

Courage My Friends Podcast Series VI – Episode 2
Labour Fair 2024 Keynote Discussion with JP Hornick
Corporate Power vs. Labour Power: It's Our Work

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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

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

STREET VOICE 1: The cost of living in the city is just soaring so high, it's virtually unlivable.

STREET VOICE 2: There seems to be a widening gap of the have and the have nots.

STREET VOICE 3: The climate is getting worse. Floods and fires. It's like we're living in a state of emergency.

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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: In the 2020s, the world's majority - its communities, its peoples, its workers, have had to contend with COVID, conflict, a worsening climate crisis, and a cost of living crisis.

In the 2020s, prices and precarity have gone up, while wages and security have gone down, right along with our social, political, economic, and labor power.

In the 2020s, the five richest men - all corporate CEOs - have doubled their wealth, while 5 billion people have become poorer.

In the 2020s, we have collectively become witness to a new era of inequality driven by corporate monopolies, but resisted by people's mobilizations; from community activism to union organizing.

It's the 2020s. And we're only four years in. Will this decade be one of loss for the world's people and planet? Or can it be one of resistance and reclamation of our world, our labour, and our power?

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

In this episode of the Courage My Friends podcast, we are very pleased to feature the keynote discussion with President of OPSEU/SEFPO, JP Hornick, for the 32nd Annual Labour Fair at George Brown College in Toronto.

Here now is my conversation with J. P. Hornick on *Corporate Power vs. Labour Power: It's Our Work*.

Hello everyone. I'm Resh Budhu and I have the pleasure of interviewing today's keynote guest JP Hornick, for this session on our Labour Fair theme, *Corporate Power vs. Labour Power: It's Our Work*.

RESH: So first, an introduction. JP Hornick is the President of OPSEU/SEFPO, Ontario's Public Service Employees Union. They come from a strong background in the labour movement and the public service, and has been with OPSEU/SEFPO for over 20 years.

Among their many hats, JP is also a labour educator and was faculty in and coordinator of the School of Labour right here at George Brown College, where they were also the faculty union steward and led The Annual Labour Fair, this Labour Fair for a number of years and quite successfully. So we stand on solid shoulders here with JP.

So JP welcome and welcome back.

JP: Thank you so much. It's really wonderful to be back here I have to say and to see the Labour Fair taking part in all these new ways like virtual space, which was just getting started right before the pandemic so it's great to be back. Thank you.

RESH: So, this year's Labour Fair is inspired by the most recent annual report from anti-poverty organization Oxfam International. Now, the report is entitled *Inequality Inc.* and discusses our arrival into an era of unprecedented inequality that is being primarily driven by corporations and the exercise of corporate monopoly power over the state.

JP, as someone who has worked and taught on the front lines of the intersecting issues of labour, of course, poverty and inequality, generally speaking - and we'll get more into the unions in a bit - but generally speaking, how are corporations accelerating inequality?

JP: I think that what we're seeing is what a lot of economists certainly policy analysts and anti-poverty activists would call almost "a new gilded age".

In other words, you know, back in the sort of late 19th, early 20th century, you have the rise of the industrialists who really concentrated wealth into the hands of a few. And you end up with this incredible distance between the ultra wealthy and the rest of us, right?

And it's not even the 1%, we're looking at the kind of 0.001% that you know, you've got the hands of the vast majority of the world's wealth concentrated in very few people. And we're seeing that again, right? And we're seeing a number of policies, legislation, all going in order to continue that funnel upwards.

You see it in Canada, even in talking about the cost of groceries and the rise of inflation.

I don't know if people are aware, over the past three years, when you look at the rate of inflation, you add it up and it's at about 14%. And when you look at wage increases, even the best of them are not keeping pace with that in either the public or the private sector.

Except when workers organize, right?

Except when people gather and start to push back.

And so we tend to look at these moments in time as individual, because they happen in the span of our lifetime. So we don't go back and think: Oh, this has happened before and there are ways that we can fix this.

But what I would say is corporations right now and the corporate CEOs like Galen Weston Jeff Bezos, those kinds of folks in the world, Mark Zuckerberg, the folks who have a lot, have a vested interest in holding onto that.

But even when we're looking at governments, we're asking, what is the role of a government in helping to regulate against that?

And instead we're seeing quite the opposite, governments and corporations existing in league together and forcing that up. So when we talk about inflation now, people are like, Oh, you know, it's greedy workers.

Inflation is literally profit-mongering at the moment.

The reason we have such high inflation is because we have a small group of people trying to hoard wealth. And a whole big group of people who are trying to actually just get by and survive.

