

Courage My Friends Podcast Series IV – Episode 2
Labour Fair 2023 Keynote Address: Senator Hassan Yussuff

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ANNOUNCER: You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.
Needs No Introduction is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

[music transition]

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: COVID. Capitalism. Climate. Three storms have converged and we're all caught in the vortex.

STREET VOICE 1: When I graduate, will there be such a thing as job security? Will I still have access to healthcare?

STREET VOICE 2: We're not seeing the same increase in wages as we are in inflation and cost of living. And I'm worried about what that's gonna mean as far as having a future, having a family and being able to grow.

STREET VOICE 1 Everything is more expensive. I don't know if it's because of the climate crisis or all of this conflict but I have kids and I need to believe their future is going to be better and brighter.

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COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome back to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) and with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell-Layton Foundation. In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

VOICE 4: Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

RESH BUDHU: Three years into a pandemic that piggy-backed on four decades of neoliberal erosion and a climate crisis over a century in the making, while crises of conflict and capitalism continue to rage around us - these are, for many, desperate times indeed. From gig work and privatization of public welfare to the increasing precarity of people and planet. How are workers pushing back and organizing for the collective good?

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

In this episode of *The Courage My Friends* podcast, we are very pleased to feature the keynote speech delivered by past President of the Canadian Labour Congress,

Senator Hassan Yusuff for the 31st annual Labour Fair at George Brown College in Toronto.

Here now is Senator Yussuff on *The Other P3s: Pandemic, Privatization, Precarity... and Planet*.

We begin with an introduction by George Brown College President Gervan Fearon.

President Gervan Fearon: President Gervan Fearon [George Brown College]: Without questioning here at the college, we're so proud to have been offering this unique event since 1992. Where not only, we have the opportunity to bring together labor activists, but individuals who come forward, to engage with our students with a college community on a wide range of topics.

And again, congratulations to the organizers and all those individuals who participated over the years and then in this year's event as well. Here at George Brown College, one of the key items that we attempt to do is to ensure that the college is labor friendly, meaning, that we want to create an environment where it is really clear the contributions made by labour, not only to the college, but also to broader society and to communities at large.

This year we are, joined by the Tommy Douglas Institute, which was launched about 10 years ago at the college, and now focuses on producing The Courage My Friends podcast, at rabble.ca This invites thinkers, activists to envision the possibilities not only for our current realities, but also for the future. And in some senses, I think we forward the future by our actions today.

The Labour Fair as well as the Tommy Douglas Institute have a longstanding, history here at George Brown College. They've paired up this year because of the opportunity of sharing progressive interest in educating for change in the 21st century as well as to bring the Labour Fair to a wider audience.

As an economist, I think the language, is also perfect. And it is, The Other P3s Pandemic, Privatization, Precarity as well as, the Planet.

It is such an incredible honor for me to be able to recognize, Senator Yussuff who is one of Canada's most experienced, labour leaders And he's been such a prominent part of Canada and the Canadian scene in so many ways As the past President of the Canadian Labor Congress, he was the first person of colour to lead Canada's union movement and labor initiatives, across Canada, which is such an important role.

He immigrated to Canada from Guyana. And as someone with Caribbean background I can't but celebrate his heritage as well as his contribution to Canada.

Senator Yussuff actually worked with, General Motors for about 10 years, before getting directly involved in the labour movement.

In 1988 he joined the Canadian Auto Workers Union as the National Staff Representative, and later became, their first Director of Human Rights

In 1999, he became the Canadian Labour Congress's first person of colour elected to an executive position as the Executive Vice president.

He went on, to be elected as Secretary Treasurer for three terms, before being elected president in 2014. And then becoming re-elected in the same role in 2017. And I can tell you without question, to be able to be re-elected so many times, really attests to his incredible contributions in each of those roles.

Senator Yussuff is also a prominent individual, at the international level in terms of his activism and his contributions as well. In 2016, he was elected for his second term as President of the Trade Union Confederation of the Americas.

This organization represents 48 national organizations as well as more than 55 million workers in 21 countries. He's also a member of the Bureau and General Counsel of International Trade Union Confederation, and a member of the Ministerial Council of Trade Union Advisory Committee to the organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.

Without question, I could keep going on, on all the amazing contributions he's made. But I also think it's important to recognize that he's also been part of the government of Canada's NAFTA Council, as well as its Sustainability Development Advisory Council. So his contributions has been vast in so many ways as well as with so many task force and organizations

One of the items I'd also like to highlight is his work with the Canadian Labor Congress, with their tripartite activities. And as part of that, they are the recipient of the 2021 Canada Freedom of Association Award, for being instrumental in Canada's 2017 ratification of the International Labour Organization's Convention number 98.

Well, those are the public statements. I'd like to maybe remind, Senator Yussuff of a personal item. And it was a little while ago, so it may have been a bit faded in memory. But one accolade I didn't make mention of is that he was the recipient of an honorary doctorate at Brock University in 2018.

And I must tell you, it was the honor while I was the President and Vice Chancellor of Brock University to preside over those ceremonies and to have had the opportunity to recognize you then. So it is really with deep appreciation that I get to introduce you and to honor you today.

But most importantly, to really welcome you to George Brown College and this amazing event in the Labour Fair.

Senator. welcome and over to you.

Thank you so much.

Senator Hassan Yussuff: Senator Hassan Yussuff: Thank you President Fearon for your kind introduction.

want to start out this morning to thank of course, all the organizers for inviting me of course to their Labour Fair.

The theme, that I think was chosen by the organizing committee, is quite eloquent in its context of recognizing some very big, but important issues that we're dealing with.

The Pandemic, which we're not yet out of 100%, but we're struggling with it as we move on.

And of course Privatization. That is an ongoing issue, long before the pandemic that are having a consequential impact on people's lives and the kind a society we want to build.

And of course Precarity, which is not a new thing in our society, but it's getting new definition and new name and of course different challenges.

How do we respond to this reality of precarity and the workers that are faced with it?

Senator Hassan Yussuff: So I'll start with the pandemic.

I have to say that when the pandemic hit I was about to retire from my job at the Canadian Labour Congress. And of course within a short period of time having to reverse my plans to retire and spend the next year to two years dealing with the pandemic.

I think in my lifetime I certainly have not lived through anything of this magnitude.

