Courage My Friends Podcast Series X – Episode 7
Labour Fair 2026 Keynote: New Modes of Organizing for A Working Peoples' City

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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

RESH: What is truly at the heart of growing housing insecurity? How can working people unite in a job economy more and more defined by precarity? Are we seeing a system in crisis or one that is working exactly as intended regardless of who it harms? What lessons can we learn from the past? And how do we break new ground when it comes to organizing for a working peoples' city? [music]

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: Welcome back to this podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College.

In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

TOMMY (Actor): Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world

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

RESH: Welcome to Episode Seven, *Labour Fair 2026: New Modes of Organizing for A Working Peoples' City.*

I'm your host Resh Budhu.

Episode seven features the March 25th keynote discussion from the 34th annual Labour Fair at George Brown Polytechnic in Toronto. Founding representative of the Toronto Airport Workers' Council Sean Smith and member and organizer with the Parkdale Housing Justice Network (PHJN) Matt Whitfield, discuss growing labour precarity and housing insecurity, how these are the outcomes of systems rigged against workers and communities and methods of effective grassroots and labour organizing toward the building cities that honour the dignity and rights of working peoples and communities.

Here now is the keynote discussion from Labour Fair 2026, Building a Working Peoples' City.

Welcome to the keynote for the 34th Annual Labour Fair. This is an annual event that we have at George Brown College. where we bring in activists, unionists, social justice activism and organizing, to come into the college across the three campuses to connect with learners.

We begin by acknowledging that George Brown Polytechnic, and where we gather to learn, teach, work, and organize, is located on the traditional territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation and other Indigenous Peoples who have lived here over time.

To speak from this land is also to recognize that the wealth, infrastructure, institutions, and governance of this country were built through processes of colonial dispossession, racism, exploitation, and extraction. Processes that are not relics of the past, but continue to inform ongoing struggles for rights, recognition, and social justice.

Organizing for labor rights, working in solidarity with communities for political change and representation, for food and housing security, and the dignity of all, from the First Peoples of this land, to our newest migrant and immigrant communities, to the land and the planet itself. To ground our solidarity in a land acknowledgement is to recognize that dismantling colonial capitalism and building genuine equity requires us to recognize the leadership of Indigenous Peoples in protecting the land, honouring treaty obligations, and committing to decolonization in every aspect of our work.

So, I would now like to introduce our keynote speakers.

Sean Smith who is a retired airport worker and founding representative of the Toronto Airport Workers Council, the collective voice for Toronto Pearson's 50,000 workers and six largest airport unions. So please welcome Sean.

And next to Sean, we have Matt Whitfield, who got his start in activism as a resident at the Occupy Toronto encampment in 2011. A longtime Parkdale resident, Matt's been connected to tenant organizing in his building and neighborhood for several years. In 2020/2021, Matt participated in a decentralized Parkdale-wide Keep Your Rent campaign, withholding all rent payments for 15 months.

The rent strike ended with a negotiated forgiveness, of arrears for several tenants who had fallen behind due to pandemic job losses.

Matt is currently an active member of the Parkdale Housing Justice Network, a grassroots neighborhood organization focused on resisting gentrification, building tenant power, and supporting our unhoused neighbors through mutual aid and collaborative action.

Additionally, Matt is a member of the steering committee for the upcoming second annual People's Assembly on Housing Justice, an event that brings together advocacy and activist groups from across Toronto for workshops, discussions, movement building, and collective organizing. So please welcome Matt.

MATT: Good afternoon, everybody. It's a great honor to be here today speaking on behalf of Parkdale Housing Justice Network, PHJN, or Pigeon, as some people call

us. PHJN is a grassroots organization that's fighting for a city where housing is accessible and affordable for everybody.

And we do that in two different ways: first, by directly confronting the people and organizations that are profiting from the artificially created housing crisis. And second, by building working class power and solidarity in our neighborhood.

So we were invited to speak here today at the George Brown Labour Fair because housing is one of the most central issues for contemporary working class organizing.

These days, the struggle to find and hold onto housing is, I think, the most widely shared experience of class conflict and class exploitation. After all, everybody needs a place to live.

What's more, if we want the movement for housing justice to succeed, we have to take inspiration from the successes of the labour movement. To achieve a world with housing for all, we must begin by talking to our neighbors and organizing together for our collective benefit.

So today I'd like to talk a bit about the fundamental causes of what we call the housing crisis, as well as some ways that working people can take back their power to shape a more just city. And to do that, I'd like to start by telling you the story of our group's first major campaign, its failures and its successes.

PHJN was founded in 2024, pretty recently, by a group of Parkdale residents who were opposed to the construction of a twenty-one story luxury condo at the corner of King and Cowan.

This would represent a dramatic change for the neighborhood, which has so far been almost completely untouched by Toronto's condo boom.

And to be clear, we're not against a tower here because we're against density or we're against all development. We're against this tower because it represents the tip of the spear when it comes to gentrification in Parkdale.

So to give you an idea of why the condo is such a big deal, I'll need to paint a bit of a picture of the neighborhood for you.

So for anybody who isn't familiar with it, Parkdale is a primarily working class neighborhood in the West End of Toronto. And it has actually the lowest rate of homeownership in the city. About eighty-seven percent of South Parkdale residents are tenants.

It has for generations been a landing place for recently arrived immigrants, particularly from Tibet, Nepal and many South Asian countries. And it also has a wide variety of services for low income and homeless people, including a drop-in center, supportive housing units, a food bank, and an ODSP office.

The Toronto Star recently described Parkdale as "unapologetically gritty." I've heard a lot of people say that Parkdale is a little rough around the edges, and it's frequently been a target of campaigns of revitalization.

If we strip away the coded language, what people are saying is that there's a lot of poor people in Parkdale. And projects like the condo at King and Cowan aim to address that issue not by lifting people out of poverty, but by pushing them out of the neighborhood.

So the company behind this proposal is called KingSett, and they describe themselves as "Canada's leading private equity real estate investment firm".

Here on the screen, there's an artist's rendition of the condo that they want to build and the sort of surrounding neighborhood.

