

Episode 11 All Politics is Loco (local) w/ Community Organizer Rachel Reyes

Drew Stegmaier: Hey everybody. This is The Drew Steg Show and I'm your host, Drew Stegmaier. This show is new, evolving and finding itself. We don't yet know what it will turn out to be. And that's exciting. I believe the world has a current civility deficit and with this endeavor, I'll be exploring tough and taboo topics with compassion and incivility.

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Rachel, what is up? What is up?

Rachel Reyes: Nothing much. Happy Friday!

Drew Stegmaier: Happy Friday, happy early birthday to this country that we live in, uh, which I think is very fitting. So tell us about yourself. Give us a little bit of bio. Why should people know you? Who are you?

Rachel Reyes: Who am I? Why should people know me?

Two very loaded questions. My name is Rachel, as you said, I'm Rachel Reyes. I am, I don't know. I'm a native Angeleno. It's where I currently reside. It's where I work. Um, it's where I came back to after years of living all over and I am a worker and community organizer. I do work are organizing by day for money and in my free time I do community organizing, mostly electoral at the moment.

That's where I can focus on. Like fun time. Um, and I'm a dog mom, so I don't know. I feel like I, it's, not that I hate when people ask me that, but I never know where to go with that.

Drew Stegmaier: Sure.. and I say that deliberately vaguely, because it lets people go where they think they could or should go, because I could dive in and say, tell me what it means to be a community organizer, which I will ask you.

So you mentioned a community organizer on the electoral side. Did I hear that right? Yeah. Okay. What does that mean? Cause I don't know. I don't know what that means. Like I didn't even know there's flavors to community organization.

Rachel Reyes: Oh yeah. So there's flavors, all kinds of organizing. And I think I was, this is something my director always tells me that she's very happy in some ways that Barack Obama was president because he made the term organizer like a household term and so people kind of understood what it meant to be an organizer. Um, in Barack Obama was also is also, I guess, a community organizer. And so community organizing is simply empowering the people in your immediate community around. A specific goal, a specific campaign and so when I say that I focus on electoral politics, it is because I simply organize with my community around candidates for elected office or proposition.

Um, so literally just doing electoral work. Um, but you could also be a community organizer that focuses on transit justice that focuses on racial and then you're like the activities you do, but. Surround that, but I focus currently on electoral politics because that's where my heart has taken me really is the last couple.

Drew Stegmaier: Okay and so electoral politics, we're just going to get right into it here. What are your politics? Tell us about yourself, your politics, your beliefs.

Rachel Reyes: Um, I guess overall I would consider myself a socialist. I would consider myself and like, I don't want to like, get into the, like, specifics of that. Like who do you follow?

Who do you read? Like, that's boring to me. Um, so I guess I would say more accurately. I'm just anticapitalist whatever means it. To get there. I'm fine with honestly, um, as long as it's like actually democratic but..

Drew Stegmaier: That's a big caveat, right? That's like not..

Rachel Reyes: I wish it could be. So I'm, I think what I've learned, um, during the pandemic honestly, is that I'm not, I'm not like, not violent.

Like I'm not like a pacifist. I don't think that I would go and burn shit down, but I'm not going to tell other people not to, if that's like the means by which. We liberate ourselves, um, which I

think is a larger conversation, right? Like how do you achieve equity? I don't know. Obviously if I did, we wouldn't be living in the world that we do.

So, so that's why I like to say that I'm anticapitalist um, and I want to focus on bringing equity to queer people. Women spend people in general children. Um, that's like the climate, everything. I don't know if my politics are for everyone.

Drew Stegmaier: Okay. Well, I think it's important because part of the stick with the whole show is like, Hey, it's possible to be friends with people with different beliefs.

And if you actually talk to people about their beliefs, rather than bullshit on the news, most people are honestly pretty reasonable. I really, really believe that now you have to talk to people to get that right. Um, so you said this word equity, which I think is really important because a lot of people have this equity versus equality debate.

And I would say that they're, they're similar words, right? They're off. Two letters. Three letters. Yeah. So where, I mean, there's a lot of places that we could go with this, but, um, where I would like to go, if you're okay with it is what does it mean, um, to you to be anti-capitalist or, or socialist.

Rachel Reyes: So when I think about let's just take socialism on its own, um, to me, it's that everybody has equitable access to things that they need.

So food, water, shelter, um, but also within that, the ability to thrive, right? Because like, just because you can get a job doesn't mean that it's a good job or a well-paying job or a job that you enjoy. Um, and so I truly believe right. And like the, and roses quote unquote mentality, which is like, we need the bare minimum, just food, water, and shelter, but we also need to be able to be happy and thrive within our communities.

Um, and to be into capitalists. It's just like, I don't believe in this system of capitalism, I think if you're going to fail, right. Um, I live in Los Angeles, there are over 60,000 on house people, and there are like 50 billionaires that live here. That's like, how can you have such a high concentration of wealth, which is a marker of capitalism, but then also have 60,000 unhoused people, which is also a marker of capitalism.

Um, so to me, I think it's like clearly a project that has failed. Um, I didn't consent to live under capitalism. It was just a system that. Was there when I was born. Um, and so for me, I am choosing to spend my life trying to dismantle that. Um, and even if I can't do that, I am trying to dismantle the manifestations of capitalism that are creating like inequity and inequality in the world, um, that people in Flint that don't have clean water, that people down the street from me at the VA that live on the sidewalk, even though they fought for our country happy fucking independence day.

Um, that's not right. So for me, that is why I choose to organize. Um, and I choose to do that through electoral work on, but also to store organize workers because, uh, the places where you can organize to change your life, one of those pieces would be the workplace. So for me, it's really important that we're empowering people in the workplace to make their work more equitable and more democratic.

Drew Stegmaier: Okay so this capitalism thing, if there's an argument that okay, Okay. I know I need to make a little aside here because there is good faith and bad faith, right? So there's this one argument that, Hey, capitalism is not working. And a common rebuttal to that argument I see is that it immediately assumes whoever said this is a socialist or is a communist.