I think it represents one of the greatest challenges we have seen to human health in a long time. And it wasn't just Canada that was struggling with this of course, the entire world was struggling with this.

I can say at the time no one knew with certainty when we would .Et out of this pandemic and when we would find a vaccine that will help us deal with the impact of the virus and and hopefully preserve human rights.

I think it will have a lasting impact, as we are learning more now with the research that's being done.

The mental health challenges that it poses to society as a whole, we're yet to understand, especially for young children who were isolated from their colleagues at school.

My young daughter, who of course had to do most of her class by Zoom. And the impact that had on kids, and are still having on kids as we try to figure out how we can best support them to get back to what we consider as normal.

The pandemic also, I think, revealed to a large extent the global challenges we faced. That some countries did really well. We of course in Canada being a First World country, were able to have access to many things that the rest of the world was not able to. But the reality, the rest of the world has still struggled from that. Their access to vaccines, masks, things we took for granted, you know, that was happening.

But, they could not achieve those things. And it brought into, I think to a large extent, to the rest of the world, we need to do better. Because whatever may we want to think about how we interact with the rest of the world. The world touches us every single day. As Canadians travel back and forth and others travel back and forth to our country, it doesn't take much of course for a virus that can devastate society to arrive at our shores. Or for us to take a virus to another shore and spread it and of course create devastation.

So it reminds us, we've got to work better at how we can share, of course, the knowledge and experience. But also the things that can keep us healthy around the world.

But also I think the pandemic revealed as the country was shut down - and I was living this reality, of course, dealing with the government and how we did respond to it.

It was the first time in human history, I can remember, that we shut down the entire economy. As you know, the Premiers and the Prime Minister got together and said: The country is going to be shut down. And nobody knew when it was going to be opened again. And of course it raises all kinds of questions.

How do we support people? Where are they going to get income to support themselves? How do they pay rent? How do they buy food? Who's gonna look after all these things. We told people, for the most part, they couldn't go to work. But not everybody, of course, that applied to. Healthcare workers had to go to work. Frontline workers in grocery stores had to go to work if you wanted to get your grocery.

And I think it reminds some of us, of course, the things we took for granted, about the services we're receiving, how precious they were. And we need to value the people who were providing those services.

Brought in the full, I think coverage that we have not done such good job.

It also exposes a lot of other challenges we saw.

Of course in long-term care homes. How did we take care of our elders, who we had sent to long-term care homes? How was those workers providing services they were required to? How were we paying those workers? How were we protecting those workers? How were we protecting long-term care residents? And we saw some incredible tragedy that revealed itself.

And it speaks to the lack of the regulators not dealing, of course, with these problems way before the pandemic hit.

It also provides, I think, a context for us to do some wonderful things.

We learn, of course, in the pandemic - and this is a tribute to working men and women who in the public service, who contribute every day. We don't see them. We don't meet them. But we know that we do.

It took six weeks in the federal jurisdiction for them to create the necessary computer access for people to receive a cheque where the Federal Government will use the CRA to get a cheque out to people.

Those workers, six weeks it took them to create that program, to build it from scratch and to make sure it was working so we can get people money that the Federal government said they will support.

That's never happened in the history of this country. But the workers who were tasked with that responsibility are the people who we don't see and they do this job on a regular basis and never been thanked for it. And I gotta tell you, the speed in which they did it... Everybody always says, "the public service cannot perform to the speed of the private sector".

Well, guess what? In the pandemic, it was the public service that was there looking after Canadians and meeting the needs of Canadians to a large extent. And of course we need to recognize that because these are working men and women in country that we need to celebrate.

We also recognize that there's some things we took for granted.

As you know, some of you will remember, we didn't have access to masks. So how do we protect each other? Because at the time we didn't have vaccine. And Donald Trump says, yes, we have masks, but America comes first and we are not going to share our masks with you. And that's too bad. And all of a sudden you realize we used to have the capacity to build our own masks in Canada.

If we lost that capacity, we thought globalization... we don't have to do these things anymore, somebody could do it cheaper and faster, let's send that offshore.

All of a sudden our elected leaders recognized we have to now on-shore back some of these productions and create the capacity to look after ourselves in the moment of crisis. And we could never allow ourself to get back into those positions again.

And it reminded us again, despite all the fallacy that we have been told of a globalization in times of a crisis, we learn a whole lot of things that we had to change. And I think we're still in the process of dealing with that.

As you know, as the country was shut down, the economy essentially came to a halt. But at the same time, it was a Federal government, for the most part, pumping money into the economy to keep the economy going, by creating CERB so people could have money to pay their bills.

And there was a huge debate here in Ottawa. I was here, part of those discussions.

Well, how much are people going to get? And some on one side of the equation said they should get this much. And some of us saying on the other side, they should get this much. And I said, "Well, if you're going to ask people to stay home and they don't have a choice, you better make sure you're going to give them adequate income to look after their basic needs". Because in absence of that, they're not going to remain at home. They're going to revolt against any government that told them that they have to do certain things, they're not going to take care of them.

Now, of course, there's much to learn. There's still a lot of debate about how far we went with the support we gave Canadians during that period. And of course, what we can learn.

I can tell you this much. Since the pandemic and the subsequent recovery... this is the fastest recovery we have ever had in the economy of any time in a crisis. And that goes again to the way in which the government responded. Now some people will take that, you know, hindsight is 99... 9 out of 10. Well you know, we should have done this and that.

But the reality is, it's because of the federal government's action that really made a difference in the recovery at the end of the day.

Businesses, of course... We wanted businesses to keep people on their payroll. Because workers were told, well, we're gonna have to lay everybody off.

And we say, well, we have to find a way to keep workers attached to their employers because in absence of that would be hard to get them back to work when this crisis is over.

So there was a debate as to how much subsidy should be provided to business to keep people on the payroll. Because Canada - I'll give you an example - it didn't have the need to keep this workforce. They said, we're not even flying anywhere. Nobody's going anywhere. Plus there's restrictions. So there was a big debate here again in Ottawa.

How much subsidy do you provide?

Europeans, of course, started. So we had to get to 50%, 60%, 75%.

And we said we have to match that because many businesses said, "If we're going to keep people on payroll, somebody better help us with the cost, because we can't do this forever, we're gonna go bankrupt."

