

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

MAURICE MITCHELL & THE WORKING FAMILIES PARTY: VOTING IS A CHESS MOVE

LAURA FLANDERS: It is quite possibly the most important election in our lifetimes, and the most fraught. Both President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump have now secured enough delegates to be their party's nominees. Both have serious problems with voters. Trump on account of his 34, count them, 34 felony convictions in an election-meddling scheme, and Biden on account of his seemingly unwavering support for Israel during an assault on Gaza, declared genocidal by the highest international court in the world. Enough protest votes were cast in the Democratic primaries to send some anti-war delegates to the Democratic National Convention in August. The Republican Convention, which will be happening just four days after Trump's sentencing hearing, looks set to resemble a Nazi rally even more closely than it did back in 2016. Genocide or fascism is a rotten frame for an important election. I was talking about this recently with my friend Rev. Dr. Jacqui Lewis, Senior Minister of New York City's multi-everything Middle Church. She's also author of "Fierce Love: A Bold Path to Ferocious Courage and Rule-Breaking Kindness that Can Heal the World." I've invited her back to continue that conversation in public, and with us we have Maurice or Moe Mitchell, as National Director of the Working Families Party. An organization founded by a coalition of labor unions, community groups, and progressive advocates, its goal is to build political pressure for peace, democracy, economic justice, and money out of politics, and Maurice is out there supporting candidates who have come out for ceasefire, and generally doing his best to fire up the voting base all across the country. So what are we seeing? How are we feeling? How are we doing in this crazy and sometimes agonizing-feeling moment? I can't think of two people I would rather have this conversation with than the two of you. Welcome Jacqui, welcome Moe. In broad strokes, what are you seeing? Enthusiasm, frustration, discouragement, despair, hope, which?

MAURICE MITCHELL: Well yeah, I've been on the road for most of this year and I've been talking to folks in labor organizations. I've been talking to grassroots advocates. I've been talking to people on the forefront of the ceasefire movement. And you know, if you look at the 24 hour news, I think it's understandable why many people might feel despair. But if you're having the conversations I'm having, and I'm having a lot of them, I'm actually feeling a lot of hope, because as it relates to the ceasefire movement, this is a multiracial, interfaith, intergenerational movement for peace of the likes we haven't seen in a generation. And it's strategic, it's clear-eyed, it understands the threats ahead of us, and it's calling for something that is becoming more and more a majoritarian position, which is an end to the slaughter, and an end to the war and the genocide in Gaza, but not just that, Palestinian rights. And we're seeing a movement that is broad, a broad pro-democracy front. I call it the Cheney to Chomsky front, right?

LAURA FLANDERS: Oy, that is broad.

MAURICE MITCHELL: Who is also clear, yeah, who's also clear-eyed about the stakes of the November election, and our role in preserving democracy and challenging authoritarianism, and understands that it is our historical duty as the forces against authoritarianism in this country, to show up, and to be clear about that in November,

LAURA FLANDERS: Jacqui, coming to you. You communicate directly with and hear from an amazingly mixed congregation there in New York City. What are you hearing? What are you seeing?

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: I'm seeing a lot of the same kinds of things, but let me add some different texture. My congregation is the multi-everything congregation, and ironically enough, we had a fire in December of 2020, and I spent the last two years worshiping, guess where? In a synagogue, in a synagogue in the East village of New York, a progressive synagogue, a reformed synagogue, where my friend Josh Stanton is the head rabbi. Imagine being a a Protestant, loud, justice-y, progressive Christian church, worshiping in a synagogue where actually one of the people kidnapped is a relative of Rabbi Stanton's. So it has been an interesting container, they call it a Mishkan, a tabernacle, in which they've hosted us with incredible generosity and beauty, and we've done shared work together around immigration reform, and hosting New Yorkers, et cetera. But the tension in being a pro-everybody congregation, full-throatedly supporting Israel and Palestine for decades and decades, and to have this particular moment really divide families, much like queer conversations have, or much like Black Lives Matter have, where families, where kin, where close friends, really differ on how to talk about this violence. So I just want to texture in the split in progressive communities around this kind of issue, and how hard that is for all of us.

LAURA FLANDERS: It is very concrete. I mean, I think the last time I was talking to you, Jacqui, I had just come from a dinner party at my house, where we were, you know, we had a group of like-minded folks on most issues, but when it came to the priority for that day's discussion, there was a project in the works, some of the people were just desperate that we focus on getting Biden elected, and the other people were focused on, "Well, we can't just let him get away with genocide. We have to express our opposition, we have to express our critique." And of course, everybody in the room, in this particular group, in New York City, downtown, no one has much time for Trump. But there is this, nonetheless, a very real, heartfelt concern about this moment. And I want to come back to you with that, Maurice. You know, it sounds great, and your organization is committed to good things, but in an election season, those good things have to hang on actual candidates, and there's no perfect person out there, most notably not at the top of any party ticket. So how do you square that?