KingSett insists that this development is a response to widespread demand in Parkdale for more housing. And this is, at best, a half truth.

Neighborhoods like Parkdale are in dire need of more housing. But the issue is what's being offered to us is literally the opposite of what we need.

If you ask any tenant or any housing expert, they'll tell you that what Toronto needs is more affordable homes. But what KingSett is proposing to build is twenty-one stories of bachelor and one bedroom luxury condos. Little glass shoe boxes that are entirely unsuitable and completely unaffordable for most families.

And this project isn't alone. It's one of 20 proposed developments that were in the city's planning pipeline at that time. So our group created this map that shows the extent of the transformation being proposed for Parkdale, with the different locations of all the different developments. And as you can see, we're talking about thousands of units set to be constructed in our neighborhood. And these are gonna displace people from the relatively affordable homes that they're currently in.

Most of these developments have zero affordable units planned, and overwhelmingly they're made up of small condos.

And we've seen the effects of development plans like this across the city. We see these condos in most neighborhoods in Toronto today, and as homes go, they're not very good. They're often poorly designed. They're quickly built with cheap materials. They're cramped and crowded. As I mentioned, they're not great for a lot of people with larger families.

But because homes are financial assets first and places to live second, factors like livability and affordability are ignored in favour of profitability.

Truly affordable housing may be what we need the most, but it's also the least profitable to build, so we can't have it.

So PHJN was founded to, push back against this illogical market logic.

The King and Cowan condo was the first of these 20 developments to reach the approval stage at city council, so that's the one that we decided to set our sights on. And we launched a campaign to stop it.

We spread the word about the proposal. We attended public consultations. We delivered deputations at council meetings. We sent emails to city planners. We collected over 1,500 signatures on a petition. And in the end, to our surprise, it worked!

The city council voted not to approve the development.

So a plucky grassroots organization. [applause] Yep.

Not, not so soon. Not so soon. Then, unsurprisingly, the developer decided to appeal the city's decision.

So the Ontario Land Tribunal is the body that decides disputes between developers and municipalities. And if you've never heard of them, you're in good company. We'd never heard of them either. But small, obscure bodies like this have actually a pivotal role in the housing system.

So in the case of the OLT, they're the ultimate decision-makers about what gets built in cities. Not city councilors, not city planners. They have the final say.

They also have a reputation as a rubber stamp body that routinely sides with developers, to the point that a lot of cities just preemptively approve developments that they don't particularly want just to save themselves the legal battle.

So direct participation in the OLT is also very difficult for small grassroots organizations like ours.

If we wanted to speak at the hearing about this condo, we would need to legally incorporate. We would need to hire a lawyer. We would also need to call on expert witnesses to argue our case, and all of that would cost thousands of dollars that our group didn't have.

In the end, though, it didn't matter because before the OLT could even make a ruling, the City of Toronto and KingSett agreed to a settlement that would allow the condo to move forward.

The city decided, probably correctly, that they were likely going to lose at the OLT, so they just cut a deal.

Two years of community consultations out the window, we get the condo whether we want it or not.

I'm gonna pause the story there because this brings me to one of my main points I wanna make today.

The system is rigged.

If you wanna understand what a system is for, you need to look at what it actually does, not what its proponents claim it's designed to do. And after years of skyrocketing housing prices and rental costs, I think it's safe to conclude the housing system is not designed to provide people with affordable homes, no matter what politicians or developers or landlords might say.

Instead, the housing system seems to be designed to extract as much wealth as possible from people who need a place to live. And when we look at the actual architecture of our housing system, from the laws and regulations to the tribunals and decision-making bodies, to the financial incentives for landlords and developers, that's what we see, a system that is siphoning impossible amounts of money upwards into the hands of a few very wealthy people and companies.

This is especially true when it comes to the rental market. Over the past few decades, ownership of rental properties has been rapidly concentrated into the hands of billion-dollar corporations, not just in Parkdale, but across the country. So here are a few of the biggest, Capreit, Akelius, Hazelview, Starlight, very generic, forgettable names. But companies like these own an increasingly large number of rental units in Toronto and across Canada.

And this is bad news for renters. At the same time as companies like these have been buying up rental units, the average cost of rent has risen far faster than inflation, which makes it impossible for people to keep up.

And we know that these increases have been primarily driven by big corporate landlords.

That's all very abstract. I'll give you a personal example. I moved into my apartment in Parkdale in 2013, and at that time, I was paying $860 a month, which you're not gonna get now, right?

In fact, if you moved into my unit or a unit the same size as mine today in my building, you would pay $2100 a month, which is an increase of 150% in just over twelve years. So for, for comparison, wage increases and consumer inflation are around 30% to 35% for that same period.

For working-class people, rent has become an unsustainable expense. And at the same time, basic repairs are often neglected, and evictions are weaponized to force

long-term tenants who pay below-market rates, like me, out of their homes. So holding onto an affordable place is also increasingly challenging.

So it's not at all surprising that homelessness has also increased exponentially in recent years.

A recent study by the City of Toronto showed that the homeless population in this city doubled between 2021 and 2024.

We know that members of marginalized communities, and particularly Black, Indigenous, disabled, and queer people, are disproportionately far more likely to be unhoused.

And we also know that homelessness can take years or decades off your life. The median age of death for a homeless man in Toronto in 2024 was fifty, and the median age of death for a homeless woman was just thirty-six.

When we call it a housing crisis or a crisis of affordability, we're hiding its true effects behind some technical and abstract language.

Those terms obscure the structural violence and the social murder that is necessary for the housing system to function properly.

When we talk about the housing crisis, what we're really talking about is class war. Because this crisis is not an act of God or nature.

The housing crisis has had many victims, but it's also had major beneficiaries: big corporate landlords, property developers, real estate investment trusts, banks, hedge funds.

These housing providers have enjoyed record profits as a result of the housing crisis. Poverty, overcrowding, food insecurity, evictions, homelessness, premature death, these are collateral damage on the road to maximizing revenue. And decades of government policies from parties of all stripes across Canada have enabled this profiteering.

So I would argue the housing system is not in crisis, it's working as intended.

So what do we do about it?