So the Federal government stepped in and kept a lot of pay people on payroll in those companies. And by the way, it allowed those companies to recover, but equally allow those companies not to lose attachment to those workers, had they laid them off. Because those workers would've gone on to other things or not even come back. So it helped those businesses recover.

And of course, these are debates that I was privy to because of my role as the President of the Canadian Labour Congress. Representing three and a half million people and their families in the country was no small task. But at the same time recognizing we had to deal with the other challenges. The underbelly issues. The poverty issues that revealed itself and how we take care of people.

And more importantly, how does people pay rent? Young people who were in school, how do you support kids in universities who had issues? There was many, many debates here at the time, in the moment of a crisis. As I could tell you, without a doubt, nobody knew what the answer was to these questions.

I think of course as we return to normal, Canadians are reviewing how we handled the pandemic and to a large extent how we could continue to build a better, I think society going forward, and that's going to take effort.

We have yet to, I think, in my view, respond to the crisis in long-term care in this country. How we treat our citizens, how we take care of them, how we provide care for them.

And equally in that context, how do we treat the workers who provide the service on a day-to-day basis? That's a huge challenge and I think we've got much more work to do.

We were fortunate as a country, Canada was able to secure vaccines, based on the companies that were developing the vaccines at an early stage.

And looking back today. And looking at the complacency, to a large extent from some about the fact, you know, "do we need the vaccine." And we're all operating for the most part, like we are back to normal. And I know this because I was just in the United States and I saw this first hand. That if you were in the US as I was in, Orlando, Florida, you wouldn't know that there was a pandemic. Because I saw very few people still wearing masks, down there.

But what it does reveal. That our ability to create and develop new things in the moment of this crisis, show that government had huge capacity, to do things if they're challenged to do so. And of course, if you have the right leadership, you can do many things. Of course, we've got much to learn from the pandemic.

But I think for working people there's much more for us to do.

We did make some gains in the context of how workers can be treated better. There was an acknowledgement that frontline workers need to be paid better and need to be treated better.

One of the big debates that came out of the pandemic, which was a again, similarly that had an impact here in Ottawa - That workers need paid sick days in this country.

How is it that we asked workers to go to work day in and day out and that workers don't have access to paid sick days in this country?

At the federal level, shortly after of course, the Federal government did bring forth legislation to create ten paid sick days in the Federal jurisdiction. It's only a small jurisdiction represent anywhere between 10% to 15% of the workforce.

The majority of workers are working in provincial jurisdiction. Ontario's yet to respond to this. And BC has of course responded to this, but not as generous as the Federal government in terms of the number of sick days that they allow workers to have access to under Employment Standard Protection of their labor code. But certainly I think what we have done at the Federal level speaks volumes of how far we have to come to get to that reality.

There's still a campaign in Ontario to get workers paid sick days and that is something important.

And the last point will be, again, how we treat frontline workers.

Again, many of the workers who are working in grocery stores and other places are in precarious jobs. - And I'll come back to that a bit later.

And it speaks to the need for reform to our employment standards; how we can get those workers to be treated in a fair way. And of course to have fundamental rights when they go to work. Because the dignity of work is fundamental to the kind of economy we want to build in this country.

And I think it's critical for us to learn from this experience, but also to recognize the capacity we had to respond to the crisis without, of course, losing our perspective that we had to rebuild the economy. But at the same time, we had to take care of people to ensure we can build an opportunity for them to come out of this crisis and hopefully be better prepared for the next crisis that the country will face, should we have another crisis of this nature.

Senator Hassan Yussuff: One of the other issues that I was asked to touch on again, is the question of privatization. As you know, this is not a new issue to a large extent. Government of all political stripes over time have privatized certain services we take for granted. And this has had a huge impact on our experiences. To a large extent it's the creeping nature of it. So we don't see it all and it's full impact because each part of it has happened slowly in the context of how government's gone about it.

I'll give you an example in terms of healthcare. There have been de-listing of certain services that was covered by the healthcare provisions of OHIP in Ontario or Health Card - when we used to go to our doctor's service that our doctors will get reimbursed by the provincial government for. And over time, government slowly but consistently have de-listed a whole bunch of services. They said those things are no longer covered by your basic healthcare protection in the province of Ontario. And of course that's having a huge impact.

Of course, they have privatized other services. If you wanted to get your driver's license renewed, get your health card renewed. Most of those things used to be done in a government office. Now most of them, you can go to the Canadian Tire store and that's where it will be done.

By the way, it's not any cheaper or better, but the government has privatized those services and now you have to go there. If you're fortunate enough to get up early in the morning and you can get in the line, sometimes you're waiting 45 minutes, sometimes you're waiting an hour. Despite all of the arguments that have been made, that the service will be better, it'll be faster, it'll be cheaper. But none of that, of course, have prevailed and it's having a tremendous impact.

Now, it's not impacted all of us the same way. I think we have to think about this because those who are fortunate enough to have more disposable income - should the government de-list certain healthcare services that's covered - who have more income, it doesn't affect them. They can equally pay for that service by reaching into their pocket.

But for many low-income Canadians, that's not a possibility. And especially in Ontario, that's not a possibility. So it's having a huge impact.

And I think what we need to remind ourselves; we have the capacity to keep these services in the public domain and we need to fight with our elected officials to say,

"Hey, we are not going to allow you to continue to do that because it have devastating consequence in the long term, especially on working people and their lives to a large extent."

Because when you need those services, when they're no longer provided, ultimately it means that we're going to have to pay for them out of our own pocket. And I think that's unfair because again, the tax system is there to ensure that government should be providing those services. And we're seeing a creeping nature of how this is going on.

Now, I think to a large extent, this is an ideology to suggest that, you know, government don't have to do all things. And I don't necessarily disagree that government have to do all things. But the reality is, I think there's some things that government have to do and have to take responsibility for, and we need to hold them to account for that.

As we're seeing the crisis in healthcare further show the deterioration of the system, I think we need to do better because we should really protect the system over the long term. But it's not just in the context of health, it's the context of other services we receive from government and we need to do a better job.

Senator Hassan Yussuff: The issue of precarity has evolved over now for many decades. And this has been a creeping way of basically employers saying they no longer have responsibility for the people who work for them and providing services for them under their roof.