MAURICE MITCHELL: We face the contradictions. All of us do, whatever your beliefs are, face these contradictions that are embedded, structurally embedded in the limitations of our very electoral system. And those contradictions cause a lot of internal dilemmas and conflicts, and you know the dilemmas, and you create some of the wedges that you saw in your dinner party. And what we're ultimately wrestling with are the limitations of the structures of the rigid two-party system, and all the ways that it's been designed to be able to or organize our politics to the venue of a duopoly. That is the actual tension. It's not me versus you, it's us in this very precarious system that creates these choices that could feel really hard. And from my own point of view, supporting a candidate is a chess move, it's not a valentine.

LAURA FLANDERS: But I do feel for the people that say, you know, being concerned about genocide is not just a feeling about the candidate. One guy has actually been involved as the leader of the United States, providing military support to a state that at this point is responsible for the killings of tens of thousands of people. The other guy, whatever is bluster and rhetoric and threats, hasn't done that yet. What do you say to those folks, Jacqui?

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: We're not listening well, some of us in this nation, are not listening well for what Mr. Trump is saying that he intends to do when he's elected. He intends to join a fascist campaign that is global, and we're not listening well. So if we're thinking of long game, we have to ask ourselves, I think, which of these candidates has the most propensity to help us build the movement for the 20 years that we need to, or for seven generations? Mo, what do you think about that?

MAURICE MITCHELL: So we have a framework that we employ at WFP, that we share across our ecosystem with everybody, we talk about block and build. And so there's a set of things that we must do to block authoritarians today, and that to me should be as clear as possible. The idea that MAGA and Donald Trump, who is currently the personal manifestation of MAGA authoritarianism, but it's not just about him. Those forces like, and all you have to do is read Project 2025, they're basically their blueprint for how they want to be able to lurch our country into authoritarianism. MAGA is a threat, and so all of us need to come together against that, but blocking is insufficient. If all we do is block, then we'll once again show up and organize, and be in the gap in order to save this country and save this democracy, and then feel shortsighted at the other end of the election, which is why we need to be the protagonists. We need to put the power in our hands, and be clear of, on the other side of the election, what are we building? The Working Families Party is a political party that is building power for working class people of all races. We believe in a country for the many, not the few. We believe that in a democracy the people should govern, not corporations and the wealthy. And the way that we do it, is we're building a bottom-up third party approach. You might've seen a third party candidate, a charismatic character, attempt to build a third party from the top down. You know, like some people remember Ross Perot. He was a billionaire, so he had all the resources available to him to

run such a campaign, and he got 18 points in the general election. To us, that proves that the top-down approach to third parties in this system is not viable. We believe that the viable approach is a bottom-up third party approach, which is what we're engaged in, state by state by state.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: That's so helpful to hear you put that together that way. In some of the movement spaces I'm in, people are going to do a no vote, a no confidence vote. As a strategy to what? I don't know. I wrote a piece in my substack, on "Liberty and Justice for Who?" Kind of remarking about Trump's 34 indictments, and how is it possible that we're going to elect a felon? I don't know, but this place of, you know, what do we do to organize for the life we want? I'm a child of Mississippi-born parents. My uncle worked with Fannie Lou Hamer on voting rights in rural Mississippi. My dad went to church with one of the three boys killed in, you know, Meridian, Mississippi, Philadelphia. Like, I'm not even remotely thinking not voting is a choice. I'm thinking up and down ballot, we vote for it, the world we want, we vote for the worldview we want, the candidate who represents our values up and down ticket, including at the president level. Are you hearing young people, 'cause you're younger than me, are you hearing young people opting out of voting altogether, Moe? And what do you say to them when you hear that?

MAURICE MITCHELL: So absolutely, I mean, and this is not anything new. I've been organizing and doing electoral organizing for decades, and there's absolutely always people, always working people, who abstain from voting, or suggest that they might abstain from voting. And it's really, really important that we understand the roots. The political system and the economic system, it is absolutely skewed towards the wealthy and the privileged. It's true that our democracy is corporately captured, meaning that yes, the Republican party is captured by a lot of those extractive industries, and more and more Democrats are captured by Wall Street and other folks. That could create despair and have people drop out. But what I want to remind people of, is the folks who have way too much power and privilege, especially the people on the right wing, they basically claim that government is the problem. And I believe they claim that, and they want to propagate it, because they don't want working people to understand something, that government actually is the prize, and that what we're experiencing is either a right wing government, or sometimes corporately-captured government. But what would it look like if we organized together, if we understood that there were no saviors, and if we organized together over time for us, the people, to capture the government?