And if you read marks, as far as I understand when I've studied Marx, he would say that the Chinese communist party is using the wrong label. Like they are not implementing what he said. And that doesn't seem fair. That that doesn't seem right. Um, so I think what I'm trying to say is there are people who operate in bad faith, who assume if you're anticapitalist that you are communists, right?

Assuming, but they're also people who just don't get it. And I think that people who in good faith just don't get it, have not been presented with an alternative. Right. I would say we have each stages. One stage that many people are at. This shit ain't work and I'm upset. Right? We have a lot of people at that stage.

And then there's maybe a smaller group of people that doesn't think we're at that stage or think, Hey, this is working for me. Let's keep going down the path we're going. And then there's another group of people that says, Hey, this isn't working and I'm going to try something different. Right. This thing I call, um, destructive criticism versus constructive criticism.

So that's a short story. That's a, that's a long way of saying like, what do you think is next? Um, or where would you like us to go?

Rachel Reyes: Well, two separate questions.

What do I think is next? I honestly don't know. I think in turn, I will just speak in terms of the U S obviously, because I am from the U S I'm not well-versed or well, versed enough in the politics of other countries to have an opinion on like the world at large, that would be impossible.

So I will speak to you, this place that I reside in. I don't know. It depends. I think where the U S goes. I have no idea. It seems like voting rights are being stripped away, which is terrifying. It seems like the climate is I mean, obviously we knew that it was changing, but I think it's actually now we're living, we're really living in the effects of climate change.

If you look at what happened in the Pacific Northwest last week with a hundred plus Fahrenheit temperatures, um, there's fires happening already. I think like California, like we're already in a drought week. We never truly got out of the drought, but we're already in a drought. Um, And so, no, I think, I think what is next is a lot of climate catastrophe that we are not ready to deal with.

Um, but what I think should happen, I think that we need to use, you know, this brief moment where people think like, people think the pandemic is over in the U S like, I don't know why everyone assumes that a majority of people have been vaccinated. That's not the case. Um, but people are living their lives, you know, normally whatever that means, I think that we have such a rare opportunity right now for people to demand more from their local governments.

And I think that we should take that. Um, I think that workers need to look around and realize. Those folks who were made to come back last summer or, uh, required to keep working throughout the pandemic, need to ask for more money, need to ask for more benefits. Um, and if they don't get either of those things, they need to stop working.

Because I think it was very clear in the last year that the economy is those folks, right? Because we wouldn't have made people go back to work at the fucking Westfield last June, if they weren't necessary to keeping the country going and so I think that like, what ought to happen is that we use this moment.

As organizers and as worker organizers to work with workers, take their demands and write them into policy and get those policies passed and we need to stop giving the keys over to businesses to tell us where to go housing, who to hire, um, and who to actually allow to progress in society. Um, I think that we ought to use this moment to demand more.

Um, and so that's what I'm trying to do. Um, and might be few tile. Right. Like maybe the whole country burns down in one big wealth fire. Um, but I'm choosing to focus on like what we can do in this moment to move forward, um, to create that equity that I was talking about, because that's really all that we can control.

I don't know what's going to happen in Congress. Not really concerned about that because I can't really do anything to change a Congress person's vote, but I can do stuff to change the lives of my neighbors. So that's what I'm going to try.

Drew Stegmaier: So what are, what are some of the things that are top of mind for you right now in terms of changes?

Rachel Reyes: So we here in LA are working to pass a policy known as fair workweek, and there are already fair workweek policies throughout the country, in different places. So we're working to pass one in LA and that would basically give workers, workers would be entitled to their schedule two weeks in advance.

Um, and that would make a massive difference in people's lives. In terms of planning. If you can go back to school planning, if you can take your kids to the doctor's, if you yourself can go to the doctors, um, pre pandemic scheduling was like top of mind for people in terms of that, along with wages, like really impacts their daily lives.

Um, and then of course the pandemic happened. So our organizing. Completely shifted from worrying about scheduling, to worrying about health and safety. Um, so top of mind, right now, as we transition out of this COVID centric moment, um, because right now in LA there's about 5 million people who are completely vaccinated against COVID, um, which is a decent amount.

Um, so we're in this transition period, and I think that we should keep focusing or refocus rather back on fair workweek policy. I would like to see grocery store workers and other essential

workers get a permanent raise of \$5. We were able to implement a hazard pay for the last three, four months. Um, and it's expiring next week here in LA.

I would like to see that permanent. I would like to see all of our retail workers that were not considered essential so they didn't get hazard pay, but were essential enough to be forced back to work last summer and work throughout. Spikes that we had in the holidays. I would like to see them get a raise.

So I would like to see a minimum wage raise. Um, and then also beyond that, we need to fix our housing crisis in Los Angeles. Um, so for me, those are some of the biggest changes that I think we need to fight for going.

Drew Stegmaier: So what's funny with some of the stuff you mentioned is that I think there's, I don't know, I'm not going to arbitrarily make a class system, but there are these classes of work.

Yeah. And what I would say. And I think this is fair to say is that community movements and things like the civil rights movement were largely based on the premise that America is a good idea, but the rights, benefits and freedoms that Americans get are not distributed to everyone. Right? And so with something like a fair work week or a \$5 permanent wage increase, or this hazard pay, there's a lot of folks let's say knowledge workers.

Right. This class of workers has all that stuff already and may or may not see a need for it in legislation as they already have it. Right. Um, but there's a large group of people that don't have these things and the common advice to just get a better job. You idiot. Yeah. Yeah. Doesn't exactly work for them.

So I guess the question is how do you rectify that and, or make it real right. And, and I think, um, you could say there's this one view, which is pro labor, another view, which is pro business and maybe a third view, which is if you're not pro labor, you will not have a business because they will burn it down.

Rachel Reyes: So what do I say to those folks? I think this is a fair question. I think it's really similar to this like student debt debate that we're seeing, right. Like, well, I paid off my debt. So I shouldn't have to pay off here or whatever. Like, people don't understand that. Like, just because you had to coil so hard doesn't mean that everyone has to, and also you should not have either.