Because they'll make the argument, you don't work for me, you work for an agency. Or for that matter, I don't want to put you on my payroll and have the cost that's associated with that, We would prefer to hire you through an agency so we have no responsibility for you.

If you look at the demographics, the people who are working in the precarious economy are mostly people of color. And most importantly of course, they're women. And I think it speaks to this reality that we have to change.

When I was growing up in Toronto, as a young person it was normal that if you work in Ontario, no matter where you worked, you were covered by the Employment Standards and the basic provisions of employment status applied. So you would get minimum wage. You would have the health and safety protection. Should you get injured, you would have access to Workers' Compensation. You would have hours of work that will define, you know, when employer will have to pay you - extra if you are working on a holiday, when they would have to pay overtime when all of those things kicks in.

All the people who are working in the precarity economy are not covered by employment standards for the most part. I'll give you an example. As you know, Uber has come along way... come along over the last number of years and provides a service that you normally call a taxi for.

So now you get your app, you call an Uber, a driver shows up, pick you up and take you to your location. And the fare is paid automatically based on your credit card.

Well, taxi-drivers who work in that industry, they do have employment standards protection. It's very basic.

Uber drivers, they don't work for Uber, so they're not our employees. They're independent entrepreneurs that we hire to provide that service.

How is that possible? One of the largest corporations now in the world that provides this service in the taxi industry, as I would describe it, could make the decision where they get to decide that the workers who work for them - who they employ and deploy to pick up passengers and to take them to a location - that those employees, those individuals are not employees of Uber.

It's unbelievable that a corporation could do this. And of course, to a large extent some government's been inept in responding to this.

Around the world is starting to change. The UK brought in some legislation that holds Uber responsible, that they have to apply labour laws to Uber's actions in the economy and Uber has to comply with it. California's brought in legislation. Similarly in other jurisdictions around the world.

I'm hoping here at the federal level we'll see some action by the federal government on this because it's not just about Uber. Uber's just one example of companies who are saying that they don't have to deal with the rules anymore because the rules don't apply. And the people that they employed, these are not their employees. These are individual entrepreneurs who are working for them and providing service and we don't need to bring them into the system.

I do think we need to, of course, regain control over the lives of working people who work in the economy and to ensure that they have the most basic rights, the most basic protection. The right to health and safety, the right to employment standards, which provides basic protection. And more importantly, to ensure workers are treated with dignity.

And again, more importantly, of course, government need to be far more aggressive in how they regulate and legislate to ensure that nobody falls through the cracks. I'll give you an example. And this I hope will resonate.

Why does the corner-store person who operates a business and employs people have to contribute to EI and CPP for their employees, but yet a corporation as large

as Uber, as an example, don't have to contribute because they say the people who work for us are not our employees.

How is that right? And how is it fair?

How could you tell the corner-store that they have to comply with employment standards, but yet none of that applies to a large corporation such as Uber? I think it speaks volumes to the challenges we face.

When more importantly, when the pandemic hit, of course, we had to take care of all workers in this country. Whether they were in the formal economy or not in the formal economy, everybody was provided with access to gain access to CERB [Canada Emergency Response Benefit], because we know people had to pay their bills and take care of their family. So that happened.

The taxpayers, generally you and I, who pay into the system, had to pay to ensure ... are going to pay for that over time. Why shouldn't these employers be required of course to contribute to that. And so government do have some responsibility.

And the labour movement has played a great role in trying to figure out a way how they can push to change the system and challenge the status quo.

And by workers organizing and taking on that responsibility. That they want to join a union so they can improve their conditions of work, bring some democracy to their workplace, a chance to participate and have an opinion and a voice in their workplace ... helps govern is fundamental. Unions should continue to provide some leadership to say that they need to of course, improve the laws in this country so all workers can benefit from the things that, you know, we, in the labor movement have been fortunate to ...I say "we", but I'm no longer a member of the labor movement in my capacity... But recognizing that the work that continues to be done in organized labour to ensure that workers can have dignity when they go to work is fundamental to the kind of country and society we want to live in.

We want to give people an opportunity that they need to benefit from the gains of their labour. And employers have a responsibility to share those gains with workers. So you can have a decent pension, have extended healthcare benefits, and more importantly, you're able to have paid time off from your job. Not just to work for minimum wage, but to have an adequate way so you can be able to look after your family. Opportunities to training so you can improve the kind of skills you may have over time to do different things in a workplace, not simply be stuck in just a particular job because you're not having access to this.

So society does benefit enormously from what the labour movement does in pushing for changes.

And even at times when it seems impossible, you need to of course, continue that effort. Because over time it will have an impact and government will react.

The pandemic certainly did that in the moment of crisis. Things we were talking about that seems far-fetched and impossible, government started to think about. They need to do a better job on these issues. And we need to figure out a better way how we can regulate a legislature to do that.

So let me conclude to all of you.

I know if you're not already working, you will be working and I'm sure if you are working, you're trying to figure out how you can - when you graduate from this program - how you can build a better life.

There is no easy answer to these questions. I always say to people, did I ever predict I would be the President of the Congress or the Secretary Treasurer or Vice President, subsequently, what I'm doing today as a Senator?

I was fortunate enough to be given an opportunity. And took the best opportunity I've had and I did the best that I can.

Even today in my new role I recognize fundamentally my job is to advocate for working people in the Senate and to take their cause and issues and to lend my voice to that, how this country can be a better place.

I want to say to all of you, it truly has been an honor to share some of my thoughts and ideas about some of the things, the challenges, how we can build and make this country a better place. But each one of us have to take responsibility. Political action matters because it helps shapes the debate of this country.

As much as we will have disagreement with our political opponent from time to time, fundamentally we're all Canadians. So we need to find a way to collectively work together to make this country a better place. But to make this country a better place so the people, for the most part, who day in and day out, no questions asked, go to work and put in their time to try to help their employer be successful. At the same time, they also want to be successful, to build a better life for themselves and their family.

We need to ensure the laws and the regulation in this country keep up with the challenges that we are seeing. But equally never accept that the status quo can't be changed. Because I could tell you with my experience over many years now, that the status quo can change.

And fundamentally you have to push and you have to fight and you have to engage and bring people together to achieve great things. But that is what all of us does in our own way.

And more importantly, I want to conclude by thanking all of you for the opportunity. I want to thank Chandra again for reaching out to me on behalf of the organizing committee to invite me.