This particular round of inflation is not driven by workers, it's literally driven by corporations.

We've seen with the pandemic they can't pretend it's the supply-chain anymore. This is actually just about corporate greed.

And so we can see that in the lack of response to climate change. We can see that in the lack of kind of a sense of corporate responsibility.

We can see that in the ways in which corporate taxes are at record lows. I think we're at what, 13% or something. We can see it in the ongoing privatization of public service. We can see it in all of the things that actually are about making sure wealth and power stay in the hands of a few.

RESH: It's interesting because I'm sure everybody here can relate to this on some level.

Just if you go to the grocery store, the food inflation that we've been seeing is absolutely ridiculous.

Now, the report outlines four ways - and I think you've mentioned probably all of them already, JP - but it outlines four ways in which corporate power fuels inequality.

So climate, right? So it drives climate breakdown. They dodge taxes like crazy. Privatizing public services. And taking a quote from the report, "rewarding the wealthy, not workers". And just add to that, as you said, at the expense of workers.

So again, in terms of this last point, what does this attack on workers, on working populations look like?

How is it being done on one side, and how is it being experienced on the other?

JP: Yeah, that's such an interesting question. Because I think when we think about workers ... I mean, you know, I represent, a union. And when we look at unionized workers, that makes up about 30% give or take 32% of Canadians in both the private sector and the public sector.

But the vast majority of workers are unorganized. In other words, they don't have access to a labor union.

And I'll go back to the basics a little because I don't like to assume people know what a union is or does.

So my union or our union, because Resh and Ben are part of that union, all the faculty and support staff here are part of OPSEU. We represent close to 200,000 workers in the public service and broader public service across Ontario. And that

includes everybody from college faculty and support staff, to corrections officers, to the workers in the LCBO retail and warehouses, to hospital workers, education workers. If you name a sector that is related to the public sector, we're in it, right? Those are our workers.

And we work together with other unions.

If you think about the private sector, you might think about steel workers, right? And steel workers, ironically, their largest local in Canada is over at University of Toronto with security, maintenance, food service, etc.

Or you have folks like Unifor. You also have carpenters, you have all kinds of unions that organize workers.

Why do unions organize workers?

Well, I don't know how many of you have ever tried to walk in and have a conversation with your boss on your own. And how frightening that can be and how vulnerable you feel. If you have a problem at work or you need a day off or you're looking for a raise because you've never gotten one or you've hurt yourself on the job.

When you have to go in and talk to your boss one on one, it's a scary thing, right? And you don't have a lot of protections in there.

What a union is, is basically a collection of workers who have come together, who have organized together, to bargain their working conditions; everything from wages and benefits, vacation, leaves, that kind of thing, so that they have strength in those spaces.

Now, The moment we're in right now, workers without unions and migrant workers and folks who are vulnerable to attack are experiencing incredibly accelerated attacks. So when you look at rewarding the wealthy, not the workers, I think one of the first places to start, is around how immigration works to divide workers, right?

So when you look at things like the migrant workers programs in Canada, where you have a group of workers who are brought in, often in farming or in elder, child, etc., care sectors. Where their wages are kept artificially low. They don't have access to the full range of benefits that Canada has to offer to workers. They're at risk of deportation constantly. They do the work that you know, ostensibly nobody else wants to do and yet we rely on this labour increasingly as a way to bring in cheap work. But we don't actually use it as a pathway to immigration, which is the sole way that Canada grows by the way. We don't have population growth through just reproduction.

Then you've also got student workers, and that goes to the immigration piece too, right. Where you have a tax on international students, and these caps are being put

on international students as a convenient place of blame for everything from the housing, affordable housing crisis. You often see it criminalized. And these are folks who frankly bring in about 10 billion dollars a year into the Canadian economy all told, in a myriad of ways.

And then you've got workers who are in various care sectors, service sectors where there's not a lot of high union density. And so, in other words, they're forced to try and fight for wages and benefits one on one on one with their employers. And you've got a government increasingly making it difficult to organize into a union.

It used to be that you just had like 60% of people in a workplace sign a card and it was called "card check" and then you had a union, but now you have to have it certified and takes years and years and lots of resources.

And then you have unionized workers, like us, where the legislative attacks still happen.

So everybody remember a year ago with CUPE, the education workers, OSBCU. Where they had organized themselves to the point where the government was like, Well, we are going to preemptively remove your right to strike. In other words, remove your Charter Right to withdraw your labour, because we're scared of what you're asking for.

They did the same thing with Bill 124, where they imposed a three year moratorium on your ability to actually argue for a wage increase that was commensurate with inflation. So they kept everybody artificially at 1%.