Um, and so I think when Matt, with folks who like work in an office who worked the same hours every single day, Monday to Friday of healthcare, have a parking spot, there's air conditioning out their office, whatever. Um, like to remind those folks that unless you're in a union, your job could turn around tomorrow and take all of that away.

Your job could say, actually now you have to work Wednesday to, I don't know, starting on Wednesday, you only got Monday and Tuesday off you work. The other days you don't have the typical weekend off. Like your job could do that. If you're not in a union, your job could decide that you no longer work 40 hours, and you're actually only going to work 20.

Um, your job could decide to take away your health care. Like there's a lot of things that your job could decide to do because most states are right to work. Most private jobs are not union. Um, and so the second thing I would say is that while it's great that you have access to all of those things, everybody should also have access to those things.

And because I can't organize a union in every single workplace, what I can do as a worker organizer is codified the rights that people have into policy. So I can't unionize every target worker in LA. What I can do is push and pass policy at a city level that mandates things like two week work schedules in advance.

Um, we could pass a policy that says hard time, wait part-time workers are defined as having 25 to 30 hours a week. And full-time workers are classified as 35 40. Like we could pass policies that lay out those rights very clearly for folks, we could pass a universal health care in the city of it. We could pass public banks.

We could pass all of these things that actually would improve the lives of all workers. Um, not just sector specific workers. We like to start with sector specific workers in local places because it does actually then when it becomes popular and people envy it, it goes to other counties. It becomes a state, um, plan, hopefully.

Um, so I think it's great if folks already have access to what they believe are fair working conditions, but unless, and a union you're not entitled to them and your boss could end them all or just fire you if they want it to, um, which is bad. So I would invite anyone that, you know, with comfortable with their working environment to join other workers and like fight for their rights as well and get them into policies because that only.

Every workplace, right? Like, of course I'm focusing on non-union retail and grocery in my job, but when we improve one workplace, we're working to improve them all and it uplift the uplift standards of everyone's workplace. Okay.

Drew Stegmaier: So for the folks who, I guess there's a rebuttal, which would be, Hey, some businesses can't afford that and I think there's, this is where we get into a little bit of nuance, right? Some businesses where the math just doesn't work out. Like, Hey, if cost of labor goes above X, we are no longer profitable and we're burning cash. Right. So they either have to cut staff and then they're understaffed or they can't sustain that.

There's another group of businesses that that's just not true for. Right. For example, um, I would say most knowledge workers again, anybody who has these things that you've mentioned like a fair work week, just as part of their job, like, um, most people that work for laps. Uh, on laptop, right? I would say, I think that's a fairly fair assumption.

So what do you, what do you say to the people who say like, well, that would kill the businesses?

Rachel Reyes: Well, two things, my like petty response is then they shouldn't be in business by my actual response is that there are ways to write legislation so that it only applies to retailers that can't afford it.

So the hazard pay legislation that we pass in the city of LA does not apply to the corner shop that employees like the person that owns it and like their family, like it doesn't, it didn't apply to them because we know that it can be economically challenging. We use a metric of square footage. So if your business was a grocery or grocery retail business, which is a classification that is like decided by either the state or the federal government, I want to say it's a federal classification, um, based off of square footage, And within that square footage, 10% of your square footage has to be dedicated to grocery, which is why target was included in hazard pay legislation.

You could use those same qualifications for things like defining what it means to be a part-time worker versus a full-time worker. So there are ways to ensure that it is only applying to big box retailers that are more likely to abuse their workers. You could also say things like employers of 10 or more, this apply this policy will apply to.

So again, you're carving out smaller businesses where it might not be feasible for whatever reason. But yeah, there's like waste write legislation so that it is targeting the actual root of the problem. Just like Walmart target, the 99 cent store, like those kinds of fitness businesses. There's definitely ways to target the letters.

Drew Stegmaier: Okay. Yeah. I think, I think what's interesting about capitalism is that in the marketing it's we have this competition and competition is. But all big businesses are monopolistic or oligopolistic. Anti-fracking competitive entities.

Rachel Reyes: Yeah. They don't want competition or a free market. They want to be the market.

Drew Stegmaier: Right. And, um, that's one of those things where you could say, oh, that's not a bug, that's a feature. Right. Because we see it all the time. Right. Google markets itself as small potatoes. Right. Because it's a monopoly, right. Monopolies market themselves as small and small company pretend they're monopolies.

Right. Like, Hey, we can be big too and I think and I'm curious on your thoughts on this. Are you familiar with Richard Wolf?

Rachel Reyes: I am, but I don't know if I'm not well-versed I know who he is.

Drew Stegmaier: That's cool. Yeah. So I like some of his ideas. I think he does some good work, but, um, I would say in some sense, he thinks about how we collectively organize ourselves and how we organize workers.

And I don't want to put words in his mouth, but I think what he advocates for is protecting workers, right? Like maybe not that a job as a human. Right. But if you have a job, it should at least pay for you to survive. Right. And that is a human right. So how, how do we beat that? So to speak, how do we get around that?

Because I think it's an emergent phenomenon of capitalism. We see this trend time and time again, like a system exists to propagate itself and metastasize. So how, what do we do, right.

Rachel Reyes: I mean, I think if I understand what you're asking, like capitalism can only be successful when there's people to exploit and when there is money to be made, I think the problem that we're seeing is that like people are literally dying. Whether it's the pandemic or

climate, um, like dozens of people die last week during the heat wave in the Pacific Northwest and we're going to see that happening. That's going to keep happening. but something that I was really kind of struck by was that folks who didn't have AC in places like Seattle went to hotels, but the hotel rooms were all like triple the price that they normally were press scouting, which is illegal, but it happens anyway and things like that are going to keep happening.