Thank you so much. I'll turn the floor back over to you and take any questions you have.

SUSAN HEXIMER (MODERATOR): Thank you so much, Senator. I've been tasked with facilitating the Q&A portion of this.

So here's a question. How would the Senator suggest that we work with to get governments to properly and fully fund public healthcare?

Senator Hassan Yussuff: There's no easy task. This has two streams. One, there is the federal government, which is interlocutor with a healthcare provisions and there's the province.

The province delivers the service at the local level, but equally they have responsibility to fund healthcare. It's not all on the federal government.

I think we need to, of course, continue to keep the political pressure on government, both at the federal level and the provincial level. To the things that we think they should be funding.

We have the money to fund healthcare. Don't believe a single word that you hear in the media.

Ontario, by the way, to give you one example and to put this in context - The Premier made a decision that his government will no longer charge a licensing fee that you got to go buy and put a sticker on your car.

Now, for some, you know, that was a great decision. For me, I'm still scratching my head to understand.

It took 1 billion out of the revenue stream that it could have used to fund healthcare. \$1 billion. So the argument that the Premier will make, they don't have enough money to fund healthcare. I don't buy one bit of it.

Now, the federal government and the province just reached an agreement. I want to again applaud them for doing so. But the reality is that we have the resources. That's what our tax-based system is about. It's a question of priority. And if we continue to allow our elected leaders to evade their responsibility to fund the system, we will end up in a place where we don't want to be. What we see from some of our friends experience in the United States.

So we need to keep the political pressure.

The minute we take our foot off the gas. By not keeping that political pressure, our elected leadership will go back to that.

Of course, election is a good time for Canadians to vote with their feet about the things that matter to you. I always say, you know, what are the three things that define you for going to the ballot box?

All of us have reasons. But figure out the three priorities and go vote for a political party that you think will help further those issues and make them happen as a reality. I do that, no different than any other Canadian. So, all of us are not lacking with some degree. But also we could join groups that are advocating for greater support of the healthcare system in the province of Ontario. To lend their voice, to send an email, to pick up the phone, call your members of Parliament or your MPP, and say, "Hey, we need to do better! I want to tell you, if you don't, you're not going to get my vote in the next election."

I know those things may seem very hard to do given our busy lives; but the reality is those kinds of activism will change the reality.

Now, it just happened that the George Brown School [College] is Partnering with the Tommy Douglas Institute.

As you know the history, without him [Tommy Douglas], we wouldn't have healthcare today. Because he was a lone wolf saying we could do better in the small, tiny little province of Saskatchewan. Decided he would no longer allow people to lose their livelihoods, their homes and all of their life's possession just because they got sick. And he said, we could do better.

On his own, in his province he took on the doctors.

By the way, there was a strike by the doctors against Tommy Douglas bringing in the healthcare system in Saskatchewan. Despite all of that, he persevered. And today we have a national healthcare system. So he wasn't just courageous as an individual, he was courageous as a citizen to say, we can do better.

And each one of us need to recognize we can lead that fight again to make this country an even better place for healthcare.

SUSAN HEXIMER (MODERATOR): President. Fearon, I'm wondering if you had a question as you're on camera.

PRESIDENT GERVAN FEARON: Thank you very much. And thank you for all the remarks Senator as well as for challenging us to be able to see our part in the mosaic and future of Canada. What would you tell our students about the scope for their involvement. Should they focus on a single topic? Should they focus on a wide range of topics? Does it make a difference? And how have your experience on leadership define how you've been able to focus and been able to make a difference?

SENATOR HASSAN YUSSUFF: Well, I will simply encourage. Don't be shy to think that, one, you can't learn new things, and two, that you can challenge yourself to build relationships.

What I've learned a long time ago that building relationship with even people you disagree with is of value. Because when we need to talk with each other, even when we disagree and we need to understand and respect, that's how we build a healthy democracy for debate and for ideas to be part of the world we want to live in.

And in absence of understanding that, you can't get very far.

And for the most part, I would say to the students, be inquisitive. Want to learn new things? Don't be afraid to challenge yourself. Don't be afraid to say, well, I think I can do that.

I didn't know what the attributes of a Senator was until I became one.

Well, I understood to some degree what they did. I used to go to the Senate to present. But what I learned a long time ago, that I need to get outta my comfort zone. Because your comfort zone is an easy place to exist. You don't have to really push yourself to understand. And not being in my comfort zone is my best, I think, best attribute. Because it reminds me every day how much I need to grow and to listen and to learn.

It's not just about talking, it's also about listening to others to get ideas from and to benefit. But equally, if you want to further your career, you need to recognize, well, I need to improve my skills. If I want to I build a better life. I need to maybe get a job that pays more money. Many of the things that I've been able to have access to, I've never taken for granted. Because I remind myself how fortunate I am every day when I consider millions of citizens that I live with in this country don't have that same possibility.

But I also recognize I can't allow my voice to be marginalized in the context of advocacy. Even when it goes against the grain, by the way. It's not an easy thing to get up and say, Hey, hey, I don't agree with that. Or to tell a colleague that are behaving badly, they need to stop.

Those things are not easy because you're going to upset the norm. But by the way, if it's not right, it's just not right. And there's no courageous moment to do what the right thing is. You do it every time you're required to do it at the end of the day. So it's a bit of, I think, a philosophy about life and how you want to live your life.

But also what will guide you through the world of work? Because the world of work is never simple. It's complex and it will change throughout.

The things that I learned as a mechanic in the early years working for General Motors are no value to me today if I was to go back to being a mechanic, I would have to learn a completely new set of skills if I wanted to do that.

But I recognize in the same skill level that I have for being a mechanic, they equipped me to do the things I was end up able to do in the labour movement. But I also get out of my comfort zone.

The first time I spoke, my legs were shaking so much. I say this., I think it's okay to say this. I thought I was gonna pee my pants. That's how nervous I was.

Now, it's not wrong to admit to that. To share to others who were struggling with that same problem with public speaking. But I had to overcome it. And each time I spoke publicly, I overcome that fear of my leg shaking. And what else would happen?

But my only point is I had to confront my own demons. That I needed to say, I could fix this. I could do something better.