To answer that, I'd like to pick up where we left off with the story about the condo at King and Cowan.

Our brief triumph over the developer quickly gave way to disappointment.

As far as we could see, we had done everything that we were supposed to do.

But ultimately, none of it mattered because it seemed the system was set up to produce approvals for condos, regardless of what communities thought.

So the conclusion we drew was that engaging in the system and hoping to win was a waste of our time.

Now, I wanna be clear, I'm not arguing for apathy or despair. I'm not arguing for a total disengagement from all formal decision-making bodies or processes. But it seemed like we could just pour endless effort and time into deputations, and petitions, and hearings, and letters to elected representatives for each of the twenty developments proposed for Parkdale and see absolutely no results from any of that work. It felt like a waste of time.

So instead, we have pivoted to an outside of the system approach.

Rather than engaging in unending and meaningless consultations and hearings, we're doing two things:

One, directly confronting the people who are actually responsible for this housing crisis. And two, talking to our neighbors to build working class power in our neighborhood.

So about a month after the city reached its settlement on the King and Cowan condo, a group of us traveled to KingSett's headquarters in the Scotiabank Tower at the corner of King and Bay. And for over an hour, we blockaded a bank of elevators in the building. Ultimately, a member of our group was able to go up to their office and meet with one of their executives. She delivered a letter demanding that KingSett withdraw the condo proposal and sell the land for affordable housing.

We are continuing to keep pressure on them. Since then, we've periodically returned to remind KingSett we haven't gone anywhere. In fact, just last week, we were protesting outside of Scotiabank Tower again.

For these and other actions, we've worked closely with an organization called 230 Fightback. They're based at Dundas and Sherbourne. And for nearly twenty years, they've been fighting KingSett as well. KingSett owns two large lots in that neighborhood that are undeveloped, and they've left them empty for seventeen or eighteen years.

The city originally wanted to buy them and build affordable housing on them. KingSett outbid them and has just sat on the land ever since.

So we've connected our struggles with theirs. We're facing sort of a common opponent, and so we're amplifying each other's voices. And no doubt that's caused some headaches, for companies like KingSett.

In terms of our condo in Parkdale, so far the results are inconclusive. We have heard through the grapevine that other developers are taking sort of a wait and see approach with their developments, not hurrying things through as quickly as possible, seeing how things go with the first few that came up for approval.

We intend to keep the pressure on KingSett to make sure every phase of their project is as complicated, as difficult as possible. To ensure that they suffer as much reputational damage as a small group like ours can inflict.

So one other example of our direct confrontation strategy relates to the province-wide campaign against Bill-60 last fall.

So Bill-60, if you hadn't heard about it, was a new law that dramatically expands landlords' ability to file for evictions, and it speeds up the eviction process.

The bill was, in my opinion, a pretty transparent giveaway to the landlord lobbyists. They've been asking for powers like these for years.

So again, rather than going through formal channels like calling our MPP or filling in consultation forms or another petition, we brought our concerns directly to the people who are actually responsible for the problem. So on the screen here, you're seeing the face of Tony Irwin. Tony Irwin is the president and CEO of FRPO. They are the largest landlord lobby association in the province. Every major corporate landlord is a member of FRPO, and they lobby on behalf of those landlords' interests.

One Wednesday morning, we showed up at Tony Irwin's office. We didn't have an appointment, and we weren't alone. I wanna stress this was a joint action with several other housing organizations.

We chose to target FRPO because it was the loudest supporter of Bill-60 and it may in fact have helped to write Bill-60.

The bill was created to satisfy the greed of organizations that FRPO represents and lobbies for, so we brought our grievances directly to their main representative.

Before Tony knew what was happening, a camera crew was inside his boardroom, and he was being bombarded with questions. And when he was confronted with statistics about eviction and homelessness, he really didn't have anything coherent to say for himself. If you wanna see the video, it's on our Instagram page.

Of course, Bill-60 did pass as predicted, but the campaign against it has built up tenant organizing in Ontario to an unprecedented level. I, I really have never seen energy like this around tenant organizing before. So that brings me to my next main strategy, which is talking to our neighbors.

Although we were originally founded to focus on condos, we have boosted our efforts on tenancy issues in the last six months. So PHJN is currently in the middle of

a campaign to assist tenants of a major corporate landlord in Parkdale to build a tenant union.

This landlord owns about a dozen buildings with a thousand units spread between them. So far, we've helped to knock on four hundred of those doors. We're aiming to get the next six hundred done over the next few months. And helping to host lobby meetings for tenants to share their concerns, connect their struggles across the neighborhood.

We've also conducted some research projects as well, including a deep dive into the statistics on vacant condos and apartments to dispel the myth that the housing crisis is due to a lack of supply.

Additionally, we have an article coming out soon about our research into the Ontario Land Tribunal.

We did a deep dive into their adjudicators, and we found that many of them have close connections to the development industry, the Conservative Party, or both.

So we have an article coming out hopefully in early May in The Grind, detailing our research into that organization.

We think about this as a form of political education. We're raising awareness among the people in our neighborhood and across the city about the true causes of the issues that we're facing.

This type of work isn't as glamorous or as attention-grabbing as our direct actions, but I would argue that it's equally important in many ways.

As a movement, you don't succeed just by being right. You succeed by having people power on your side. So building up working class power and awareness in the neighborhood is, in the long run, the best way for us to fight back against landlords and developers.

Under the heading of talking to our neighbors, I also include our work with other organizations, and I can't emphasize enough how collaborative housing organizing is in Toronto right now.

Out of all of the actions and campaigns that we've conducted over the last year, we haven't done literally any of them by ourselves.

Here's a short list of some of the organizations that we've worked with just in the last year or so. I mentioned already 230 Fightback. York South-Weston Tenant Union has been pivotal in the fight against Bill-60, as has Climate Justice Toronto. Organizations like Encampment Support Network and Harm Reduction Collective have been huge in pushing back against the closure of safe consumption sites. No Demovictions. Demoeviction, when you're forced out of your home because the

landlord is demolishing it. I could go on and on about the groups on this list, but there are so many organizations working together.