Now, these attacks on workers happen constantly right. Whether you're a migrant worker, whether you're an international student, whether you're unorganized or organized.

But what we are seeing right now, is that workers are fed up like we've had enough. I think that we've hit a tipping point culturally, where people can see it in their neighbors, in their kids, in their friends, that the impact of income inequality, that corporate greed, that corrupt governments, actually are as bad as we thought. And it's sort of adding up.

And so workers are kind of pushing back and saying, Enough!

So when you look at the CUPE education workers - The lowest paid workers in the education system, averaging \$39,000 a year - they got together and they said: Oh yeah, you're taking away our right to strike; we're going to do it anyway.

And then our education workers said, Oh yeah, you're trying to attack them. Well, we'll go out on an illegal strike and support them. And then all of labour jumps in. And all of a sudden Ford's got to overturn his own legislation. Right?

Same thing with Bill 124. We fought that in the courts. We fought it in the streets and we won twice. Twice it was found to be unconstitutional and he had to back down.

You see it every time now that the government is overstepping.

You see it where in retail sectors. Like the first Starbucks in Canada just organized with the United Steel Workers.

You see it with the Gig Workers United, a lot of whom are international students who are driving Uber, doing food delivery, that kind of online food service.

Those are the folks that are actually saying: And we're done now.

But the only way to fight back is when we collectively organize and I think that that's what we're kind of seeing in this moment is a willingness for workers to come together, whether you're union, non-union. I mean, hell, we were just at the Status For All Rally on Saturday. And you know, there were at least six different unions there, including the nurses.

Because we know that a fight with this government, a fight for what's happening right now, is not a fight for someone else, it's a fight for all of us together.

RESH: We did see that amazing show of solidarity between both public sector and private sector that really came together around the education workers. And particularly that, you know, the government was going to bring in the Notwithstanding Clause which is sort of the nuclear option in the Canadian Constitution. So how far they were willing to go, but again that astounding show of solidarity among all of the unions.

You also mentioned the gig workers. And there's this phenomenon where workers are not workers. They're not termed "employees". So we have, you know, you brought up Uber and, also Walmart . There's this push to categorize workers as something else, as "associates" or as "private contractors". We also saw the passing a couple years ago of the Ontario Digital Platform Workers Rights Act. So could you speak about that, when corporations are playing quite a role in actually changing the definition of labour and of workers.

JP: And this isn't a new trick, eh? Like, it's so interesting to me. Because I remember this, it was about a decade ago, and I think it was Wendy's fast food redefined, everybody became a manager, right? So to the point where the term becomes meaningless, right? So if you were working the cash register, you were the Frontline Manager of some sort, like it was hilarious. Like it was just, you were the Fry Manager.

And it's this notion that employers often use, particularly when you do it on a corporate scale is, okay, well, what you really want is respect. And we're going to

give you respect through an empty title, rather than respect through paying you what you're worth as a worker. What you deserve and what you need.

Like when we look at things like even minimum wage versus a living wage. A living wage in Toronto for a single person is over \$22 an hour. We're not even close to that on minimum wage and we've been behind for a long time.

Corporations have a huge role to play in this because what they're trying to do is consistently keep their labour costs down.

Governments have become, and I'm just going to say this post secondary too, has become much more business model, right? So we don't look at things anymore, like colleges, we don't look at this as a collective good, right?

Post-secondary education should be free, first of all, because it is the basic level of education we need now in a skilled workforce. Right? And so in the same way that a CEO can write off their corporate jet for corporate travel, we should be able to either write off our tuition because this is what we need in order to work, right.

But at the best tuition should be free in post-secondary. And the reason for that is because it actually contributes to the broader public good.

In other words, a well educated citizenry is exactly what you need to have a strong economy, particularly in this particular age of technology. And, we're not in a natural resources based economy anymore.

So when we're looking at the idea of a collective good, something that contributes, I think we have to understand that our tax dollars are brought in collectively and distributed collectively for the good of all, not the good of a few at the top.

But the best shell game the governments and corporations can do is to convince people that it's your fault if you don't get ahead and that it's your responsibility to pay for your own education, even though they're the ones that need it for the economy to be successful.

So they've shifted the notion of collective good into individual benefit. And then they download the costs onto students. Jack up your tuition. And say, you know what though, we're going to expand the loan program so that you will have the ability to pay more for your tuition and you can continue to pay that for the rest of your natural life, right. In order to pay it back to the banks.

So when I think about the way in which corporations build on this process, it's the same thing. They've convinced many workers that at the end of the day, it's your own fault if you're not earning enough money. You can always go back to school or get another job or that kind of thing.