SENATOR HASSAN YUSSUFF: I fundamentally believe the labour movement has a critical role to play in the greening of the economy. There's many things we used to do, that we can't do it that way anymore.

We used to generate electricity by burning coal. Now Canada will be finishing and evolving out of that reality. It's happening. Not as fast as we should. But what we know from the science, coal is bad for the environment, is bad for human health, and more importantly, it's bad for climate change.

So how do we get governments to do the right thing to replace the burning of coal for generation of electricity with other sources of energy that can help contribute to the environment?

I co-chair a Task Force. Most of the members who work in that industry are unionized. So I had to go and tell 'em that, you know, it is gonna be sunset. So what would we wanna do if we sunset the industry? And it was a hard job. It took six months of my life. I had to clear my schedule. But I agreed to do it because the federal government had asked me to do it. So I, you know, co-chaired this Task Force. We went to Saskatchewan. We went to Alberta. We went to New Brunswick and Nova Scotia - The, four provinces that are still burning coal. Having to engage the workers and the community. And it was not easy.

But at the end of the taskforce work, we had unanimous recommendations to the government of how we could do that. By the way, that work is still playing out. The government is about to bring forward a piece of legislation around transition and sustainable jobs that will come here this fall.

As a result of that work, did I learn new things? Absolutely. Was it necessary for the labour movement being forefront of that conversation? Absolutely. Because our

members work in that industry. Who's best to counsel them and to talk to them about what the future is going to be about, if it wasn't for their own unions. Not to hide from it, but to face it up upfront and say: Hey, we can partner with government to do better how we build this new economy going forward.

We have always had the fundamental responsibility that our kids will have a better life than we did. They will live in a better world. But if you're looking at the world today, you may scratch your head and wonder whether that's real.

So as a parent, my obligation is to do my best to ensure my daughter can have an even better future than I did, but equally, she can live in a better world. I don't know whether that will happen, but I know I'm going to do everything I can in my capacity to ensure that I don't squander her future because I don't provide the leadership I could to counsel people on how we can do better.

DANESH HANBURY: Hello Senator. I wanted to inquire as to what you see sort of the future for unions in this time. And also how can they participate in greater social change beyond just the labour movement and into sort of social justice. And if you have any sort of advice in that direction.

SENATOR HASSAN YUSSUFF: Well, you know, the labour movement of course, needs to adapt with the changing reality. The world has changed. When I grew up, you could quit a job one day and find one the next day. It was that easy. I left a job, I was making \$4 an hour. True story. I got on a bus, went and made an application in the other place and made \$7.35 more. So that was my new salary. So I almost doubled my salary at that time. But that's not the reality today for the large part. But the labour movement needs to recognize - and I think there is recognition - that enormous change are happening and they need to adapt.

We also need to find better ways of how we communicate with our own members. Because the old ways of communication is not working.

What we learned during the pandemic, by the way, we can talk to millions of people and never have to go into a room to have them sit there and listen to your speech. You can do it all on Zoom.

And yes people have far more access to information, so they're going to challenge you more frequently. And you've got to be prepared to respond to the challenge.

At the same time, we need to recognize the things we are trying to do to improve the lives of workers in our own domains, as in our own unions, need to not be exclusive. Because what we want Canadians to do is to see themselves in that conversation. How do we improve the lives of all people in this country?

Because it can be about your self-interest, and you always have to talk about the rest of Canadians who are struggling with issues when they don't have union protection. Or they don't have access to minimum wage. Or they don't have

employment standards. So how do we advocate to ensure those people are going to have the same rights as a union worker may have, the basic protection under the law and not be treated differently?

And I think it's critical that we recognize also the economy of today in 2023 is very diverse. So the union's got to reflect that diversity in their leadership. How they do that outreach? How do they build alliances? And advocate for things as, one of your colleagues raised right here about Islamophobia.

When I was the president of Congress, I took on that issue because I thought it was fundamental about our solidarity with each other. How do we treat each other? Why is Islamophobia an issue in the labour movement and why is it an issue in society? And who's best to speak about how we need to take this on? Because how we confront discrimination, how it's happening and how we're stereotyping individuals who are union members in our own community by the way, and feel isolated that their union is not there with them.

And it helped. I think we developed some materials, training for our leadership and our shop stewards, people on the frontlines.

Twenty-five years ago, I co-chaired a Task Force on racism for the CLC. It's the hardest thing I ever did in my life. When it was over, I thought: My God. Based on what I've experienced on this, I should just quit the labour movement, go do something else with my life.

But I didn't do that. It gave me hope that we could use the Task Force recommendations to challenge the labour movement to do better. And I did then. President at the time was Bob White - now passed away. I said to him, you know, it would be a terrible thing if we just take this report and hide it on the shelves and don't tell anybody about it. It doesn't speak well of us. There's no question about that.

What we could tell the world and the public, that we acknowledge that racism is part of our movement and it exists in society as it exists in humans. But we can challenge that and overcome it.

And by the way, he did reveal the task force work and this recommendations publicly. And a journalist had asked him, said: Bob, why did you guys do this? This doesn't make you look very well.

He says, if we can do this, other forces in society can do the same thing. Because racism is an issue we can no longer hide from. That's 25 years ago.

If you read those recommendations today, it was like they were written yesterday. Because it's still pertaining to the challenges we see in this country, despite the fact we've become a diversified country.

So we need to do more obviously. And the social alliance we can build with others on other struggles....

Right now, I'm a big advocate to give status to non status workers.

Why? They're here. They're in the economy. If we were to tell them all to leave, the economy will not function the way we are because they're vital.

So why can't we find a way to give them a path to become a permanent resident, to become a citizen?

And by the way, we can do that. We are taking in half a million new immigrants a year. Give those people already here an opportunity. So no longer they're working in the underground economy, being exploited, being ill-treated. And of course it doesn't speak well of us as Canada.

So I'm a total advocate with what they're doing because I think my voice should be heard with those people. And I want to associate with their action because I know we can do better and we can do this.

So yes, we need to build broader alliance in the labour movement.

I say "we", in the general "we". But also we need to ensure we can sustain that alliance. because ultimately those issues no longer are exclusive to one or the other. We have to work together.

The labour movement have a number of things. It have resources. It have structures. And it has leadership. So you could use those things to work with others to help the path to social justice in this country. And that's been our DNA. That's how we were created as a labour movement.