LAURA FLANDERS: I actually think now we've got a right wing that has updated its, the government's the enemy agenda, to democracy's the enemy, because they see what democracy can actually do, and they're busily trying to vilify the whole process. The only thing that cheers me up is the stories that I hear, like from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the story of Summer Lee,

Working Families Party candidate, won against all odds her first time, and just got healthily renominated as her party's candidate this time.

SUMMER LEE: There is no reason why anybody should be saying that it is extreme to believe that we should have clean air and clean water, or that it is extreme that we should have a house in a neighborhood that we call home, or that it's extreme that Black and brown people should have equity and justice in our society, or that it's extreme that we should have a quality education and that you should be able to go to college without lifetime debt. Or that it's extreme that your kids should not drink lead water, or that it's extreme that our prisons shouldn't crumble. Or that it's extreme that we can't stand up for each other, that each and every one of our communities don't have a stake in our own future, in each and all of our futures. We will not, and we have rejected in this district, the false proposition that we are siloed or isolated, that our liberation is not tied together.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'd love to hear from you a few more stories from the field that might cheer us up, because boy, we have a media that only covers the top of the ticket, and it's driving me crazy. There's so much else happening out there.

MAURICE MITCHELL: What I know is that a people with a plan can do anything, and that's evidenced by, for example, Kendra Brooks and Nicholas O'Rourke in Philadelphia. So you know, not too long ago, a few years ago, Kendra Brooks was an organizer and a mother, fighting against the real estate lobbies and the banks, because she was one of the millions of Americans who had her house taken from her, because of the subprime mortgage crisis. And she ran, she ran in Philadelphia as a Working Families Party independent, at-large city council person, and defeated the Republicans that had sat on the city council way too long without any challenge. And she ran a few years ago, and Nicholas O'Rourke joined her. So she's now the minority leader. So in Philadelphia, Philadelphia is a two-party city, the Democrats and Working Families Party. In Chicago, it's another great example of an educator and a union organizer who ran an improbable race for Cook County Commissioner a few years ago, and folks didn't see that coming or thought that was possible. And he led in a very transformative way as Cook County Commissioner. He's now the mayor of the city of Chicago, Brandon Johnson.

LAURA FLANDERS: And now he has to deal with the Democratic convention, I don't envy him. I'm just saying.

MAURICE MITCHELL: I'm happy that he's the mayor who has to deal with that, and not somebody else, right?

LAURA FLANDERS: And some other names people may be familiar with, like Letitia James, the State Attorney General.

MAURICE MITCHELL: Letitia James started off as an independent Working Families Party candidate for city council, right? And so there's so many examples of things that are happening on the grassroots level of the people deciding, not the corporations, not the traditional two-party duopoly, but the people coming together and setting a plan and winning.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: You started our conversation today by telling us that as you move around the country, you have hope. Are you seeing pockets of resistance and hope that point to something that's really future-oriented?

MAURICE MITCHELL: Yes, so I still believe that there's a path to a trifecta, meaning we defeat MAGA in the presidency, we make sure that MAGA doesn't hold the House or the Senate. And I think actually in 2025, you know, there's some things on the agenda that need to be taken care of. So we need to make sure that our democracy actually is as fair and as honest as our people. And so there's a structural democracy, a set of structural democracy reforms that they want, that Congress needs to pass in 2025. And then, you know, we know what happens in the Supreme Court, where they turned down Roe. So we need something better than Roe. But there's more, there's an economic agenda for our people that we need to focus on as well.

LAURA FLANDERS: I've seen a lot of people say, you know, "The Democrats are failing not just because of Gaza, but because of the failure to deliver on bread and butter issues." I wonder if you agree.

MAURICE MITCHELL: Before this president even got to the White House, you had Bernie's campaign and Elizabeth Warren's campaign and many grassroots progressives and labor unions and a lot of activists who were raising their voices around a Green New Deal, around an economic policy that was focused on working people, around showing up for labor unions, and showing up for labor organizing. This president is a politician, and politicians are able to understand where the political climate is ultimately going, and could sense where the weather is moving. And I think as a result, because of all of our organizing, we have student debt relief, of a magnitude that we've never seen. We have an economic agenda that is pretty broad, right? Like trillions of dollars of money went to the ground, went to everyday people through stimulus checks, went to COVID relief, went to state and local governments, went to, you know, billions of dollars have went to climate, to totally revitalize our economy, and to create really good, decent union jobs to green our economy and transition our economy. All those things happened. Those are victories, those are people's victories, right? Joe Biden held the pen that signed that legislation, and so it shows the ability, to me. I'm like, "Don't trust the politicians, don't trust the democratic party, but trust us."