We don't all share the same goals. I think that's important to stress. We don't all share the same approach, the same political outlook. But I think that's the mark of a healthy community.

Groups like these have a diversity of tactics from political lobbying, research, advocacy, direct action, mutual aid.

Together, collectively, we're starting to drive the conversation on housing in this city. And the spirit of collaboration that was built here, I think is in large part due to an event that was mentioned in the introduction, the People's Assembly on Housing Justice. It happened last year for the first time. It brought together organizations from across the city to talk about housing issues.

The second annual PAHJ is going to happen on May 23rd in Parkdale. We're hosting this year. Y'all are invited. Follow us on Instagram or join our mailing list if you're interested in coming and checking that out.

I'd like to close with a recruitment pitch. Not necessarily to join our organization, although you're welcome to. Please get in touch. But if not our organization, please join some kind of organization or start your own.

I don't wanna give the impression with this that we're a bunch of professionals and we know what we're doing.

We're just a group of unremarkable people doing work that we feel is important and necessary. And I wanna stress the word "unremarkable" because a lot of people think of organizers as people who are... you know, they're other more remarkable people.

They're, you know, politically savvy and brave and well-informed and analytical and persuasive and charismatic, and they know what they're doing. But nobody actually brings all of that to the table, especially when they're just starting out.

With causes from climate justice to Palestinian solidarity to housing justice to migrant rights to fighting back against cuts to OSAP, organizers are just otherwise unremarkable people who have two key qualities: They are passionate about an issue, and they're willing to devote time and energy to it. That's it. Everything else follows with experience.

Organizing, in my opinion, is also the best way to combat the feelings of anxiety and helplessness that so many of us are feeling about the state of the world these days.

For many years, I was there. I watched things falling apart, and I felt bitter and anxious and nervous, and I alternated between doom-scrolling and putting my head

in the sand and ignoring what's going on in the world. And I felt hopeless a lot of the time.

And I can tell you that nothing will give you more hope for the future than organizing with like-minded people to make positive changes happen in your community. Like, nothing. Nothing.

I feel like the world is worse off today than when I started organizing, but I'm way less stressed about it because I feel like I'm doing at least something little about it.

So I'll close by saying I think that we're in a time that demands action and that demands commitment to a cause. And the specific cause, I think, ultimately isn't that important. For me, it's housing. That's what fills my cup. That's what lights a fire in me. That's what motivates me to keep going.

Doesn't have to be housing for you. But I urge and implore you to find your cause and then to agitate.

Confront the people who are responsible for injustice as directly as you can. And talk to your communities. Talk to your neighbors about what you're doing.

We have to talk to our neighbors because no meaningful change was ever achieved alone.

Thank you for your time today. [applause]

RESH: Thank you, Matt. And I'd like to invite Sean to speak about labor organizing, and he's also gonna connect it to the Prairies as well, the home of Tommy Douglas.

So, Sean.

SEAN: I'm really appreciating this conversation because Matt really touched on the issue.

The system is rigged.

No matter what we do, things get more expensive and crappier, and there's never good news. We just constantly see a day shittier than the day before.

I'm going to break the Boomer code a little bit. I'm going to tell you it always wasn't that way. And I'm going to tell you how it got fucked and how it got unfucked. Because the system was always rigged against us, and Tommy Douglas actually was one of the people who unrigged it.

And I can talk personally about that because I am from the prairies, and my mom's from Saskatchewan. I just came back from Saskatchewan, so it's very close to home.

Life in the prairies was shit, like it is today. You showed up, there was no employees, there was no jobs. My grandmother sold cream, and that's how we survived. She raised six kids on her own in the prairies selling cream.

And she had two options.

One option, actually, when she first started, was you sold to the company store. And the company said, "That's the price we pay, and that's what you pay." And farmers were getting ripped off because the guy who owns the store has this beautiful house, beautiful car, and everyone else is living in shit.

And they go, "This is not right. Cream is worth more money 'cause we know in the city it sells for twice the price you pay us. So we'll start selling it ourselves."

So they formed cooperatives, and they pooled their resources together. And that's how the prairie people pulled themselves out of the Depression.

You know, I grew up listening to these stories because those stories of Depression shaped our families growing up in those times because they were such horrible times.

And people had to really, as Matt say, face that choice. Either I'm just going to doomscroll and try to do the best I can in a sinking ship, or I'm going to say, "Enough." And back then, enough people said, we've had enough of this rigged system where, you know, farmers are considered sharecroppers.

And if you don't break enough land... I remember my grandfather having to write to the CN Rail tell how much land he broke every year. And if he didn't break enough land, they'd replace him with another peasant would bring over from the old countries.

And they got together- My grandparents' generation, your great-grandparents, most in this room, and said, "Enough of this shit. We're going to change it. We're going to work together."

They couldn't form unions. Because what can farmers do when they're all isolated? Just like what can you guys do? Most of you are precarious workers. How can precarious workers form a union when you're a contract worker, when you're in a different job every day?

You don't even know where you're gonna be working next year, let alone in 20 years' time.

So the only thing they could do is they could rely on each other. We don't know who's running the system. We know it's not working for us, but we can count on each other. So we're going to form something called a community. And we're going to take care of each other in our community.

So we know the company's ripping us off in the stores, we'll form a cooperative store where we pool our own stuff and we do it ourselves.

You go through the prairies to this day, you'll see co-ops everywhere, gas station, grocery stores.

It's funny, in Saskatchewan, people think co-op is like a big evil conglomerate like Walmart because they're everywhere. But it's the lifeblood of these small towns. And what it was is that the people had to find a system to unrig the system, and how they did that was by forming their own community and said, "You guys, your superstores, your Walmarts, you do your stuff. We'll take care of ourselves." And workers did the same.

You know, in the prairies, they couldn't form unions because of the nature of farmers can't unionize. Who do you unionize against? Yourself? But workers did. And that was workers' ways of trying to collectively come together, form cooperatives. Collectivization, to work together to become a "we" to take on the boss.

You know, a, a famous Irish trade unionist Jim Larkin said, "They're only great because we are on our knees. Let us rise."