But they never talk about how they could change the way they distribute shareholder profits back down to the front-lines and the people who are actually doing the work.

This is a basic premise that underlines the problems with capitalism, particularly in its current form. The people who are actually doing the work, who caused the economy to run, and do so both by their earnings, but then putting those earnings back into the purchase of goods and services, etc., are now completely divorced from any notion of having a good life. We work to survive, right? Like we live to work now rather than actually working to live.

And when you pay workers more, you also build stronger communities. Because then people have the ability to participate in things like their kids, little league, you know, like volunteer cleanup day. Like, there's all kinds of things, your neighborhood. Like those are things you can only do if you have disposable time.

RESH: And you have people who would exercise their democratic rights, which might be something some governments want and might be something other governments don't want.

You know, when you're talking about a public good. This is what we're seeing right so the erosion of the public good, public services through this privatization, but the trick is, is that a lot of it is being done by stealth. And JP, we've talked about this in terms of how this is happening in health care.

You're dealing with this, in terms of education, but also what's happening at the LCBO.

But yet it might not be immediately apparent to people who are not on the front-lines of this, either experiencing it as workers or people who are on the front lines of this crisis as well as every other crisis.

Give us some examples of how privatization is happening in these areas.

JP: One of the kind of fascinating things about this moment is we have a Premier who keeps getting caught out lying to people, but then telling us to just believe him this time. .. Basically just professionally apologizes. That seems to be his role right now.

The thing that I think we have to keep in mind about privatization and governments is that these are about choices around spending right? So for example, and this is I think pertinent for Ontario.

Down in Ontario Place where they're gonna build this giant spa, he is gonna give - literally, it's a corporate giveaway to Therme for what - \$490 million to build a parking lot.

\$490 million would clear the debts from every hospital in Ontario. Right? So, those are choices. Those are active choices that he is making. You know, the \$6 billion dollars, they're saying: Oh my gosh, he's on the hook for \$6 billion dollars in paying back workers for Bill 124 because we're negotiating all these wage re openers. Because it was unconstitutional what he did, was keeping wages suppressed.

RESH: Could you just give a little bit of an overview of 124 for those who aren't in the know?

JP: Yeah. So Bill 124 was a piece of legislation the Ford government introduced, and I want to say 2019 ish. And they forced workers in the public service and broader public service to limit their wage increases to 1% per year.

If we think about last year when inflation was at 7%, that basically stole 6% out of the wages of every worker, right? It's out of your pocket.

So now he's got to pay back all the money that he stole from workers by interfering with what's called "a Charter Right to free and fair collective bargaining".

So on top of that, right now, you've got a guy that swears he's not stealing land from the Greenbelt to hand off to his developer buddies. And we find out, oh, actually, yeah, you were about to hand off \$8 billion to your friends.

We see the same thing in the expansion of private surgeries. in hospitals, right? He's expanding private health care. And what does that mean for the rest of us? If private surgeries; well, that sounds great. You know, maybe I can get my knee replaced a little bit quicker or my eyes done a little bit quicker. Except what the effect of these things is, is in a private surgery clinic what they're taking is all of the easy stuff out of the public hospitals and putting it into a private clinic. And they're saying, , they're using the same workers, but paying them at a different rate.

So you're skimming the cream from the system. And then eventually what will happen is as more and more of our healthcare system ends up privatized, you'll start to see that fees will go up and only the people that can afford healthcare will have access to good healthcare. And the rest of us it'll be like the Hunger Games of healthcare.

They're doing the same thing with the LCBO. He swears he's not going to privatize our LCBO. And shouldn't we all love it if we can walk down to the corner store to buy a six pack and, you know, get some White Claw?

Well, that sounds good for a minute. But if everybody remembers how Uber started. With Uber, what they did when they came out is they pretended it was all like, we're just sharing our cars, isn't this great? It's just our neighbors helping neighbors. And, you know, it was kind of cheap to start, and their workers were paid pretty well. And everybody jumped on board and started working for Uber.

As people became accustomed to it, and there wasn't regulation to balance it, prices go up. Working conditions worsen. They pass legislation in order to make it that, what you were talking about earlier, Resh, where the drivers are not employees, but they're independent contractors. They don't have any workplace protections.

Same thing is happening with alcohol right now.

They're going to say, we're just going to put it in corner stores. With the LCBO, it's the only thing that makes money in the government.

\$2.5 billion in profit a year go back into public health care, public education, and other public services. \$2.5 billion a year.

What's going to happen when they keep encroaching on those profits is those profits will go into Galen Weston's pockets. Those profits will go into the pockets of the people that actually own these chains of stores. These are not little mom and pop places. And what they're going to do eventually is they'll undercut the public LCBO.