And so capitalism will find a way to make money. Even when, while it's killing people. And so I think like the natural end to capitalism is when, like literally there are no workers left because I've all fucking died because they don't have healthcare or because they died, like when the country was on fire and I obviously don't want that to happen. So that is why I am focusing my efforts partially on organizing workers, because like we can mitigate capitalism right now and my life outside of work is like dismantling capitalism period. End of story. With everybody and so I think that like, I owe it to workers and like I am a worker.

I also spent six years in retail. I know what it's like. I know exactly what it's like to be working in these very terrible abusive conditions. Um, And I don't want that to happen anymore. Um, and it shouldn't happen anymore. So I think the natural end to capitalism is we all fucking die. Um, but I think before we get there, we have to try very hard to mitigate the effects, um, while also working simultaneously to just dismantle it altogether.

Drew Stegmaier: Okay. Yeah. So if I was understanding right, capitalism, I guess in the firmware, right. It is exploitative period. Yeah. Um, and without that feature doesn't work, right. It's about value extraction. Yeah. So that's, um, you know, obviously not good, right. That leads us to on the trajectory that, and yeah. I just like I'm a little bit at a loss for words, because. I think where we're at now, there's this phrase called game A game B. So game A would be finite rivalrous zero sum dynamics game B is infinite collaborative, positive sum dynamics, right? That's the only way we're going to survive.

And right now we're in game in between, right. Or we're shifting from game to game in between. And so if we're not doing this value extraction, and I think I'm kind of skating around this question over and over, but I'm like, what's next? What's next? What's next? What are, what can we do instead? Cause I think the argument against, um, giving workers more, right.

Which I think this is actually a somewhat sound argument. The whole Adam Smith thing of, Hey. Well, our productivity, and then we'll all enjoy the fruits of our labors and that's just not how it's gone and you know, some people would say, well if we raise the minimum wage, Mickey D's will fire everyone.

Right. Those people will be screwed. So what is your, what are your thoughts on that take?

Rachel Reyes: It's a bad take McDonald's is going to do it anyway. McDonald's is going to find a way to fire its workforce. Even if they don't give them a raise or healthcare, or their managers stopped sexually assaulting their employees.

Right. Like it's going to happen regardless. Because that's how capitalism works. It's like what we just said. In order to continue making maximum profits, they're going to find ways to do that. So I think that even where we're not moving workers, resist benefit companies find ways to increase profits Chipotle.

A great example. This has been on the news recently, in cases were due to the fact that they raised wages for their workers. When in actuality, they've been raising prices steadily for years. And last year they raised the CEO's pay. I can't remember the figure, but it was millions of dollars. And it's like, so where is that price increase? Where should you actually place that blame?

I don't think it's in the stinky, like dollar ways you gave to people it's like in the millions and millions of dollars you gave to the CEO. And when you work with CEO over the last couple of decades, that's been steadily rising. Whereas the federal minimum wage has not raised at all. Um, so I think I just need to go get her, give me a second.

Drew Stegmaier: Okay, Holly. So I think that's a great point and it's one I hadn't heard ever before. So I was like, oh, this shit is juicy, which is a, whether or not we advocate for worker rights. Those at the low end are being externally. Right. And there's this classic managerial question of what, if we train all our people and give them all these perks and they leave.

Right. And the flip side is, well, what if we don't and they stay. So you touched on something I've been thinking about a lot. And again, I think this is something where evil misinterpret the data,

right. Or they misunderstand how our system works, which is we assume what people buy is what they want and is what's good for them.

Right. And the easy rebuttal to that is addicts. They're your most loyal, their most reliable customers. And they're getting horrible outcomes, right? So on the worker side, you could say, you know, where people choose to work is what's good for them. And I think that's, that's wrong, right? That's not true.

Which is, Hey, many people are in situations where they're knowingly doing things that they absolutely hate that don't enable them to thrive because they feel trapped. Like they don't have another option. Um, so again, you know, that begs the question. What do we do instead?

Rachel Reyes: I mean, like there's, at this point, I was having this similar conversation with my brother over the holidays, um, because we were talking about target and Walmart, um, and how they have just taken over small cities, big cities.

Um, and you know, I was talking about how it's kind of too well, not kind of, it is too late to stop Walmart from coming in. And closing down small businesses, pharmacies, markets, clothing stores, that's already happened. It's the appeal of the mega store. Um, and so your only options, if you live in smaller towns, it's like you have to work at Walmart because all of the other variety of workplaces is gone.

Right. And that lets Walmart dictate workplace environment, culture, because they're the only workplace. Right. Um, and so what do we do now in the situation where people can really only work at Walmart? Walmart doesn't hire full-time employees so that they don't have to give them healthcare. Their employees are on welfare because they can't survive on minimum wage and short or just tiny amount of hours that they get.

Um, they're also on EDT. Like the, the public is financing. Walmart's poor business practice. So in theory, we're already practicing. So Melissa, cause we're already helping hundreds of thousands of workers, either bills their families, um, and survive, not thrive, just survive. So we are giving Walmart money to exploit their workers.

Um, and so what do we do with that? What do we do now? Um, the city of LA you cannot. A Superstore in the city. Um, there's only one Walmart in this city, like the super store. There's a

tiny Walmart, um, in Pacoima, but an actual like Walmart Superstore, that's like very common in many parts of the us. There's only one.

And that was built before this ordinance was passed. Um, so cities can do things like that. Or cities can demand that employers of exercise provide benefits, fair workweek, whatever the case is. Um, you have to legislate around it or you have to create. So much public pressure that Walmart tries to do the right thing.

We saw target agree to raise the wage of all of its workers in the U S to \$15 an hour in response to rising demand for hazard pay throughout the country. So target didn't just decide to be nice and like give people more money. They were trying to trick us and squash their workers demands for hazard pay by just raising minimum wage, which is good.

Great. Like we want that. We also want all of this other stuff. Um, and I think it's also just like trying to organize unions, um, and trying to empower workers in that way to get together with their coworkers and demand more. Um, so there's a lot of strategies that we can employ at this moment to try and like get workers more and get not even more, just like what they deserve, like bare minimum, um, uh, wage.