And that really comes to the point of, yeah, Walmart's much bigger than me. Air Canada, my company, is much bigger than me. But without all of us workers, there is no company.

These were the lessons. If you look in labour history, these were the lessons you see in the 1930s, 1940s, '50s, even up until the 1970s, you could say, where there was a working class fight back against capital. And there was very much a left and a right in the political discourse in this country.

And the 1980s came, and this is when my story started personally, we got comfortable. My generation got comfortable because it was my grandparents that had nothing in the Depression.

I grew up, I started at Air Canada. My dad was Air Canada, so I came into company business 'cause that's kind of how it was. There was no skills. You just followed your family into their job. And I walked in, here's my pension, here's my pay, here's everything else. It was like prison, like your retirement date, 1st of May, 2010, sounded so far off.

But that was the way it was. Because the system became unrigged because people said enough of it, so capital had to start catering to the workers. Because back then

we had alternatives. We did not have to rely on a company store. Air Canada back then when I started was government. It was a government crown corporation.

A lot of things you see today were government-owned in the past. We used to have public housing. We talk about housing, we used to build houses as a government.

So the thing is, and I want to pick up on Matt's point, is that the reality of today is not the reality it has to be tomorrow. You can change your reality.

And for us at Toronto Airport, we found out, like the farmers, my grandmother before, we found out the system was rigged because as Air Canada privatized in 1980s, it deregulated as well. And so if you look at today's airport, it's a very different world from when I first started when things were very controlled.

Well, you see the situation, this air crash in New York. This is what happens with untrained, overworked people.

The airline industry became the front lines of neoliberalism. Because when privatization, deregulation, all the shit we see today started, it started with the airline industry. The first industry that was deregulated was the air transport industry because they could have seat sales. Then they privatized Air Canada. And once people got used to that, then they just start privatizing more and more.

And so I started in 1985 with Air Canada. I was a government worker. I had pension, everything. And I watched the system go unrigged and become rigged again.

So I started in with everything handed to me. And over time, as recessions happened, as we privatized, we saw the cuts, and people coming in after having less than I had and less. And so by the time, 20 years later, we had four tiers of workers all doing the same work with less pay.

Because what was happening, the boomers were saving themselves by throwing the next generation under the bus, but they were losing their solidarity.

And as workers, you saw the Air Canada strike last summer. When we go on strike, we last, what, three days before the government rules back to work. I've lost count how many strikes I've been involved in where we last two minutes before we're ruled back to work.

So if you don't have the ability to strike, which is apparently what we gave up our militancy for, was to have a legal right to strike. If you don't have that. If the system is rigged against you that whatever you do, the government's going to make laws to make it easier for the employer to replace you with unpaid workers. And the union model's not working, because what can the union model do? We file a grievance. Well, how do you file a grievance against contracting out?

So we said, "Enough of this. Let's go back to the prairie way and form our own cooperative."

There's 50,000 workers at Toronto Airport. There's 450 employers in that one building. The labour code says everyone has to have a health and safety committee. You have 450 health and safety committees in there. Nothing's getting done. It's just committees of nothingness.

And what happens on the airport tarmac when safety protocols are not followed, people die. And we had people dying on the tarmac, of untrained workers.

And yeah, you could file a grievance. That doesn't work. We'd go on direct actions. W e had so many wildcats, we've lost count. That would get the issue fixed, but it doesn't unrig the system.

So how did we unrig the system?

We formed a community union, the Toronto Airport Workers Council. Because when you look at who rigs the system, the people, and Matt talked about it, when you actually look at who owns everything, it's a few people. And in our case, Toronto Airport is owned by Toronto Airport Authority, GTAA, Greater Toronto Airport Authority. They control everything at the airport. So why are we bargaining with our employers about our pay and working conditions when the airport authority controls everything out at the airport?

So we decided that we're no longer going to be employees, we're going to be community, an airport community. So we're going to meet the airport authority and say, "Look, we are the airport community, the airport worker community, and you're have requirement to be part of this community too." So we're sitting down with our community demands, and we talked about things.

We didn't do collective bargaining. You can't bargain wages and stuff, but we took community demands.

I'm going to use a real-life example, George Brown College. There's probably, my guess, at least 20 employers in this building right now, and there's probably maybe 10,000 people associated with the building right now.

Everyone has their own union. Students have their own unions even.

No one sits together and works things through.

Administration's one guy at the top, controls everything. These 10 different groups meet, and can we do this? Can we do this? Can we do this? And the guy at the top just picks the cheapest prices. I'll take that price, and the rest of you get the same.

With us at the airport, we said, "Fuck this." sorry. I'm from the airport, and we swear a lot. [laughter] Let's come together, and let's go together to the airport authority and say collectively, "Fix the air in this building because it's dirty, and we're tired of breathing this dirty air, and the companies can't do it because they say it's your job."

And they did. They did a survey, and they fixed it.

And we started seeing that when you hold a community, that is power. Because we put too much emphasis now on social media, that if I can just sway this person over here- And, and unions have fallen in this trap of national bargaining patterns and everything else. But the workers don't have connection with each other 'cause they've lost their community.

We've gone so s- digital, we've gone so online that we've lost the face-to-face, as Matt talked about. It's really interesting, Matt's presentation was very similar to our presentation of how we would do when we started meeting, 450 companies, when you meet these new companies saying, "Welcome to our coalition," we began with a bake sale is how we would do it.

Because when you deal with workers around the world like you do at the airport, 'cause we deal with everyone from every culture, the one universal language is food. It doesn't matter who you are, everyone loves their mom's cooking. And so we say, "Bring your mom's cooking and we're just going to have mom cooking days."

And you know what? That's the first thing that brings community together.

It's crazy, but going back to Tommy Douglas, this is what we did.

My background actually comes from the cooperative, not the union, so I ran unions like a cooperative, and it was bake sale, it was community.

If the community is right, then I know I've done my part for this world. And we've gone so global now when thinking about the big picture stuff, 'cause it is freaking scary, that we've forgotten that inside here.

If everyone at George Brown in this one building said, "We're together going to do something today," you could do something really cool today.