They'll start to offer sales on alcohol or they'll bury costs elsewhere in the grocery store or the convenience store. And then once we get used to it, then they'll start jacking prices, cutting jobs, and the only jobs available will be really, really crappy non-union jobs that don't actually help the communities that they're in.

That don't actually make sure that people are safe, that communities are supported. And then that money comes back out of public education and healthcare. And we've "starved the beast". Which means we'll need to privatize more of health care and education. So it all loops together.

It's not a conspiracy theory. You can actually see this happened in a number of other countries. It's happening right now in Alberta and Saskatchewan. Alberta privatized alcohol. Everybody thought it was going to be this great thing, but now it costs more than it ever did.

Saskatchewan just privatized. We managed to beat that back.

Manitoba kept it public. BC kept it public. And we're going to keep it public here in Ontario.

I've got 9,500 LCBO workers, give or take. They have organized 700 leaders in their stores and warehouses across this province. And they held a Day of Action where over 7,000 of them delivered petitions to the Premier and MPPs across this province last week saying: We're not going to take it. Privatization must stop.

And the Premier saying: Well, we're not, we're never going to sell the LCBO.

And I'm like: No, no, you're going to do a death by a thousand cuts. That's what we see happening.

They've outsourced online commerce. They've outsourced distribution. They've outsourced some of the warehousing. They're planning to fast track the expansion of beer and wine into convenience stores. Like right now, that's what's happening.

And so, you know, you can say I'm not privatizing, all the while privatizing.

And I'll tell you what's going to happen.

Now that he's been caught, he's going to say he was sorry, but he's never going to do it again until next time.

RESH: It's interesting, right, that, we're having these incredible shifts. And this really has come about in the 2020s, or at least this is what's coming from the Oxfam Report.

We've always had inequality. We've always had a corporate power working its magic, well, magic for them. But this has really been something that has really sort of accelerated in 2020s. Which is the COVID years. Right?

The five richest men, have doubled their wealth. Five billion of the world's people have become poorer and working people more precarious.

So we're still sort of in COVID. I mean, there's not really been an official end, at least I don't think. But is COVID just a coincidence or has COVID played a decisive role in all of this?

JP: I don't think there's any such thing as a coincidence, really only, you know, opportunities and how they're taken advantage of, frankly.

With COVID, I think there's a couple of things that have happened.

One, there were absolutely legitimate rupture in everything we understand about the world. It's that simple. The massive lockdowns, the disruptions to supply chain. The chaos that resulted. Just hundreds of thousands of deaths.

The moment, that brief glimpse where we thought that when we came out of COVID, we would have an economy that was rooted in care, rather than profit.

And If we know anything about this current moment in capitalism, crisis capitalism, it's that folks immediately realized afterwards that they could use this as a way to further concentrate profit.

COVID, if it showed us anything, was the real distinction between where you live in the world and what access to services, supports... like how much your life was worth, right?

JP: When we look at the unequal distribution of vaccines, for example. At a moment where this could have been a global community coming together to share vaccines, to respond collectively to what was truly, truly a global crisis.

Instead, we have effectively what was vaccine hoarding, in the Global North and in, you know, really industrialized countries and a kind of almost modern form of colonialism in vaccine distribution and in then resource distribution.

We also see when we talk about globalization, it's often talked about in the free movement of money and goods, but not so much the free movement of people. And so where workers - and this is where you get into the Migrant Worker Programs in Canada.

When you start to look at the ways in which we respond differentially to countries that are in need of the movement of people. You can look at the difference between how we treated Syrian, Ukrainian refugees versus how we treat refugees from Sudan or other countries in Africa. You can look at the difference between the lack of admissions around folks from Palestine in the moment or Yemen.

We need to really reckon as a country with the distinction between what the pandemic has shown us we can be and who we are allowing ourselves to be collectively as a country called Canada at the moment.

RESH: Absolutely. Now, to get into the power of unions, I mean, obviously you've been talking about this throughout. But you know, just to go more into it. We always say to our students, or I always say to my students, wherever there is oppression and injustice, there is always resistance.

The labour movement, as you pointed out, is certainly a testament to the power of organized resistance. You know, unions, again, came out of the sort of Night Watchman laissez-faire state when there were no rights or regulations or social supports for impoverished people or working people. A time that we seem to be going back to now, given what you're saying, JP, unless we do something about it.

So how are unions intervening and organizing against this corporate anti-worker, corporate monopoly state that seems to be being created.