That will allow you to thrive. Um, so there's a lot of strategies that we can take. And I just think it depends on where folks think they would be most helpful. Um, but at the end of the day, like that change has to come from workers, workers have to be the ones demanding it because at the end of the day, it's their labor that is being exploited.

I don't work at target. So what, what target does to his employees? It doesn't impact me directly, um, to think about it selfishly. Right. But at the end of the day, I understand that like the work environment that target workers are in does directly impact me. Um, it impacts everyone's workplace in some way.

So, so yeah, there's a lot of different ways that we should go. Um, and you know, hopefully people are inspired to do one of those things.

Drew Stegmaier: So yeah, let's, let's talk about unions a little bit because my take on unions is that, um, unions exist to serve their members, right? And so it's not as simple as unions are, good.

Unions are bad or unions are powerful unions. Aren't right. A union is an organization that exists to serve its members. And what I would call the spectrum or lifecycle of a union is that workers are getting screwed. Right? Eventually some worker speaks up Rouses the other workers said, Hey, we deserve more.

We deserve better workers than organized. Then they get what they need. Right. But then they also get better at organizing. And eventually at some point the union itself begins exploiting, right. That doesn't always happen. Right. It doesn't always happen, but sometimes it does. And there's a lot of backlash for example, against police unions.

Right. And so the question I have is what does a healthy union mean or healthy union look like? Yeah.

Rachel Reyes: I mean, I, I also will, would like to reframe it in that unions are a collection of workers. Like a union is not like a third party, like a union. It's just a bunch of workers. Um, and that I think is kind of where all of this abuse kind of stems from is that people, workers don't understand that they are the union.

If you want things to change within the union, you have to step up and do it. Um, you cannot rely on other people. Um, and that's why organizing is important. Um, I hear you. I refer to these unions as like corporate unions that have just gotten like so big that there's all of these paid staff members that like didn't, you know, work on the shop floor, um, and are doing more of like a surface union model, which is like workers come, come to someone in an office, tell them what's wrong.

And then that person goes and deals with management. And instead of the workers leading that, um..

Drew Stegmaier: Noise, right. That has noise. Not signal. Yeah.

Rachel Reyes: Yeah, exactly. And so I think a healthy union is one that is actually truly run by workers. Um, and I've been thinking a lot about this, obviously because of my job.

Um, but also when looking at Amazon workers, um, there was that huge union vote. Um, recently that didn't pan out, they didn't have enough votes. Um, but then I was, um, I was on Twitter, just kind of like searching hashtags about Amazon. And I found out that there are like

two worker led unions. They're not recognized by the government, but there's two Amazon warehouses that are union that are organized together in their own plant, um, and have made changes in their own workplace.

Um, which is really good, right? Like that's exactly what we want workers to do. The problem is that, like, those changes are only being implemented at those plants. They're not being extrapolated throughout the country. Um, which is why I do think it is important to try and get union recognition, uh, recognition.

Um, even though you don't need it because a union is just a group of workers. Um, I do think that it's beneficial in the long run and for everybody, if you do get that recognition, um, but I think a healthy union has a leadership pipeline. I think that older workers. Train, um, younger workers into positions of leadership.

I think that there should be turnover. Um, I don't think that like there should be union bosses. I think that that breeds, like, I, I think that unions like that can start to, um, copy the abuses of power we see within capitalism, um, and also in non-union workplaces. So I think a healthy union is one that forefronts the workers in every sense has a leadership pipeline, um, and regularly like needs collectively to reassess where they're at.

Um, whether it's with their contract, their health and safety, um, rates of pay benefits. It's just healthy to meet, um, and constantly, um, reevaluate, you know, their work is that right?

Drew Stegmaier: So, um, tackling a little, because from my view, you haven't said anything that's like shocking or inflammatory. Um, it, it, it seems.

And, um, I'm curious, what type of resistance do you usually meet and in what form does it take?

Rachel Reyes: Well, a lot of workers, um, a lot of workers in non-union workplaces are scared of losing their job, because like I said earlier, most states are right to work or in California, um, we're like kind of right to work.

So a lot of workers are scared of losing their job, which is very real. Um, we obviously don't live in a country that has universal healthcare. So you lose your full-time job, you lose your health care. Um, And you lose your source of income to pay your bills. So that's the biggest hesitation I get from workers resistance.

We see from politicians regarding, um, workplace policies are just things like, well, define what it means to work in retail or define what it means to work. Part-time. Um, why, you know, why is this only necessary for this workplace sector? Why don't we do this for everybody? Um, and the reason why, as I said earlier, the reason why you start with like one workplace, um, sector, for instance, fair work week, starting within retail is because if you try to bite off too much at once, you're probably not going to get anything and you need to start small in order to expand, um, So a lot of times politicians will say, well, let's just open it up to everyone.

This was something that city council, one city council member try to do with hazard pay. Well, shouldn't everyone that's working get hazard pay. Well, yeah, but like only certain workers were required to go in. Yes. If you had a work from home job during the pandemic,

Drew Stegmaier: that's not hazardous. Even if I'm wearing it, I'm scared.

I'm scared. I'm scared. COVID is going to come through the microphone.

Rachel Reyes: So it's a tactic that like they will use to try and get more reports for instance. Well, let's do an analysis of how is this really going to impact the city? And it's just like ways to stall because they don't want to outright say our friends.

Like the business corporation pack, like don't want you to don't want us to do this. Um, so there's a lot of weird style and tactics. And also, as you said earlier, like a lot of people, not a lot of people, I don't actually know how many people, many people, some people have the opinion that. Retail and service jobs are a low pain for a reason because they're low skilled, which isn't true.

If you've worked a shift in retail or service, you know, that it's like the most difficult job you will ever have. In my opinion. Um, I spent six years in luxury retail, which isn't even big box retail. Um, and it was probably, I know for a fact it will be the hardest six years of work I will ever have to do.

Um, so I think that we conflate like low pay and no benefits to value and that's just really not the case at all. Um, so I think that there's like pushback and hesitation from everywhere and a lot of it is cultural. Um, so I think a way that I try to mitigate that is by talking about my experience in retail, as much as I can, um, And by talking about like how I made it a career.

