

THE LAURA FLANDERS SHOW

GREENPEACE AT 50: THE CLIMATE CRISIS IS A FIGHT NOT AN ARGUMENT

LAURA FLANDERS: Just over 50 years ago, a group founded by Canadian and American anti-war activists and environmentalists sailed into history when their flagship Rainbow Warrior supported anti-whaling, anti seal hunting, anti nuclear testing, and anti-nuclear waste dumping campaigns throughout the 1970s and 80s. That ship was famously bombed and sunk by French intelligence. But as we record this, the Warrior and ships like it are back in action, confronting Russian tankers in ports off Poland, Germany, Mexico, and New York. And making that old link between autocracy and war and environmental destruction. You could be forgiven for thinking that not much had changed at Greenpeace, but on that, you would be wrong. Over half a century, a lot has changed in what the group does, and how, and how it decides. And internally, Greenpeace made arguably its biggest change this last year, when it changed its structure and brought on new leadership. Today, we are joined by that new leadership team. Ebony Twilley Martin was appointed as the first co-executive director and the first Black woman executive director of a Big Green organization in the US. Ebony is joined by co-director Annie Leonard, who first worked with Greenpeace back in 1988 and returned as its director in 2014. Tefere Gebre is Chief Program Officer today. He joins Greenpeace following leadership roles at the AFL-CIO and the Orange County Labor Federation. So to find out just what is old and what is new and how this organization is going to meet the challenges of this moment, I'm very happy to welcome the leadership team of Greenpeace, at 50, to The Laura Flanders Show. Thanks for joining us.

ANNIE LEONARD: Thanks for having us.

EBONY TWILLEY MARTIN: So great to be here today.

LAURA FLANDERS: Ebony, let me start with you. I vaguely remember those pictures of the Rainbow Warrior and I was actually struck to see that picture again this week. Can you talk about what links you see and the significance of those links?

EBONY TWILLEY MARTIN: Well, you know, Greenpeace, as you've just laid out has a very vast and heroic history. And we have always been on the front lines, speaking truth to power, confronting environmental injustices. And it is amazing to me to see today that same ship, that same spirit that we had 50 years ago, is still resounding and still loud. And we are still on the front lines, still speaking truth to power. And today, we were out confronting a tanker, actually carrying Russian oil to send a message that oil fuels war. And if we want to realize that green and peaceful future that our founders set out for us 50 years ago, we still have to do that work today.

It's amazing that we're still doing the work and we're doing it in a way that not only just sets out a certain group of people, but a broader and more diverse group of people. It's not just one person going out speaking truth to power, but it's all of us collectively. And that's what we at Greenpeace are doing today, building that movement of a strong, broad, and diverse coalition.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tefere, did that boat mean anything to you back then?

TEFERE GEBRE: Greenpeace always has been direct action activism. We have also evolved from those days. We have come a long way. It was one woman in a bunch of men who founded Greenpeace and who actually did a lot and a lot of people don't talk about actually that woman. It's just a bunch of men that people talk about. We have moved from that in a vast way. Just look at your screen right now.

LAURA FLANDERS: I mean, this is exciting, Annie, both the connections and the transformations and at a very basic level, the transformation that I'd love you to talk about is the one that Tefere just kind of alluded to, the difference between, you know, a few bodies on the line, bravely, courageously going out there in confrontation, and the consciousness, the lot of bodies, more Brown and Black bodies are always on the line. And especially at the front lines of environmental destruction. You've been with Greenpeace at different eras. What's important, or what's significant about what you've seen in the way of change?