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: I see the light happening in progressive faith communities, not just Christian ones quite honestly, but also in synagogues and mosques. But especially I'm noticing as a Christian pastor that across the spectrum of Black church, multi-ethnic church, Latinx churches, churches are understanding their power. They're looking back to the Southern Freedom movement and understanding, Laura, what you and I talk about all the time, that these movements have come from faith-based communities all over our history. And I think this is a time where people are leaning into their own individual power, and their power as a group to do stuff. There's rumbling all the time about getting to DC when Netanyahu gets to DC. So much movement building happened around this Gaza fight, this horrible genocide, and I think there's a coalition across the nation that I think Moe is endemic of, and I'm finding that in my own congregational experience. I'm very excited about it.

LAURA FLANDERS: So given all of this Mo, what's your advice to Biden-Harris, and what's your advice to maybe some wavering Republicans out there?

MAURICE MITCHELL: Strictly to the Biden-Harris campaign, I would say that the protest movement that is pushing you and prodding you and calling you out on Gaza, listen to that movement, because that movement is not just a fringe movement, it's a majoritarian movement. Poll after poll after poll after poll is showing that people want a cease fire, and that people actually want more than that, want Palestinian rights, and want an end to unconditioned aid to Israel. And if you're interested in winning the vote, then you have to treat that constituency like a core constituency that deserves respect, number one. Number two, to anybody listening, right? Whatever your affiliation might be politically, it's important that we understand what the choice actually is in November. It's not a choice between the left or the right, or conservatives and liberals. It's actually a choice between democracy or not. We have a duty to preserve our democracy, so we could preserve our right to debate and fight about all of these issues, and about all of these things that concern us. Right now let's join a united front, whatever differences we might have, in order to prevent that movement from taking power.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: I'm a part of an inextricably-connected community of revolutionary levers that include the two of you, but also your aunts and your uncles, and your kids and your friends. And I'm not okay if you're not okay, and that's what gives me hope, is that people are understanding the woven-ness of our destinies, and we just are not going to make it unless we make it together.

LAURA FLANDERS: That's my theory with my dinner parties, which continue monthly. So that same crowd that fought last month can come in and make peace this month. Now Mo, you have a strategy for surviving this?

MAURICE MITCHELL: The only thing that has ever changed anything, has been the ability of everyday people coming together, to bring us the weekend, and the 40-hour work week, and women's rights, and civil rights, and Black power and democracy, and anything good in this country.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: I love what you're saying there Mo, and I'm thinking as we're having this conversation, it's Pride month, so I'm thinking about all of those trans Black women who started a whole world movement that leads to the party and protest that is Pride. It's Juneteenth almost, and I'm thinking of all of the Black people in every state in this country who made a way out of no way, who worked for voting rights, who walked instead of getting on buses. I believe what June Jordan says, "We are the ones we've been waiting for."

LAURA FLANDERS: Thank you both so much, for being with me in this conversation. It's been a pleasure, and good luck out there on the road, Moe.

MAURICE MITCHELL: Thank you.

REV. DR. JACQUI LEWIS: Thank you, Moe. Good to see you, Laura.

LAURA FLANDERS: Regular viewers or listeners to this program will have picked up on my beef with the way that most of us in the mainstream media talk about elections, which is to say, democracy, or power shift, or how change is made. To sum it up, my complaint is, we pay way too much attention to the top of the ticket, and way too little to the base. Pundits love to talk about coattails effect. Well what about updraft? By way of experiment, I asked Google the other day 'how many people were running for office this year in this country', and I was told two. Many articles appeared about the presidential race. I got more specific. 'How many people are running for any elected office?' Same answer, it makes you wonder. Now for the record, 435 seats in Congress are up for grabs, more than half the Senate, 13 gubernatorial seats, and no end of local and statewide offices. Maurice Mitchell reminds us that it is those who understand that government is the prize, who spread the idea that government is a problem. And that reminds me of poet activist Audre Lorde, who reminded us that the rumor that you can't fix city hall is spread by city hall. So who has to gain from us only paying attention to the races that are taking place the furthest away from us? I wonder, I know one thing's for sure, that it isn't we the voters who benefit from thinking that our power is small. Till the next time, I'm Laura, for "Laura Flanders & Friends", stay kind, stay curious, and thanks for joining us.

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