JP: I think one of the things to be cautious of with unions is that we're not monolithic or frozen in time. Right? So the labour movement, in its origins, while it was an amazing sort of pushback against industrial capitalism in many respects, it was also incredibly racist and xenophobic. And we reckon with that to this day within trade unions. Like these legacies of bringing certain workers in and keeping other workers out.

In other words, labour is not immune to the social pressures around it or the social milieu around it.

And I think similarly in the 80s and 90s, you saw a move from trade unions that were more progressive and socially minded and, you know, at the forefront and fights against like apartheid and things; where it moved into a form of business unionism, where labour was trying to get closer to employers in order to get gains for workers, particularly their own members. And as a result, unions ended up often very insular. In other words, like my union wouldn't talk to your union, that kind of thing. And we were only about our own members in that moment.

What we're seeing, and I do believe that the pandemic might be partially responsible for this move within the labour movement, is we see a new wave of union organizing and leadership that is quite worker-driven. And that is about a socially progressive unionism. A recognition that if you are not fighting for the rights of all workers, then - and you can see this in Shawn Fain in the UAW, United Auto Workers down in the States there's a recognition, like naming the problem clearly. That if CEOs are getting 38% increases, then that's what we want too.

Right, like there's an ability to name the problem. But then there's also an ability to argue from the bottom up. So even when you look at the CUPE Ed workers, they were arguing for the folks who were the lowest paid.

When you look at our LCBO workers and what they've been organizing around, as well as the Ontario Public Service, they're tabling language that is about creating more for the people at the bottom.

And also building in demands around better equity within organizations. So like improved access, like the college faculty did this, the team that I led in 2021, it was around, building in more acknowledgement for Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing. Building in equity language into our collective agreements. Like making sure that there was language around chosen family for example. Like, so making sure that we're have an expansive notion.

You see this in the United States, the teachers in Massachusetts, where it's illegal for them to strike, have been taking illegal strike after illegal strike after illegal strike and making amazing gains. The salaries for the lowest paid, I think in Newton went up over 40%. So they were arguing for the lowest paid workers, but more than that, they got guidance counselors and school nurses back in schools.

Chicago teachers actually managed to get in language around affordable housing for students and their families, around keeping immigration services out of the schools.

Actually when unions remember that our workers live in communities and are whole workers, that's when we're at our strongest. Because when we realize that we are part of an ecosystem of social responsibility, that's where labour thrives. Because that's when we become relevant. That's when we become a force for good.

And I think that that is in this particular moment coming out of COVID, one of the benefits of unionism. We know we have to work collectively. And we see retail sector unionism soaring. Like when you're looking at Starbucks, when you're looking at the warehouse in Amazon, even in clothing retail, folks coming together and saying like, yeah, yeah, we're done with this crap. We deserve more than having to beg on our knees for what we deserve.

RESH: Thank you for that, JP. Now I want to get to some of the questions coming from our participants. And so one of the questions is how can we as young people stay optimistic about the future of the economy and the cost of living, especially those of us who have not yet joined the labour force or are having a hard time doing so?

JP: I think that is such a great question because the question is always like where is the hope and all of this. Like having taught labour history for a long time and when you get involved in this kind of work you're often at this point where you tell these stories about all the ways in which the world sucks. Right?

But the story that drives everything that I have done since I was a student activist has been around that the only thing that makes change is people coming together and forcing change, right? And so, as similar as these cycles of history are, they are also stories of resistance, of change.

They are stories that we have to remind each other constantly, that just because things seem that they've always been this way, doesn't mean that they have. That's because when people try and convince you, you shouldn't bother because it's always been like this. There's always been inequality, so why bother fighting it?

Well, sure, there's always been inequality, but there are times where there's less of it and there are times when there's more of it. And in the times where there's more of it it's when people are fighting each other rather than going to the root of the problem. And right now I think we have, in this generation in particular, a group of folks who have lived through at least what three recessions, constant global conflict, a climate that, you know, the planet that's literally on fire, and a global pandemic that still rages on. Yeah, there's a lot to be hopeless about.

But I will say I haven't seen this kind of activism, and I don't mean like young people. I just mean like activism, like a surge of activism that's happening on the ground.

Look at what happened after the murder of George Floyd. Right. That was a catalyst for something that had been going on for decades. It's not as though this was the first moment that people around the world were talking about the impact of anti-Black police brutality, right?

And it sparked a global movement. The Black Lives Matter movement is something that we should all be like desperately proud of.

Look at what's happening around support for you know, to end the war against Palestine, the genocide in Palestine.

Look at what's happening when you're looking at Indigenous organizing.

I mean, it is incredible where folks are coming together and saying enough is enough. And I think we are on the cusp of all of these movements intersecting in ways that we can't anticipate, but that will provide a brilliant, brilliant future.