ANNIE LEONARD: Yeah, I started at Greenpeace in 1988. I wasn't here the whole time. I left for a period in between, but I've seen a lot of change. And one of the biggest changes is the two things that you were just talking about, which is the recognition that we need a lot of people and that we need a lot of diversity. The early environmental movement was really trapped in the myth that the truth will set us free. You know, we thought, if we have the science, if we tell people about it, change will come because it is so obviously needed. You know, it is so scientifically and morally compelling that we change, that we really thought if people knew, if elected knew, if the public knew, that that would be enough. And that was wrong because people really, really know. I mean, we have so much truth about the dangers of climate, about the inequity of the impacts of pollution, about so many things. In fact, we have almost everything we need now to drive change, right? We have model economic policies. We have incredible, innovative green technologies. We have common sense, we have economic arguments, we have science, we have justice. We have every single thing that we need to solve the problems we're facing, except one thing, and that's the power to make it so. And power comes from organized people. We can't do it alone. We need to work with lots and lots of people. And we need to work not just with our supporters, our millions, millions of supporters, but with movement allies. So we've been building relationships with labor, with immigrant rights groups, with women's groups, across the movement spectrum, and especially across differences of race and class. That is the only way we're gonna build a movement strong and smart enough to actually win this stuff.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what does that actually look like? Maybe, Ebony, I'll come to you in terms of adopting this kind of racial justice and equity lens. How does it change what you do? And I should say that, Greenpeace founded a movement organizing hub back in 2014, from which, as I understand it, you drew a lot of lessons. Can you talk about some of those, Ebony?

EBONY TWILLEY MARTIN: The organization was founded by two women, however, you don't really hear that in the stories nor do you see it in the pictures. And that was actually because they felt it was bad luck for women to be on ships during that time. So the work of women and also Black and Indigenous and people of color has often been left out of the story of Greenpeace. And that work has often been marginalized. We have gone on a journey to correct that. And what we've had to do was align our processes, our practices, our culture, with the values that we say that we espouse. And so has included everything from overhauling our hiring practices, overhauling our compensation, overhauling our promotions, and how we do that to ensure that we're leading to more equitable outcomes, so that we can build a more broad and diverse movement at large. And we know that at the end of the day, if we wanna solve these problems, we have to do the work to embed justice. And so that's been a journey that the organization has been on for some time. And we've seen great progress over the last few years. When I started, the organization was 13% Black, Indigenous, people of color. And now we're at 52%. We've also seen more women of color in leadership than at any other time in Greenpeace US history.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right, so, so far so good, but Tefere, I'm gonna come to you because justice sometimes can really delay action. And I want you to talk about that because Greenpeace is famous for like, fantastic eye-catching visuals and dramatic actions, sometimes involving celebrities that, you know, adhere to a model of impact, making an impact. That doesn't lend itself well necessarily to long meetings with lots of people, careful process of inclusion, listening, concern, you know, moderation. I'm all for it, but I wanna know how you do both or do you continue to do both?

TEFERE GEBRE: We have to do both. We have to do both. We have to honor the Greenpeace of the past. We have to honor our past, but that's not gonna hold us, that's not gonna be a shackle on our ankle to pull us back, but we are gonna lean on it to move forward. That's what we're gonna do. And look, Greenpeace is not unique to the rest of the country. This is a changing country. This is a country, especially young people, are mostly people of color. And that's where we're gonna go to build power. And we don't build that power just for Greenpeace's sake. We build that power for our world's sake, our planet's sake. You know, the people who did not pollute, the people who did not have anything to do, was what we found ourselves, with the climate right now are on the front lines of actually paying the price for it. And in order for us to win, we have to activate those people to fight their own fight. I don't intend to be their agent to

fight their fight for 'em, but I would love to activate 'em so that they line up along us and actually fight their own fight. When we do that, we will start seeing actual concrete changes happening, not just the facade, not just a show for people to look at and go away.

LAURA FLANDERS: But we are in a crisis. I mean, highest temperatures ever in Antarctica and Saharan dust storms and leaking diesel fuel tanks in Hawaii. I mean, everything feels urgent, Annie. Give us some examples of how you balance the urgency with the kind of equity and justice approach that is imperative at this moment as well.

ANNIE LEONARD: I think it's absolutely essential that we balance them both because it is so urgent, you know, it's true, in the next three years or so, we need to be switching off of fossil fuels for sure. But if we don't have a longer term vision for justice, for equity, we can end up promoting false solutions. An example is, there's absolutely a scientific and moral imperative to get off fossil fuels. That's our number one goal for Greenpeace globally is to speed up the transition away from fossil fuels. But we don't wanna go into the current system that is so inequitable and so problematic and just say, okay, use solar energy instead, everything else is fine. We wanna ensure that while we're working to get off fossil fuels, we're centering the voices of those who are most impacted by fossil fuel pollution. We have the workers there that were talked to them, the fossil fuel dependent workers and the fossil fuel dependent communities, make sure that they're not sacrificed and thrown under the bus as we do the transition. Make sure that we do the transition in a way that we are rebuilding our energy economy to do it right. You know, on one hand, it's terrible, we have to rebuild everything. On another hand, how fantastic, we get to rebuild everything. There is so much structural inequity in our whole system. We get to redo it all and have justice at the center this time.