I was a social activist, not a trade unionist to begin with. I became a trade unionist out of my social activism. Because my big struggle back then in the 70s was about racism.

Taking a subway... People didn't know you, they call you names just on the streets. You get on the subway, they would call you names and not even know where you're from. And I thought, this is terrible. Why can't the labour movement do something about it?

There was a campaign by the Ontario Federation of Labour back then. Racism Can Hurt Anyone. They took it on publicly and it helped change the attitudes of thinking to a large extent.

But it showed that the labour movement is still capable of doing those great things. And I think some of the campaigns that are on right now, whether it's on the question

of status for non status workers, the question of precarity, the labour movement needs to be on the forefront of that.

SUSAN HEXIMER (MODERATOR): Senator, you are a force. Honestly, your energy is tremendous.

So a question that was raised concerns inflation. So inflation is skyrocketing as is rent. What is the government plan for the minimum wage just given the gap? Will we be seeing any changes in this regard?

SENATOR HASSAN YUSSUFF: I don't know about Ontario. They've indexed the current minimum wage to, of course, to inflation. So obviously it would automatically go up whenever that adjustments get paid in Ontario this year.

But I know the minimum wage does not cover basic needs of people. Depends where you live. It's fallen behind to a large extent.

If you live in big cities such as Toronto, the minimum wage cannot possibly meet your basic needs. So I think that two things. One, obviously the minimum wage needs to be adjusted not just to inflation, but I think we need to get it to a place so at least it's relative to the needs of workers. And recognizing the cost of living in big cities that continue to escalate, and that's not going to change anytime soon.

Then of course you need to index it to inflation to make sure it doesn't move as value over time as inflation may come and go, but it can maintain it.

I think the bigger issue and the long term issue that we have to continue to advocate for, and this has been accomplished in other jurisdictions as an example, is to get to a living wage.

And a living wage is more about the cost of living in the location that you're living in. And a good example would be Boris Johnson in the UK. As much as we may have think a lot of things about him, but to a large extent the campaign that was led in the UK, in London, specifically around the Olympics, was that London should get to a living wage and the UK, London brought in a living wage.

And I think was a great thing. But it was recognized fundamentally how bad the system was outside of the needs of people. So some jurisdiction here, a New Weston [New Westminster] BC was one city that embarked on a living wage in the city, what they pay their workers.

But I think we need to take an approach that every province should have a living wage for the workers because the minimum wage no longer meets the basic needs of people.

Paying people with minimum wages is to keep them in poverty. And fundamentally, that should be an affront to all of our appreciation of the dignity of human beings who work in this country.

You should not work and remain poor. There's something fundamental wrong with it.

When a society says: We will pay you so you can remain poor. We're not gonna pay you to get out of poverty, we'll pay you to keep you in poverty. There's something wrong with that equation, in my view. And I think the dignity of work should be that you don't have to live in poverty to work in this country. And the minimum wage speaks to that reality.

The federal government also have the minimum wage. It was set at \$15 and it took the longest time, took it out of the code, finally back there. It does need to increase. And I'll certainly be pushing the federal government, that wage need to go up to at least a reasonable amount and then indexed to inflation. And then we need to get to a living wage within the federal jurisdiction.

It's only a small jurisdiction, but it's critical to show leadership in this regard because you could help the rest of the country emulate and learn from the federal experience.

But by the way, for province get there first, we can also learn at the federal level, what we can do to move the system much farther.

SUSAN HEXIMER (MODERATOR): And I think that this question about a living wage is just so central to the work that future Community Work graduates will be doing, trying to animate populations in our communities and trying to provide support. And I know that a couple of agencies that we've had histories with, including FoodShare and the Parkdale Activity Recreation Center, have committed to living wage campaigns. So there's encouragement and leadership, but we still have a lot of work to do.

There's a question about how best can government quicken the process of having professionally trained people share their skills to deal with labor shortages in sectors like healthcare? Because a lot of these skills are underutilized in the manufacturing sector, yet the value in other sectors would be tremendous.

SENATOR HASSAN YUSSUFF: Well, I think what this healthcare crisis that we were sort of talking about earlier, and we talked about in Ontario and other places, really I think shone a light that we have not done a good job.

All of a sudden realized we've got thousands of trained nurses who've come from other places and they couldn't work in the profession. And finally, the Ontario government, to their credit, says they're going to get them into places so they can shadow other trained nurses and find a way to credentialize them.

And this should have happened a long time ago.

Too many agencies that are responsible for credentializing people have operated as a closed shop and guarded their jurisdiction with unwarranted rules and regulations, in my view. Of course we want people to be certified.

But if you know how the human body is, it's no different in another country, by the way. It's exactly the same. So how is it that you can do this service in another country, you can't do it here. And it took that crisis to show government they had to do better and they had to put some pressure on the system to move much faster.

Now we need to do a better job of that. As you know, at one time we used to tell each other and kind of laugh, but it was not a funny matter. That we have the most trained, medical profession driving taxi cab in Toronto. If you were to have a heart attack in a taxi cab in Toronto, you don't have to worry about what's gonna happen to you; because the driver will just come in the back seat and resuscitate you. Because he's probably, he or she's a doctor, but he couldn't operate in the profession.

And by the way, most of the people are from other jurisdictions or are people of colour. I know what they look like. We need to challenge the professional organizations to do a better job and government have to play that role.

Individuals have been advocating for this. There's been some improvements, no question about that. But we need to move much faster.

Because what we're really saying to people: We want you here because of all these skills. We're not gonna let you work in the profession which you're skilled to work in. Because the professional credentializing organization have determined that you're not ready or you're not qualified yet to work in that.

But we need to keep the pressure on government and in the moment of a crisis is an opportunity to show government or at least push them to say, you can do better. And what's happening in Ontario's good. But I think other jurisdictions are learning from that. And the federal government has also weighed in to work with with the provinces to say we need to have a uniformity across the country in how we credentialize foreign nurses who are already here to work in the profession.

But we need to do that for other professions, not just healthcare.

SUSAN HEXIMER (MODERATOR): Thank you, Senator.

I just wanted to draw attention to the words of appreciation, including someone who said, I've never heard a Senator speak before and just what a delight it is. So I think that it's an especially great honor for students to hear from a Senator.