That I have to hang my hat on because otherwise it's really hard to get up in the morning.

If you don't believe you can change the world, then it's a lot harder to actually just get through your day.

But I know this as a historian, you can change the world. You can, because we do it all the time.

RESH: I mean, the Global Civil Society, right, is just incredible in terms of those examples that you've just said.

And would we have any human rights if it weren't for grassroots organizing right?

JP: Yeah.

RESH: So more questions. A little bit of commentary and then a question. COVID is not exactly over in terms of the fact that workers continue to catch COVID and other illnesses.

What I was hoping would come out of the pandemic would be increased gains such as paid sick days. But what I'm seeing in my own workplace is a huge increase in pressure to come back to work sick, no matter what kind of illness you have. And with the encroaching healthcare privatization, I only see this problem worsening.

People who have no choice but to come in sick due to a lack of healthcare access. I see this crossing over with student experience aspect of being a student worker, too. Students who feel pressure to come to class sick, because their profs, TAs, are not paid for extra hours to accept late assignments.

Just wondering if at OPSEU, there is any specific campaigning happening around access to sick days now that we can leverage the pandemic to show the importance of paid sick days?

JP: Yeah, it is such an important question. When you look at it federally, now we have the federal 10 paid sick days - and that was mostly the work of the Workers Action Center, honestly, which is a group based out of Toronto that is province-wide, that organizes unorganized workers incredibly, incredibly well. If you don't know their work, go to the workersactioncenter.org.

But what you see, I think is the backlash of a combination of remote work for those who have the privilege of being able to work remotely. And then yes, absolutely, for those that don't, incredibly increased pressure from employers to come in, because we stopped believing that COVID is a threat, but rather a manageable illness. Right?

And so you see a kind of pushback as well. The anti- vaccination movements and the convoy type movements, the conflation of those is again about eroding trust in systems of connectivity like government, frankly. And because governments are behaving badly.

It dovetails nicely with those of us who are in progressive movements who are like really pissed that the government keeps attacking workers and social justice. So we have a kind of perfect storm at the moment. And I think the paid sick days have gotten lost in that.

, So at any given moment, I have 250 to 300 collective agreements that are in active bargaining, right? We're responsible for about 700 collective agreements province-wide.

And in those, in unionized workplaces, certainly paid sick days are a huge issue, ensuring that workers have access to paid sick days and paid short-term disability and long-term disability. So within the unionized worker sector, you see a massive push for that post-pandemic in particular. As well as other types of leaves like compassionate or bereavement type leaves, COVID leaves or pandemic.

So these are things that are on the radar for organized labour. And they have not completely dropped off for unorganized workers, but have somewhat been absorbed into some of the larger issues around income inequality and job security.

RESH: Another question. Why isn't the argument against these kinds of power money grabs by big business and the government more convincing to the vast majority of voters? If the answer is people's perennial focus on lower prices and convenience, what can drive a successful effort to expose the chasm between the appeal of that message to the electorate and the harmful consequences experienced by workers and people who use government services?

JP: Oh my goodness, my friend. Okay, so one of the things that people here who have worked with me for a long time have heard me say repeatedly - The attacks on education, both K through 12 and post secondary, are no accident because the worst thing that neoliberal capitalist governments can have is an over-educated underclass.

But the second worst thing is to believe that workers don't understand their own conditions. And combine that with people being in periods of incredible income inequality, you have a lack of spare time, right? So people want something quick. Cause you need it. Cause oftentimes you're working two or three jobs cause you got to feed your family. You got to pay your rent. We have soaring costs in everything from housing to food and wages that are not keeping up.

So how do we get people's focus on what really matters is one on one on one conversations. There is no shortcut to this. Organizing is not a spectator sport. It's not going to be like an ad. Right. What was the quote? The revolution will not be televised. Well, neither will the organizing efforts.

Organizing efforts are the conversations you have to have with your friends, your family, the uncle that you hate at Thanksgiving. And you have to keep approaching them with curiosity and love. And saying, well, why do you think that's happening? Who has the power to control that? Well, do you think they know about it? Well, if they know about it, why aren't they making that decision? Well, what do you think we can do about it if we do it together? And it's always about trying to get people to sort of unpack their thinking.

I believe very passionately in the things I believe in, I think that's probably clear right now. But I also know that if I believe these things and believe them to be true, that there is somebody out there that believes exactly the opposite and believes it to be true.

And the question is, how do I go find them and talk to them and figure out how high we have to go in that conversation? Like 20, 000 feet until we find the common ground that we can build from.