With Matt, I want to encourage you as well to look for those opportunities, because we did the same thing. We were shop stewards who were filing grievances day after day of shitty situations, of friends and family being laid off. Grievance doesn't cut that when it comes that personal. So with the different union reps, we sat and had coffee and say, "Fuck this, let's do something. We don't know what, but let's together decide to do it, so we're going to have a coffee every Friday and figure out what we're going to do, and when we figured out, we'll do it." So we just would meet every Friday until we figured out what to do.

It sounds crazy, but believe it or not, that's the first step you take. And that was 30 years ago. And we look back and it's, like, crazy, we don't even think how we could have done things like we did, if we didn't have taken those first steps. But it's amazing when you look even in your own buildings, as Matt says, look where you live, the people, your neighbors. We don't even talk to our neighbors anymore.

They've broken that sense of community because what they want us to do is they want us to feel isolated and hopeless. Because once you're isolated and hopeless, you're controllable. And we don't want that as a society because we're seeing the effects of that. We're seeing every generation worse than the generation before.

And the only way we're going to do that is what my grandparents' generation did. And let's say, "Enough of this. Let's form a new community based on solidarity. Based on taking care of each other. Not based on greed or based on who we could use or whatever." And, and I really want, as Matt says, I want to pick up on that, too.

Find your space. Find your passion. But find other people. And you don't have to have all the answers. But just getting together every Friday, and one Friday, the answers will come. And when they do, it'll be a lot of fun, I assure you. It never stops once it starts.

Thanks for this opportunity.

RESH: Thank you so much, Sean, and thank you so much, Matt.

We're so mired in so many crises, and it's so easy to lose sight and to lose hope, and again, to remind us that hope is within ourselves.

I want to open this up to questions or any comments for our speakers?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1: Thank you both for coming. When you were organizing the 5,000 people at the airport, if people are not into it, or they don't get it, or they think, "Well, my specific job or union is okay for me," how did you organize around that? What type of approaches would you take?

SEAN: We had very high union density at the airport. We were 72%. And because we would do the good examples. People are tired of a sales pitch these days. Everyone says, "The best thing ever." We're tired of it. People want to see results. So the best way we organized, quite frankly, was we would make sure that all units around that unit would have good collective agreements.

It's kind of a different approach than the traditional union model where you get the right people to talk to people. But we found the model worked the best is just simply representing your members well, and your members will then be the ones talking to their coworkers.

Now, that's in a place like a George Brown situation where you have a lot of workers in one common building.

In workers, like, where it's standalone, the way you get them to on side is, there's not a magic thing you can say to a person to get them thinking collectively.

What I would often do to help them think collectively, because they think it's a loyalty issue. A lot of people have loyalty to the company. And so we would say, "Well, the company, when they drafted your employment contract, they used a lawyer. Do they not trust you?"

So we would kind of use that analogy on the soft people a little bit to let them know, "Well, the company's doing a lawyer on you, so you better lawyer up on them just to be safe." That's a more business union model approach, though, as opposed to the good union model approach.

So I prefer the good union model approach because it means the unions are actually doing good. And so we convince the unions to be good organizers, to be good unions. I honestly wish unions would do that more often than hiring the best talkers to be organizers, because that's often what they do, and it's a sales pitch.

I shouldn't say that, but in a lot of cases it is.

But find a good union that fits your people.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 2: How do you organize against organizations and companies that are sort of willing to shoot themselves in the foot to stop collective action? Companies like Ubisoft who, when Halifax unionized, just shut down the studio. Just willing to just hurt themselves as a company in order to punish collective bargaining.

SEAN: That's why we formed the Workers' Council, because that's exactly what would happen. If we've got 450 employers in one building, if one group of workers all of a sudden gets $25 an hour, they lose their contracts, they all lose their work. And so the discipline forced everyone to work minimum wage, so it was a race to the bottom. So the airport was full of minimum wage workers.

The way to change that, you cannot change it with one company, like Ubisoft, anything else. This is where union strategy is failing. The business union model is broken. Is you can have the best union strategy in the world. Air Canada, they had 98.9% strike vote.

The government just rules you back to work, so your strategy's done. So you don't have the power to bargain with an employer that we did before, because Ubisoft will just move somewhere else. So what can we do? That's why the community model is so powerful, and that's what the community model worked in the prairies and why we need to come back to it.

Yeah, Ubisoft can move, but that building is still going to be there. And whoever goes in that building then will be anchoring that community.

If you focus on the community instead of focusing on business, 'cause business is too mobile, but who comes into your community is what you can control. And if all your neighbors work on that, then you can find other employers, and that's been done.

There's a lot of cool models. In Argentina and places like that have gone through massive depression, where those type of buildings have been repurposed into new workplaces.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: Thank you both so much. I'm thinking specifically about, housing justice, Matt.

How do you build solidarity across housed and unhoused communities? So I think of like TUHU- Toronto Unhoused and Homeless Union.

MATT: Underhoused and Homeless Union.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 3: Yeah. And to build solidarity where it's not like, oh, but we're the tenants, and like you're the underhoused community, and we're doing different things, different projects, different tiers as it were. This idea of like these tiered approaches and building solidarity across that.

MATT: Absolutely, and I think this fits in really well with this sort of community model of unionizing. These struggles are connected.

So tenant struggles, and the struggles of unhoused people, and the struggles of people fighting against gentrification, these are all interconnected struggles.

At the same time, they're very different from each other, and it makes sense that some groups are gonna wanna specialize. You mentioned TUHU, the Toronto Underhoused and Homeless Union. They're organizing in shelters and drop-in centers. Other organizations that are focused in that sort of sector of housing, I mentioned the Harm Reduction Advocacy Collective, Encampment Support Network.

They specialize in that type of work, and I think it's great that we have that sort of robust ecosystem.

We also have neighborhood-type organizations like ours. So we have sort of three main committees. We have our Anti-Condo Committee, our Tenant Committee, and our Street Committee. And each committee focuses on those sort of three different areas of housing within Parkdale. So there's sort of the neighborhood model, and then there's the sort of field of housing model.

And I mentioned across the city, there's lots of these different organizations either focused on neighborhoods or on particular issues.