And I think that retail can be a career and people treat it like a career in this country. There are people who've worked at Macy's Walmart and McDonald's for their entire lives. That is their career. Um, and they should be compensated the same way that they would be if they worked on wall street for their entire lives or in another similar sector that is paid ridiculously well.

Um, and where you get more pay and more benefits, um, as your seniority goes on. Um, so yeah, I think that this is all common sense. I think that all this legislation is common sense. Um, but I think a lot of people don't see themselves as workers. So, or see their struggle in the workplace as similar to people who work in retail and service. And so we have this chasm when it doesn't need to exist.

Drew Stegmaier: Okay. Yeah. And as far as I know, to circle back to Amazon for a second, they don't like workers organizing. And as far as I understand, and I'll try to put this in the show notes, but it's, I guess I'd call it incentivized turnover where my understanding for warehouse workers and drivers, they like them to not be at the company more than three years.

That's not true for software engineers, not even close. They want those engineers to stay there forever. Right. And for these other folks, the real question is it becomes a philosophical question, right? This idea of are people lazy or are people hard workers. Right. And if you think people are lazy, it's like, screw them, pay them zero.

Right. And. The other side of the coin is all like all the wall Streeters deserve much more money because they're providing much more value. So I think, I think it's a fair jump or a fair leap to make, to say, however we map value to people's earnings is broken. Um, and I think what's very scary and very dangerous about a welfare state is that there's this idea of politics is all one question.

How much do we owe each other? Right. And that's a gross oversimplification, but I like to use it. And I like to say like, okay, the right simplified is pick yourself up by your bootstraps, the left, simplify it. Hey, someone stole my boots, right? Like there's nothing for me to pick up here. Can I have another card please?

And, um, I guess the, the question there is, um, you could say, where do we draw the line? Right. And basically as a community organizer, um, there's a focus on raising the floor. Yeah. And then

there's this future dystopian model of, Hey, when we keep giving out welfare, we're going to put a ceiling on other people.

Right. We're going to hold people back. And many people who are at the line will willingly become lazy. Right. And so this is something I like to talk about. I'll be talking about it a lot more, but, um, how do we make a different way? How do we create a different way? And so when COVID started, I was working at a restaurant and it shut down.

And what we don't have is. Spectrum based governance. Right? So there are people who, when the restaurant got shut down, they began getting more money from the government. Then they were making in some cases working 50 hours a week. Yeah. Right. And I don't think anyone was saying the benefits were great.

Right? Right. It's like, Hey, this is considered small is more than many people are making after busting their asses in a hard job. Um, and so what happened is, and I've told this story a few times, but if folks are new to this podcast, um, there's some threshold which was, Hey, if you're making less than 300 a week, the feds give you an additional 600, when you hit 300 or get 301, you get zero.

Like that is fucking nuts. Right. They wouldn't cross the gap. They wouldn't cross the chasm. It's like, you hit this threshold, you get zero. It's it's not, Hey, we've decided that 900 a week is the minimum people need to live. So if you make 700, we'll give you 200. If you make 200, we'll give you 700. If you make four 50, we'll give you four 50.

And so the question I have for you is this seems so painfully obvious, like why does this not yet exist? Why don't we have something like for a minimum wage, right? Let's say we've decided the minimum wage is \$15 and employers, if their balance sheet allows it are responsible for it, otherwise they're required, let's say \$8 and the government will give you another seven per hour.

Do you have any idea why we don't have what I'll call spectrum based policy? It just seems like a better way to do policy.

Rachel Reyes: Yeah. I mean, I'm not sure why to be honest, because I agree with you. I think it makes sense, but I think the people writing the laws. Don't want to give people anything like they don't actually want to make up that difference.

Um, because the way that my friends in England were being paid, um, during the pandemic was the government. I think it was the government was giving them 80% of their paycheck, which like makes sense because then it would be in line with what you were already making at work, not a hundred percent of what you were making, but 80% and everyone was getting the same 80%.

Um, I think the point you make about like a lot of folks were making more on unemployment, like that's damning and that is bad. Like it's actually bad that folks are getting paid so little and have access to subpar hours at their job that they are on minimum wage are being on campus. Other is paying them more money and is giving them a leg up.

Like that's not their problem. It's not worker's problems. That's a failing of our businesses. That is a failing of capitalism. Um, and that's what we need to fix. Like that is why it's important to raise the minimum wage. I think if you lose your job, your unemployment should be what you were making at that job until you get another job.

Like, it shouldn't be this like weird, like, oh, you get 450 max from the state of California. If you made over a certain amount of money, like, I will be honest. I was making \$38 an hour at my last retail job. I was making a lot of money. Um, I lost money when I had to go on unemployment because they were not giving me the same amount of money.

Um, and I lost my benefits. I had to enroll in Obamacare, so like shout out Obamacare, but it was really expensive. Um, and when they took away the like beef stuff, Unemployment. And I was only making gain in quotes of \$450 a week. Like one week of that was just going to my healthcare. Like I literally was making 900 hours, but that's what people make on minimum wage working.

Part-time it's ridiculous. Um, so I don't know why we don't have, um, a system like you described other than that, our government hates. As workers and doesn't want to give us anything while at the same time is giving corporations welfare left and right. Like I was explaining earlier, we're paying for benefits for Walmart employees that are part-time because they cannot survive on the wages that Walmart gives them.

And the hours that Walmart gives them, that is not okay.

Drew Stegmaier: Huge point. Cause I, I want to interrupt there because a lot of the arguments I see are what ifs like, well, if we did this, then things would crash or then things would burn. And what you're saying is why are you saying if we're doing it.

Rachel Reyes: We're already doing it right. We are, we're already doing it. Um, so why don't we. Actually, instead of making it this like punishment and this negative thing, why don't we turn it on its head and make it a good thing? Like we, we live in a society. We live in a society. We have neighbors. Like we ought to take care of each other.