LAURA FLANDERS: Ebony, what's your favorite campaign that people could, you know, do well to learn about right here, right now?

EBONY TWILLEY MARTIN: Democracy, because democracy is the tool that we need to unlock all of this, everything that we're facing right now. And right now, our democracy is under assault and we aren't able to pass the legislation that we need to realize true justice and to do what science and justice demand in the moment. And I'm excited to have Tefere with us because this is his heart. This is where he is an expert. So really excited about how he's gonna dive into our campaigns and take it to the next level. Especially in our democracy work.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tefere, where was your heart born? Where are you from originally?

TEFERE GEBRE: I was born in Ethiopia and I came here as a political refugee when I was 15 years old. And for most of that time, I've called California home. And that's where I cut my teeth in organizing, in activism, and in politics until I got elected to my last job at AFL-CIO as

Executive Vice President, which I was the first immigrant, and the first Black man to ever hold an office there. Yeah, so I'm grateful for this country. In the time of needs, this country opened up its arms for me, but I'm also a believer that being grateful doesn't require us to be grateful and sit down. Being grateful requires us to stand up and actually fight for those things that we are grateful about. And I'm a father of a five year old who entirely changed my perspective about the world and what we live for. So this is sort of a calling and to just add to what Ebony was saying, you see, people think the fossil fuel industry just pollutes our climate. That's not all they do. They also pollute our politics in the tune of almost 150 million dollars in the last major election alone. So it is on us to make the connection, to put the dots together, that it's not a choice of picking climate over democracy, democracy over climate, workers' rights over climate, climate over workers' rights. It's not, that's a false choice. That's a false choice. When we organize people and when we get 'em to understand actually how a broken capitalist system in this country is polluting our air, polluting our politics, and polluting our schools, and polluting everything we touch, it's time for system change.

LAURA FLANDERS: But I do think this is a critically important moment for a shift. Are you seeing it, Annie?

ANNIE LEONARD: We're seeing a huge shift in terms of public opinion. I mean, it is just amazing what's happened over the last five years. The United States really lagged behind in terms of public awareness and understanding of climate. Now it's a majority of people in the United States, over 75% of people in the United States are now concerned about climate. So we're seeing a huge shift in public will, public concern. The public wants action. The people that are lagging behind are the elected leaders. We have scientists, faith leaders, activists, the general public, moms and dads and neighbors that all want action. The elected leaders are not delivering it. And that's why we've gotta bring our climate commitment to the voting booth. And if they're not willing to lead and deliver what science and justice demands, we need to help them get a new job, 'cause they're obviously not fit for the ones they have.

LAURA FLANDERS: But you know, you are up against it. I don't know who wants to respond to this, but those who make their money off the fossil fuel economy that we have today are not gonna go peacefully into the, you know, off stage. Are you ready for that, Annie?

ANNIE LEONARD: I'm absolutely ready. I've never been more ready. It's true, they have more money, they have more greed, but we have more people and we have more love. And now I know I'm calling in from Berkeley, California. That might sound like a very California thing to do, but it's not a passive love, it is a fightin' love. And I'll tell you, we are gonna fight with everything that we have to win, within the boundaries of nonviolence, but we are gonna fight with everything we have because honestly, what is at stake is everything that we love. You know, Ebony and Tefere both talked about their kids. A parents' love for their kid, a parent's desire to

protect their kid is infinite and no amount of Exxon or Monsanto greed can get in the way of that. We are gonna do whatever we can to build a better future because we're gonna win this thing.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right, Tefere, last word from you. Ethiopians know how to fight, stand up against power and survive. Any tips?