I think one thing that has really helped us is back-and-forth communication, especially in the last year or so, a lot of us are showing up for each other's actions. A lot of us are coming out. Like, we can put out a call, and we know other organizations are gonna show up.

The action I mentioned at the FRPO office, our group was sort of the main organizer of the action itself, but the York South-Weston Tenant Union was responsible for the media related to it. Climate Justice Toronto brought a lot of people out to that event.

We sort of put out the call, and other people showed up for us. And when other people put out the call, we show up for them.

And that doesn't happen naturally. I mentioned this housing assembly last year was really pivotal in that. And I wanna give a lot of credit to the organization 230 Fight Back. They were formerly OCAP, the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty. And they've been really pivotal in trying to build those connections across the city. It doesn't necessarily happen organically, but reaching out to other organizations in the same sort of space and figuring out what are our common issues where we can collaborate together. And what can we learn from each other?

What successes and failures have you had? How can we draw on your knowledge to help build our cause up?

AUDIENCE MEMBER 4: We see how colonialism and neoliberalism allow corporation to profit by extracting from poor and working class communities, not just in housing, but across basic needs. What concrete policies or structural changes can actually shift power and stop this cycle of exploitation? Thank you.

MATT: So I think that there's been a lot of really good work done on housing policy proposals. I'm not a party person, but I wanna give credit to the Ontario NDP, credit where it's due.

They've put forward a number of really good bills, I think, on housing policy. One against ending above-guideline rent increases, which allow your landlord to charge tenants for major repairs to the building. Like, if they fix the roof or install a new elevator, they can pass those costs along to you right now.

The NDP has proposed ending that. They've also proposed something called vacancy rent control. So that's something where if you move out of your unit, the next person moving in will pay the same rent. So right now I'm paying, like, $1,100 a month. There are no $1,100 a month one-bedroom apartments in Toronto available. But if that law were implemented, when I do eventually move out, the next tenant would be paying that below market rate. So I, I think policies like that are interesting

But I think the reason they're not enacted, and we don't see policies like these being enacted across the country, is because the landlord and developer lobbies are much more powerful than the tenant lobby.

They've got the money, they've got the funding, they've got the connections. And I don't think that we're going to see a shift on housing policy until we see a shift in that balance of power in the favour of tenants.

So our organization doesn't endorse political parties or campaign. We're not primarily focused on lobbying politicians because we don't think that that's the path to actually changing the policies.

First we need to build up that working class connection and solidarity and build power among working class people and tenants so that politicians are more afraid of us than they are of the big developers.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 5: Just to roll back a moment when you were talking about all the groups coming together organically and everyone kind of falling into their role to help, due to their skill set. Do you find that aside from the feel-good aspect of that, that the side benefit or byproduct of that is that there's a cost benefit and that you're gaining back what you're losing in current funding by having people volunteer to take on a role?

MATT: We have no funding. I think last year we spent, like $300 and it was all, like, our own members' money. We're like a zero budget organization.

Definitely I think that like, getting more members in is very important for small organizations like ours.

Our capacity is mostly limited by how much free time and energy our members have to take on projects. There's lots of things that we'd love to do that we just don't have the time for.

And so events that are very high profile that maybe get a lot of attention, like our Instagram post about visiting Tony Irwin's office, that got us a lot of attention and a few new members.

Every time we do something like that, hopefully it's going to boost our capacity so that future actions, we have more people there for it. But yeah, we're too small to be thinking about budget.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 6: Thank you so much for being here today. I just wanted to go back to what you guys were talking about, a little bit about the fractioning, of different parts of society, like here within the unions, even in the schools. The teachers have one union, then the part-time teachers have one union, then the students kind of have a union, and maybe it's not so like connected one to the other, especially when it comes to like bargaining. I also worked in the airlines, and I found

that was like something that was super, prevalent among the flight attendants not happy with the working conditions, but there was not solidarity between say, the pilots or the companies or the unions and stuff like that.

How can we like bring together those fractions, especially when there's such like heavy things like money involved or like feeling replaceable in our jobs.

SEAN: That is really what drove us at the airport because it didn't matter what union we were, it didn't matter who we were, we were just getting less and less because the companies were so good at picking the cheapest offer that we were always told, "Well, if you don't like it, there's the door." And if you weren't making minimum wage, there was always someone who'd do your job for minimum wage.

You're not going to change that culture quickly. So we did two things.

The workers council actually turned out to be a shop steward council really. Every workplace has shop committees, shop stewards that you elect. And you guys all have good shop stewards and bad shop stewards, and we just picked the good shop steward of each of the unions and worked together to deal with the issues on day-to-day.

To use George Brown example. Students, faculty, support staff, clerical workers, tech workers all depend on this college for their livelihoods and for their future, and all are walking away without it satisfying those needs in many ways.

Tuition's going up with less services being offered. Faculty's being worked harder and harder for less and less, and it's the same race to the bottom that we called it at the airport. How you stop that is twofold.

One is culturally, by doing what we've talked about doing coffees. Have faculty, students, and electricians and admin workers together for coffee to just talk about life in general.

We've lost our human connection with each other. We tweet at each other. We don't talk to each other anymore. And when those situations arrive, you build friendships between the groups. This is what we did. It's very basic, but it works. We built friendships. I'm friends with lots of flight attendants even though I was a check-in agent.

And the reason those friendships matter is because when the time comes, and now we're talking strike. So when the Ubisoft situation happens, you mentioned that, or a strike happens, what would happen is the whole community comes together. So it's not just those one workers out on the line. It's now the whole community.

So when we had a strike at the airport, it wasn't just against 300 workers that were easily replaced, like, just contract workers. It was an airport-wide strike. So us who were non-contract workers would support them, and we would picket with them, and

we would do everything in our power to make sure that that company had a shitty day.

The thing is, is it all started with coffee and a friendship. Everyone's leaving George Brown today, going home to a bad situation or to a situation that's not good materialistically for us in the future.

And the way to change that is just by meeting other people who say, "I've had enough of this. What can we do about it?" And change happens. If, say, there's 20 people, say, "What's the most effective thing 20 of us can do?"