It doesn't make me work less hard if someone else is making money on unemployment, if someone else is making more money than. Like it doesn't, as long as they're being taken care of which at the end of the day, I think we have an obligation to ensure that our neighbors are taken care of and that's what we should fight for.

Um, and we need to start calling out and by we, I mean, actually meet our politicians, um, the squad as it were, uh, people like that, I think need to very publicly call out a corporation on their bullshit. And I think it doesn't only have to come from senators and Congress people. I think like our city council members, I think our supervisors locally need to also start making those connections for people because people are too busy working, trying to survive to make those connections.

Um, and so that's where like education is a really big part of my organizing, um, is like showing people the ways in which the system is not working for them and is working for a specific amount of this specific kind of person. And this is the alternative. This is what government can actually and should do for you, um, to improve your lives.

Because for so long, our government has spent decades trying to actively make our lives worse so that other people can enrich themselves. And like, that is what it is. Um, since Reagan, that is what it is. Um, and I think that we need to just like all come to a conclusion that like, trickle-down didn't work.

Um, and like, we need to start over. We need to do something differently, um, because it didn't work and people are suffering and it is our job as neighbors to end that suffering.

Drew Stegmaier: Um, so on that note, um, I think it's really easy to get into phrases like the government or corporations when the government is just a group of human beings.

Right. Maybe they're lizard people. I don't know. Also these corporations. Right? And so something I'm curious about is you could say a corporation as an entity of organized human beings is not a good way of organizing human beings. Right. Kind of like a, a first principles type view, um, which I think is debatable.

Right. I also think it's kind of the best, worst thing we have so far. What I'm more curious about is not so much are corporations good or evil, but at what point does a corporation become evil?

Rachel Reyes: Good question. Um, well, okay. So the last question, what I do want to say about like governments, just being groups of people. Yes. I think the government that we have now is a group of very rich people and a group of very, a certain kind of people who are writing laws based on their own life experiences to benefit themselves.

And so I think that one of the, one of the reasons why I am so passionate about electoral work and electoral politics is that we have to get different kinds of people into office. We need people who are saddled with student loan debt, with medical debt. We need people who have been unhoused. We need people who have never owned a car because it could never afford it.

We need single parents. We need to stable people. Those are the kinds of people that need to be an office because you only legislate to your own experience and what you know. And so the more kinds of experiences that we can have an office, I think the better chance we have at creating a government that is equitable and actually representative of people.

Um, that being said, I think the same is probably the same for corporations. I've never run a corporation. So I don't know. Um, but I think a lot of businesses that have boards have boards that look like our government, very old, very white, very male able-bodied rich. Um, and that is not great. Only, only centering those experiences in the workplace or in the government is going to be bad for everyone.

But folks who look like that. Um, and so where does a corporation become evil? When you look at Uber and Lyft, I think are a great example. You can argue that they have always been evil. But

they deliberately ran themselves into debt with cheap rides to drive out competition. They started to lie and say that actually we're not a business.

We're an app. People don't have to work for us. They don't work for us. They work for an app. So we're not a business, they're not employees. And then they pulled everyone in California with prop 22 and said, unless you pass this, your rides are going to be more expensive. Prop 22 passed, which was so detrimental to workers, the drivers, but now the rides are what you would pay for a yellow cab.

And it's what we should have been paying, frankly, for people to drive us around. Um, so they feigned ignorance, pretended they were not a business. Drove out competition destroyed people's lives, who were their employee, are their employees. Um, and then Jeff set prices for everyone else. And so now we're in a situation where like, it's hard to get a cab, um, and everyone's prices are now raised.

Workers are not getting the extra money either. Um, so yeah, Uber probably should have been charging me \$40 every time I wanted to go across the city of Los Angeles. That is actually what it costs. Um, but instead of the driver now getting the extra \$25, they're making off of that ride, Uber is just getting instead.

So the, the driver is still getting the same amount of money that we're getting when that ride was only \$15, but now Uber is making an extra 25 off of them. So I think when you start to center the business and the profit itself over the people that make you the profit. That's when you become evil.

Drew Stegmaier: Okay. Yeah, I think that's, um, I think that's a pretty, pretty, I don't know. I'm inclined to say like, oh man, I liked that definition, but also I think that people may or may not understand it and it's, and it's okay to have that as a general definition, as I'm thinking. Like, that's not a clear threshold and maybe it isn't a clear threshold, right?

Maybe the reality is, Hey, that threshold exists on a case by case basis. And I think, um, it's where I want to go with the Uber example. Cause I just think this is fascinating is you have this idea of public goods versus private goods. Right. And the government, just for lack of a better word is generally incompetent.

Right? One reason why DMV Sox is because the DMV is a monopoly. You don't like it too. Fucking mad.

Rachel Reyes: Where else are you gonna do? Yeah, you have to get your license here.

Drew Stegmaier: What we're seeing now with digital nomads is people go to other nation states, right. Myself included. Um, so I think what happens is corporations try their damndest to basically create a good, that is public in the sense that their customer base is everyone, but they want to maintain private rights and private ownership.

Right. And so where that gets really tricky is part of what makes Uber awesome is that it is accessible. Right? Um, most people have a smartphone. Most people can go on this single. And safely get transportation from point A to point B. That's fucking magic. That is great. What comes along with that is all the other stuff you mentioned.

And so I'm curious how that gets rectified. Right? Government takeover of a business seems like the best way to make that business suck. It seems governments are not good at innovating.

Right. And government innovation is them paying companies to innovate. Right. Right. Um, at the same time we need better public goods.

Right. And these better public goods come from the Uber's and Lyft's of the world and the Amazons. Right. As a customer, I fucking love Amazon. It is an amazing experience. And the fact that someone driving a car might have to pee in a bottle at me, a shampoo faster than I ordered on my computer is insane.

Right. I mean, that, that is absolutely insane. Um, and I'm literally just spit balling here. Like I just came up with this during the conversation. So I guess what I'm thinking is at some point a corporation exists in a competitive landscape, right? And it tries its best to destroy the competition. Right? It is competing often competing in an oligopoly, right.