TEFERE GEBRE: Yeah. Just for your reference. I will direct people to the Battle of Adwa. The Ethiopian farmers versus the Italian army. It looks overwhelming. No one would've predicted, you know, just farmers with machetes would defeat an army which came with tanks, but it happened. It happened because everybody was committed. Everybody was in the fight and look, all my life, I have been trying to be in a place that realizes people power. We cannot fight the Koch brothers. We cannot fight the fossil fuel industry, in our politics, dollar for dollar. That is their lane. That's where they travel. And a lot of times in the progressive movement, we get in trouble because that's also the lane we try to travel. But if we organize communities, if we organize people, that's our lane and they can't compete with us. So it is lane identification, and we just have to know our lane. When we travel in our lane, we'll win.

LAURA FLANDERS: We often end this program by asking our guests about a moment when not only did they think that their goals were realizable, but that they felt it, perhaps felt that it was actually happening. Ebony, did you ever feel it, see it in action, the kind of change making that you want to see more widespread?

EBONY TWILLEY MARTIN: I remember after Trump was elected and the sense of grief that hit our organization and the country as a whole. And a few weeks later who was up there, hanging a resist banner, speaking truth to power? Greenpeace. And that reminds me every day, every time I get down, every time I think that it's not possible. I draw on the strength of those, my colleagues, our staff, our supporters, our volunteers. And like Annie said, that growing army that's ready to take on the fossil fuel industry. Yes, it's David and Goliath, but who won in the end? David.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tefere, an example, a story, a place that you were, people you saw.

TEFERE GEBRE: I have been so fortunate actually to be in those places and could take us all day, all night if I give you examples, but two examples. One is David versus Goliath. People thought it could not be done, was actually the coalition we created to defeat TPP. It was against the president we all elected, against the global order, against the chamber of commerce, against the business round table. But that was the power of labor, the environment, the consumer community, students, and immigrant community coming together and saying enough is enough.

LAURA FLANDERS: That was the Trans Pacific Pipeline, Partnership?

TEFERE GEBRE: Partnership, the Trans Pacific Partnership. And another one if I could throw away is, when I started organizing in Orange County, California, people laughed at me, especially for a Black man to go try to organize in Reagan country. You know, we believed in people, we organized people, we organized workers, we organized communities. And what the result was, we were able to change 100% of the elected congressional members from that county. And that is despite people telling us you can't do it. And I believe we can save our planet. We have no choice. We can save our planet. And since you mentioned the AFL-CIO convention, I'll just leave you with this. If you talk to 'em, I think the theme of the convention should be no jobs on a dead planet.

LAURA FLANDERS: No jobs on a dead planet. I look forward to seeing the next 50 years of Greenpeace and thank you so much for spending some time with us.

TEFERE GEBRE: Thank you.

EBONY TWILLEY MARTIN: Thank you.

ANNIE LEONARD: Thank you so much.

LAURA FLANDERS: Two years ago, on April 22nd, 2020, the world marked the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. What did we do? We conducted a climate strike. We were all under COVID lockdown. In a sense, it was the best thing we could come up with. But I think what I learned from today's conversation is that we need more than a one day or even a one week or one month strike. We need more than actions around individual problems, oil spills, even individual industries. We need a systemic shift in the way that we think about our economy and our culture and our climate as a whole. And that's just what Ronald Reagan perceived in the early 1980s. He came into office after the preceding president had put solar panels on the White House roof. He understood that what was being signaled was a shift in consciousness and he wanted to shift that consciousness back. He got it, and the people behind him in the oil and gas industry, that the issue was political. And what was really at stake wasn't a few laws or a few endangered species, but a whole way of thinking and a power structure. And that's why he and his colleagues fought back as vigorously and as unitedly as they did against individual groups, against science, and against the whole notion of environmental protection, environmentalism, ecology. The word eco-terrorist dates back to that date. I think what I'm hearing in today's conversation is that a shift is happening on the other side, too. Sure, changes in leadership are important, but it won't be about individual leaders, but rather alliances that we make the changes that we need. It won't be about people, but about politics and power, because that's what's at stake if this climate, if this planet on the brink and the people and living beings on it are gonna survive. You can find our

full uncut conversation in our podcast feed and all the information about that is at our website. Thanks for joining me. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. I'm Laura.

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