We lose sight as a society because we look at the big picture, and we talk about big pictures stuff. We can't change the big picture today. But Matt showed a picture of a march on a boss. We used to do that stuff all the time. And that is very effective.

If there's 20 people that are unhappy because of how, say, the cleaners are being treated in this building, well, then everyone else come together in this room and go after the boss of the cleaners.

The cleaner can't do it because they're too vulnerable. But you can do it as a customer of this university. And so we use that. That's how we played it.

I was Air Canada employee. If I said what I said about WestJet against Air Canada, I'd be fired. But I could cause all sorts of shit on behalf of the WestJet workers, and they could cause shit on behalf of me, and the company kinda liked it. We'd go over and cause shit to the other guys, but we'd build solidarity.

You can do that here very easily. Because instantly you've got people in faculty, students, administration, and tech workers who want change already. Get that group together and start making it happen. Because you know change is coming from above, and it's not good.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 7: Thank you very much. And I must appreciate Parkdale because I did a project in Parkdale, and I'm impressed by how community is connected there. Thank you very much, both of you.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 8: Thank you both for coming. I really appreciate your candid conversation. It's a refreshing take. You both mentioned a little bit about the cross-generational divide that kind of comes along with these projects and these movements. Do you feel that we are shifting into a society where younger people are in fact facing more repercussions for standing up for these movements? In the past obviously that was pretty normal. A lot of famous pictures we see is very direct, often violent action. Do you feel that these shifts are kind of triggering a normalization of that form of direct confrontation? Or is that kind of sensationalized to people within the current movements?

SEAN: Direct action was very much part of our DNA at the airport because we can't legally strike. The government shuts us down. So wildcats was our way of doing it. It's short, violent, and quick.

There's never been a time where society has said, "Come on in. You can protest us."

Matt mentioned Occupy, and I was involved in Occupy as well. There was no welcoming. That was not a welcome mat.

I'm from Winnipeg originally, so the Winnipeg General Strike's very near and dear to my heart, and workers back in the day were killed.

You go through all Prairie towns and you'll find worker graves of workers that were massacred trying to exercise their rights to strike.

The thing is, is yes, society is getting more violent and more reactionary, but it's because we're doing it ourselves.

When Matt and I were sitting down, I was kind of joking that us old guys retired during COVID. That a lot of us got bought out when they were closing these companies down, and a lot of the Left kind of left with that as well because I haven't seen much protesting. We have our rights because we exercise our rights.

At the airport- I remember we went through a period of time of almost 20 years where we had no strikes.

And when we started talking strike, it was all of a sudden very serious. I had cops following me in the airport, everything else. Because they weren't used to it before. And it's kind of laughable because once we started striking again and we said, "Enough of this nice stuff," it's very quickly how they got used to it and was back to the old days.

I think that we as a society are not challenging the authorities enough. We're too scared. We're too afraid. We're too not sure what to do. So we're all just trying to look for the right social media thing to follow as opposed to just going out on the street. Like, people are doing that, and that does work.

The pictures Matt showed of marching on the boss. Yeah. The look on that guy's face. That look works. That's the look of someone saying, "How do I get out of this? What can I give these people to get rid of them?" And they're not afraid of us anymore. I'm telling you that. The people at the top are not afraid of us anymore. They're talking about how to control us. And once they talk about that, we're in trouble as a society.

So I think it's time for us to become a little more uncontrollable, shall we say.

MATT: Yeah. I agree, and also I have a slightly different perspective, I think maybe. In terms of tenant organizing, I find that often younger people are more interested. And I think part of that is, at least in my building and the buildings I've been knocking on doors in. The older people in my building have often been there for 10, 15, 20 years. They're paying below market rates, and they're terrified of losing their homes. Like, "If, if I lose my home, I don't know what I'm gonna do. I won't be able to afford a new place, and so I don't wanna step out of line. I don't wanna rock the boat."

And I completely understand. If you're paying $1,000 below market rate and you lose your home, what do you do? Like, where do you go? Your life is turned upside down.

Versus a lot of the younger people in my building have moved in in the last few years, are paying market rates and are like, "This is bullshit. This is way too much money. Like, why, why are they asking us to pay this much in rent?"

Not to say that long-term tenants in my building aren't interested and engaged and wanting to push back, but I do think it does depend on the cause, who feels like they have more to lose from pushing back.

I do also think that, a lot of the ways that we organized against power in the past have shifted as the shape of the economy has shifted.

You know like Sean was talking about with the Air Canada union and how that's changed over time, right? That model of you start with a company and you're there for 40 years and you get your pension and you go...

Like, that's gone, right? That's not coming back. Most people aren't in that kind of context. And if you're working a minimum wage job at Starbucks, like, fighting really hard to organize a union- I'm not gonna say it's not worthwhile, but a lot of people are gonna move on from their Starbucks job after two or three years, right? Versus General Motors or Air Canada, where people were building a career. So I think the way that that organizing and pushing back ... it's gotta look different in the 2020s than it did in the 1970s or even further back in the past.

RESH: And with that, I would like to invite the thank you on behalf of the class.

STUDENT THANK YOU: As we come to the end of the session, I would like to speak a little bit about the central theme that we had, which was greed. So I have a little quote here which says, "As long as greed is stronger than compassion, there will always be suffering."

So as a community worker, student, and your classmate, I would just like to tell you all that wherever we might be, please extend your compassion, expand it, and lower your greed as much as possible so that we can do incredible work like Sean and Matt are doing in the world.

Sean and Matt, on behalf of our class I would like to extend our sincere thanks for taking this time to join us as speakers today. We truly appreciate your willingness to share your knowledge, experiences, and perspectives with us. Your insights were not only informative, but also deeply engaging and thought-provoking. The discussion helped us understand the complexities of the field and challenged us to think more critically about our roles and responsibilities moving forward. Thank you.

RESH: That was the keynote discussion from the 34th annual Labour Fair at George Brown Polytechnic in Toronto featuring Matt Whitfield, organizer with the Parkdale Housing Justice Network (PHJN) and Sean Smith, founding representative of the Toronto Airport Workers' Council.

And this is The Courage My Friends podcast.

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

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