I taught for 20 odd years and I've never had a class where I agreed with every single student or where every student agreed with me. And I didn't want that. What I want is rich, deep conversation with folks, because I can tell you the answers will come when we try and find them together.

RESH: Indeed. Another question. How should we be targeting our resistance in this new gilded age?

JP: I think that we need to stop thinking of ourselves as islands, right? The biggest and worst sell of the past 30 years has been the notion that we are individuals who happen to co-exist on a rock in space.

I think that there have been many deliberate attacks on the social safety net, on the places of care, such as healthcare and education.

There's no mistake as to why governments are attacking trans kids. Islamophobia only could get them so far, and anti-Semitism only gets us so far and racism only

gets us so far, so you gotta light a thousand fires of difference and try and turn people against each other.

I think at some point we need to figure out that at the root of this is a system- and I say this very mindfully as somebody who doesn't believe that there's a single source of oppression that trumps everything else - But I will say that we have not seen inequality in wealth like this since the 1920s.

We are on the cusp of global war. We are in the midst of a massive climate disaster of our own making. And we need to focus our energies on how we are going to work together to bring down politicians who will not actually work for the people.

We need to name and call out the corporate greed for what it is.

We need to make sure that we are joining one another in our respective organizations and allyships and figure out how we can really reckon with the systemic racism, the roots of colonialism that keep us from being able to identify common enemies. And the common enemies are the folks who believe they deserve to have 99% of the wealth concentrated in 0.01% of the population, right? We need to eat the rich or tax them appropriately.

RESH: Okay. Thank you.

So two more questions, JP. One from one of our participants and a final one for me.

How does OPSEU navigate supporting unions and sectors of work who go against OPSEU's values? For example, how can you support a correctional division, when corrections workers and the correctional systems contribute to racism, abuse, violence, death, inequity, inequality, and the list goes on.

JP: Yeah, absolutely. This is something that I reckon with every day as a union president. So as somebody who believes, at the end of the day, frankly, that the carceral system should be abolished, I also, in the midst of that have a host of workers who operate within its bounds and who deserve good working conditions while these institutions still exist.

And so I think it's a combined effort of supporting workers to have better working conditions so they can do better, while simultaneously working to dismantle the underlying system that gives rise to the conditions you just described.

There is no morally or politically perfect position that one can inhabit in a world, but to always strive to do better.

And at the end of the day, a worker is a worker is a worker. And the folks who are in these positions, are often in communities where these are considered to be good jobs.

And then the conditions that they are living and working in with people who are incarcerated are the worst possible conditions I can imagine.

These are systems and institutions that are designed to break down any notion of humanity. So I try and keep that in mind and work towards education, support and dismantling simultaneously.

RESH: And I guess that sort of leads to the final question. Because ideally we want to change these institutions fundamentally, the ones that really contribute to all of the oppressive isms that we're dealing with right now.

So, in the OXFAM report, as we discussed, they said that the best remedy, I'm paraphrasing, but the best remedy to the corporate state, is the strong social state.

When you envision sort of the end point of all of these struggles, what should we be working for? What does that state look like to you? What does the lives of working people look like to you?

JP: Yeah, I think that is such a hopeful way to end.

Every public service we have, everything that we consider part of our social safety net, everything we consider part of the social state, emerged from community coming together and building it themselves.

There is not a single service I can think of that is not a direct result of people organizing on the ground and creating exactly the support we need for our neighbors, for our friends, for our families to build community. It is a natural human inclination to build community. Right?

The only thing that keeps us from that is this fiction that there are scarce resources.

There are improperly distributed resources, right?

But there should not be haves and have nots in this world. Certainly not in this, in this city or this province.

We have enough. And we are enough. And so from my perspective, a social state is really rooted in traditional notions of to each according to their ability. And for each according to their need.

So that we find the right balance and that we don't see one another as more or less deserving, but simply as human.

RESH: Lovely. Thank you for that.

And JP, I do want to thank you for a fantastic discussion and opening to this year's, Labour Fair.

But I also want to thank you for all of your work. For demonstrating the type of ethical leadership that is so valued to the people- and the worker-centered world that we want to and that we need to build. So this conversation has been a pleasure. It's always a pleasure JP.

And, and again, thank you so much.

JP: Thank you for having me back. This was a lot of fun and it's great to be, it's great to be home.

RESH: Lovely. And you're always welcome home, JP.

That was JP Hornick, President of OPSEU/SEFPO, in the opening keynote discussion for the 32nd annual Labour Fair at George Brown College in Toronto. Corporate Power vs. Labour Power: It's Our Work.

And this is the Courage My Friends podcast.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu. Thanks for listening.

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