
- 9) What are the economic mythologies present in the United States which are consistently mobilized to combat workers’ movements? Which spokespeople are most effective in conveying these myths, and why?
- 10) What role does the long-term neglect of worker organizing by business unionism play in making things more difficult for Sea-Tac campaigners?

## Chapter 8: Union Troubles, Community Win

Even those on the same side of a campaign can have strategic and ideological differences in how to approach contentious and challenging circumstances. Chapter 8 considers the internal and external struggles of moving forward with the initiative campaign in terms of resource allocation, strategies, and the political process. The following questions ask you to consider the struggles associated with organizing, launching, and executing a political campaign:

- 1) What are the differences between movement funding and movement ideology? How can these approaches conflict and/or support each other?
- 2) What are the various strategies available to unions in campaigns (i.e. political, legal, organizing, etc.)? How do these approaches rely upon each other?
- 3) What were the potential detriments of moving to a full “get out the vote” (GOTV) campaign over the previous approaches utilized in Sea-Tac? How is the infighting in the Sea-Tac case study representative of the larger struggle within labor movements?
- 4) When Rosenblum argues that, “...the very fact that the internal struggle had to be waged in the first place underscored the fragility of the new labor movement that was struggling to emerge” (144), what relationship does this process have to struggles over power?
- 5) How did the SeaTac initiative’s pro and con campaigns mirror the deep demographic divides in SeaTac? How do they mirror broader divides in American society today?
- 6) Why did the campaign in the small community of SeaTac lead to such a large national and international audience?
- 7) How did the larger moral argument at the heart of the campaign persevere in the GOTV environment?
- 8) How did campaigners consider cultural differences to encourage political participation?

## Chapter 9: Beyond the Ballot Box

In the aftermath of the dramatic win for \$15, organizers and Sea-Tac workers faced huge challenges in putting the law into action. The eventual success of the initiative created a new environment and strategy for movements initiated for worker empowerment. It also renewed interest and energy within the realm of local politics as a potential space for progressive legislation and change. The following questions ask you to consider the role that local politics play in pushing back against national and international economic trends:

- 1) Why would a democratically elected institution like the Port of Seattle challenge a democratically supported initiative?
- 2) Are campaigns for elevated minimum wages and campaigns for union organizing mutual exclusive or mutually reliant?
- 3) What are the household-level effects of higher wages for airport workers? How can the tangential benefits of a higher minimum wage be understood? What are the potential generational impacts?
- 4) How and why are these opportunities different at state and/or federal levels? How did the Sea-Tac campaign impact politics beyond the city limits?
- 5) How does Rosenblum demonstrate two vastly different paths to a minimum wage in the Seattle example? What are the costs/benefits of each approach?
- 6) How did the Sea-Tac campaign create leverage for grassroots activists in Seattle?
- 7) How does the \$15 deal in Seattle mirror the struggle between business unionism and social movement unionism?
- 8) How can wage fights that align with other social and economic struggles help build a new kind of labor movement?

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

Social movement unionism offers an opportunity for the mobilization of workers in campaigns reaching far beyond wages. It also represents an attempt to push back against economic forces that have reshaped the labor landscape over the past few decades. In the aftermath of the successful Sea-Tac campaign, Rosenblum looks forward to what can be learned and what is necessary to change the tide in favor of workers. The following questions ask you to engage with the potential for a new labor movement in the United States:

- 1) What does Rosenblum point towards when he argues: “Sea-Tac and its progeny seemed to offer both a glimpse into the potential of a new labor movement as well as a cautionary tale about the extraordinary difficulty of transforming existing unions and maintaining a focus on building power” (174)?
- 2) What are the foundational elements of social movement unionism? How can the Sea-Tac campaign be understood as an example of social movement unionism?
- 3) Why can’t the existing labor movement revive the status of American workers as argued by Rosenblum? Why does Rosenblum argue for a new labor movement?
- 4) What is the difference between economic and political unions? What are the shared characteristics?
- 5) What is neoliberalism? What is its overarching effect on labor standards and workers’ rights as portrayed by Rosenblum?
- 6) Why does Rosenblum argue the need for cross nation-state organizing?
- 7) What does union organizing through the lens of “accompaniment” (185) refer to? What changes in US organizing culture will be required to adopt “accompaniment” as a central movement feature?
- 8) How can social movement unionism be understood as both a universal and an idiosyncratic approach to organizing? What needs to be taken into account when taking this approach to organizing?
- 9) According to Rosenblum, what are the two most significant roles that existing unions must play to move forward?