Here's another question. In Ontario. Bill 88 has carved gig workers out of the ESA [Employment Standards Act] by creating them as a subcategory of workers. How can we advocate at the federal and provincial level for consistent legislation that protects workers?

SENATOR HASSAN YUSSUFF: Well, I think what Ontario has done is fundamentally an affront to the dignity workers period. It's not ifs, ands or but.

Because we don't have two classes of workers in the province of Ontario. We have one class of worker. We have workers who work and need to be treated with the same dignity and respect that employment standards should apply to them.

You can't have less than employment standards. And that's what's so wrong with what they did with the legislation. And we should continue to oppose it and expose it for this fallacy.

Employers cannot decide to make arrangements with some other organization or whoever they chose to, how they're going to treat workers. That's the private sphere. The law should apply to all workers in the province of Ontario.

I'm hoping again, we'll see what the federal budget reveal. That the federal government shows some leadership as to how to find ways to use federal regulation and legislation to define employers who are trying to evade any responsibility to say to the people who work for them are not their employees.

And if we're able to do that, I think it will certainly be a game changer in the context of precarity. Because then the province can't run around and pretend that these workers are not employees of the employer.

And of course, those kinds of provision that is there is about trying to preserve the private arrangement that these big companies have been able to I guess, muscle their way to get government to acknowledge and suggesting that they're different.

They're not that different. I mean if you had ever taken a taxi cab, you want to ask yourself the question, what's the difference between a taxi cab driver and an Uber driver? They're both drivers. So why does one have employment standards protection, driving me from point A to point B and the other one has no employment standards protection under the law?

How is that possible? Because the corporation said they're not? When did they get to decide it? Imagine like you and I wake up in the morning, oh, I don't want to pay taxes because I've just created this category that defines me in this way. If we all did that, where would the rules-based system be in this country?

And I think it's a fundamental affront. And for the Ontario government to put that provisions there, a subcategory of workers on our employment standard is simply unacceptable. And I think we need to challenge it. I don't care who.

Workers aren't chattels, they're human beings and they need to be treated with respect and dignity. Because what they do, they contribute to the economy. And they need to have basic protection under the law.

They could certainly advance those basic protection if they join the union to have other rights. But the reality, the basic rights that they should be under the law should be afforded to them. And no government should legislate that out of existence.

So there are campaigns to reverse that. Put the pressure on the Labour Minister, by the way, who I talked to, Monte McNaughton. I told him, you know, it's a pile of bull in my view, what he's doing. So he hears it directly from me, because I don't necessarily accept his definition. He's done some other good things, but at the same time on this one, I think he's got it wrong. And I hope that they do take a chance to reflect on it and hopefully they'll correct, in my view, the mistake that they've made and fix the problems and bring those workers under employment standards.

Because it's fundamental for the Ontario economy that these workers know that they have basic protection so they can continue to work in contribute in a way, that if the employer should violate those basic rights, they know they have access to the Employment Standard Branch at the Ministry of Labour.

SUSAN HEXIMER (MODERATOR): Thank you, Senator. Thanks everyone for your engagement and the comments and question and answer. And Senator, it's just been a pleasure to hear you speak. Thank you so much for those inspiring words and lovely to meet you in this space.

SENATOR HASSAN YUSSUFF: Thank you for letting me in your space. It's an honor and privilege for me to be let in, and I appreciate very much an opportunity to share with you.

I'm a very no-nonsense person. I don't live my life in a convoluted way. Very simple. I get up and my life is an open book. Imperfect as it is, it is my life. But more importantly, I do have a voice and I've tried to use that voice in a way that I think continue to show we can make a difference.

I'm only one person in the bigger scheme of the challenges that we face in this great country of ours, but I'm hopeful that each one of us continue in that regard.

And I learned a long time ago that without tension, there is no change.

If you want to status quo remain, do nothing. If you want it to change, you'll create some tensions. And it's necessary, by the way. That's how we achieve change. And the systems that are wrong and are unfair to working people in this country can be changed. It will require efforts and leadership and all of us is capable of that. I'm no different than all of you. But thank you so much for allowing me to be with you this morning.

Thank you for me to share some of my ideas, but equally to hear some of your ideas and your question.

One of the colleagues did ask a question about Islamophobia. There's now a new office for Islamophobia at the federal level. Amira Elghawaby is that person who is running that office. She's a wonderful human being.

So thank you so much, and again, sincere thanks to all of you for having me.

DANESH HANBURY: I have the honor today to speak on behalf of my fellow students and to give our recognition and acknowledgement to everyone who is involved in this event today.

Firstly, I would like to give our deepest gratitude to Senator Yussuff, our keynote speaker today. Senator, you are a tremendous speaker.

Your remarks on the pandemic, shedding light on local and global inequalities that exist, our responsibility as a country and as a community to work on bettering the conditions of people here in Canada and around the globe were very pertinent.

Your statement on privatization of services impacting Canadians unequally were also very poignant. As was your acknowledgement of the precarity affecting women of colour and women disproportionately. As well as speaking on the Employment Standards Act unfortunately not being equally accessed by all workers and the need for adequate protections for employment and income for all. And all this while underlining our responsibility as individuals to pressure and push government to make these changes was fantastic to behold.

You know, as a student of the social and community worker programs at George Brown, I have, and I think all my fellow students have a great respect for social justice and a really strong desire to advance true systemic change, which is something that George Brown and all of our professors really try to instill in us and we appreciate greatly.

And with this, looking at your leadership within the labour movement locally and internationally, your work in social advocacy and change, I'm confident to say both on behalf of our incredibly diverse community of students here, our staff, our faculty, myself, how inspiring you and your work have been for us today.

And we would like to sincerely thank you for your time, your words, and especially your wisdom. So again, on behalf of George Brown, it's faculty and student body. Thank you very much Senator Yussuff.

SENATOR HASSAN YUSSUFF: Thank you so much. All the best and good luck with your studies.

DANESH HANBURY: Thank you. Thank you very much.

RESH BUDHU: That was Senator Hassan Yussuff delivering the keynote address for the 31st annual Labour Fair at George Brown College, The Other P3s: Pandemic, Privatization, Precarity... and Planet.

A video recording of the Senator's address is also featured on [rabbleTV](#).

This is The Courage My Friends podcast. I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

Thanks for listening.

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