A few large players, um, which you could say service-wise is much better than a bunch of small scattered ones. Right. Um, monopolies often provide decent service, right? They can, they can afford to have assets because they're the only game in town, you know, the DMS. Right. So at what point, um, does trust Boston become good?

Right. Versus, um, I guess if we're going to surpass capitalism, um, what corporations are great at is innovating and making new things. And then at some point it goes south, right? And often the people that go south for aren't the customers, they're the workers. And so I guess in some sense to, to put a bow on this conversation, we need to shift, focus towards compensating, the folks who make this innovation possible.

Right. And often that isn't the people at the C-suite.

Rachel Reyes: Well, there's, there's a lot of ways that I can like, respond to that. Um, yeah.

Drew Stegmaier: That was, that was a mouthful or two.

Rachel Reyes: Okay. I will just go in order of all of that. I think the way that we combat Uber and Lyft is by re-investing in public transit.

People wouldn't be, I'll speak for myself. I wouldn't need my car to do anything. If it didn't take me three times as long on the bus. Um, if our buses were plentiful, if they ran according to schedule, if there were bus lanes throughout the entire city, then I actually wouldn't need. To have a car. Like I could just use public transit.

When I lived in London, I was on public transit all the time. That was how you got around the city. That's how you went to work, how you went out, how you did everything. It was convenient. Let's just every minute, literally every minute during rush hour in the morning, there were 24 hour bus lines, 24 hour tubes.

It was easy to get around that city. There is no reason why Los Angeles cannot do that other than a lack of political will. So I think we need to put people on city council that want to invest in public transit. It's better for the climate and it's better for our mental health, because I don't know about you.

I am sitting in traffic for an hour, a little bit annoyed. It's very stressful. Um, so I think that reinvesting in public transit. Helps us out in a lot of ways, and that's how you get people out of cars. And that's how you get people out of Uber and Lyft. Um, that being said, I think that all of those workers need to continue to organize, um, through existing worker collectives that are going on to demand that they are recognized as employees, um, because we might not be able

to get rid of Uber and Lyft, but we might be able to improve the people who are working for them as drivers improve their lives and their working conditions.

I think we need to do that in tandem with investing in public transit, um, which is a public good as it should be. Um, and the good thing about public goods is that we can demand public oversight, um, and we can actually demand change. Um, if we want it to fix how annoying it is to go to the DMV as a citizens, um, of the us, we could actually like form a collective and a public oversight committee.

That they change things if we want, if we want it to, like, I don't see why we couldn't do that. Um, if there's. Then, like do it. I don't have the desire to do that, but I'm sure people did. They could do that. You can't do that with private corporations. I can't demand the target, do anything because they're a private corporation.

Um, but that is why PRI uh, public goods necessitate a public oversight. And that is why I will always choose to make everything a public utility because when it's a private. They abused power. They abuse their workers and they abuse the environment. Um, we're seeing that with utilities in LA, there's constantly fires and polluted air because of our public utilities.

There are gas leaks all over because of private companies. Um, so that's what I'll say about that when it comes to Amazon. Yeah, it definitely doesn't feel great to know that my drivers are peanut bottles. They have no lunch breaks, they are isolated on their jobs. Um, and they're running up and down stairs every day.

They're being timed constantly. Um, it's a hostile work environment and it's not safe. And so I think part of that is honestly, I was reading this article about like, what can you do? Like if you don't want to use Amazon and like, how do you, how do you just like, not use it as much? Um, we just have to reevaluate our expectations.

Like actually I don't need to get that toothpaste over. Right. Like, I actually don't need that. I could just get in my car or walk down the street and like work a little harder to go pick up that toothpaste or whatever it is I need, I could schedule a time to do those things. Um, but I also think though that those services are good for disabled people or older people or folks who can't otherwise, you know, do their shopping on their own.

But I also don't see why we can't create a public version of that. Um, where folks can, I don't know, log on to a government website and a government employee with benefits and healthcare and a union delivers them. They're good. Um, bonds, which is a union grocery store. Did have Vaughn's employees doing grocery drop-offs.

If you ordered on their website, it was a employee that delivered your food, but they decided to stop doing that and use gig workers instead, the way that Ralph's uses Instacart. So it's, it's all bad. And obviously Vons did that to save money, um, which is upsetting. So I think that like where, where possible readjust our expectations of services?

Because like, there is no reason why I need to order things, have them delivered immediately other than like, it's cool and convenient, but it's not necessary. Like you don't, there's nothing you need within a one to two days deliberate. Like it's just, you don't, you know, people survived for hundreds of years without Amazon.

Drew Stegmaier: Thousands even. Yeah. So, right. So cap things off. If you had a billboard to share one thing with the world, what would you put on it?

Rachel Reyes: Start a union or union.

Drew Stegmaier: Okay. And then, uh, where do you want to point folks? Right. If it's your website or if it's a website that you want them to go to, where should they go?

Rachel Reyes: Ooh. This is a good question. I would really encourage folks wherever you live to. Find mutual aid groups in your area and find ways to plug in and help your neighbors. Because I think the only way that we get through things like the pandemic or any other future catastrophe is connecting with our neighbors and helping them through it.

Um, if you have extra money to get extra food, uh, shower, clothing, anything, um, find ways of giving it to people that need it. Um, so I would just encourage folks to look up local mutual aid efforts. Every single city or neighborhood has one. And if yours doesn't start one, um, you know, it'll, it'll be utilized and beyond that, figure out who's on your city council. If you live in the U S figure out who is in your local governing bodies, because. They are scaring you more than the president and Congress and the Senate. Um, your daily life is more effected by your local government. So I would also encourage people lastly, to get involved with local politics.

It's difficult. It's frustrating, but it will change your life more than focusing on national politics.

Drew Stegmaier: Well, alrighty. Well, thanks for, thanks for being here. Really appreciate it.

Rachel Reyes: Thank you for having me. This is so fun.

Drew Stegmaier: Alrighty.

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