

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

SOLVING ECONOMIC INEQUALITY: AN OCCUPY MOVEMENT FOR THIS MOMENT?

- **(Marisa Holmes)** This is Liberty, formerly Zuccotti Park. It doesn't look all that impressive now, but it was once filled with people, and I was lucky enough to be one of them. I will forever be marked by what happened in this space. Together, we wanted to build a new world. And for a moment, we did. In 2011, there were occupations of squares happening all across the globe. From North Africa to Europe, people were rising up in response to the global financial crisis and for real democracy. There was a global revolution happening, and I wanted to be part of it. I kept hoping that something would happen in the US, and then Adbusters made a call to Occupy Wall Street. I can't remember the first time I saw the Adbusters poster. In the summer of 2011, it seemed to be everywhere. The magazine had made a call for 20,000 people to descend on the Financial District on September 17th, but they weren't intending to organize anything on the ground, and it was still unclear who these people were going to be.

LAURA FLANDERS: That was a clip from "All Day All Week: An Occupy Wall Street Story," a documentary directed by Marisa Holmes, who will be joining us in just a moment. Today, we are asking: How do you tackle economic inequality? Studies show that massive gaps between rich and poor drive polarization and inclined people towards nationalism and authoritarian rule. That makes inequality one of the most critical issues of our time. But it's been over a decade since crowds were in the streets and occupying public spaces in the US and internationally, demanding fairness, as they put it, for the 99%. Today, we look back at the Occupy Wall Street protests, which seized a plaza in New York City not far from Wall Street in September 2011. And we consider strategies for economic change. As the country careens to another election, just how is economic transformation actually made, and are we making any? Joining me again to co-host today is Amir Khafagy, award-winning Report for America member with the online journal Documented. Amir, it's great to see you. Where were you at Occupy? It's a long time ago. Do you remember? Did it mean anything to you? Were you aware of it, in fact?

AMIR KHAFAGY: Hi, Laura, thanks for having me here again. It's always a pleasure. Occupy was one of the most important things that ever happened to my life. I was maybe 21, 22 years old. I was in community college, and I remember when that was happening downtown, and I was just a kid from Queens, and that was the beginning of my political awakening. It was really an amazing experience for me. That brings me to today's guests. Taifa Smith Butler is the president of Dēmos, a public policy organization, working to build a multiracial democracy and economy. She came to Dēmos after a decade in leadership at the Georgia Budget & Policy Institute. Marisa Holmes' first book, "Organizing Occupy Wall Street: This is Just Practice," is just out. Among

her films is the feature she directed "All Day All Week: An Occupy Wall Street Story," which focuses on the occupation at Zuccotti Park in New York in 2011.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's great to have both of you with us. Let's start with you, Marisa. You were not just documenting, but deeply involved in the Occupy Wall Street movement. For those who weren't there or don't remember it, how would you describe it?

MARISA HOLMES: Sure, so there was an economic crisis that started in 2008, and a lot of organizing was happening through those crisis years of 2009, 2010, 2011. And internationally, of course, in 2011, there was the Arab Spring. And throughout North Africa and the Middle East, people who were affected by the crisis and also dealing with their own internal political situations and entrenched dictatorships rose up and called for direct democracy. Throughout the summer, in 2011, we had assemblies in Tompkins Square Park on the Lower East Side, and that's kind of how it all began on day one, September 17th, 2011, when we took over Zuccotti Park.

LAURA FLANDERS: Where were you, Taifa, do you remember?

TAIFA SMITH BUTLER: I remember right after the Great Recession in 2008 and '09, and when we saw such impact on families and a loss of a decade of wages, and the slow recovery for Black and Brown communities and families and workers. And so, in that 2011 period, knowing that we had a long haul of trying to really bring back the economy for those who have been so devastated, and to see the Occupy movement sort of take on the sort of the tax reform, the things that are really needed to address inequality in the country. And so it just resonated heavily for me.

MARISA HOLMES: The space of the occupation at Zuccotti Park. It was really a liberated space and we ran it ourselves. We had these assemblies every day. We also practiced mutual aid through the various working groups, and we grew exponentially from an initial organizing group of maybe 30, 40 people to 4,000 active organizers. And so, to me, it was really an indication that people are capable of engaging at scale and cooperating with one another. And if given the opportunity, we'll show up for one another, even in the face of state repression. And yeah, so I will never lose that sense of possibility that people can actually cooperate, make change together. And even in the darkest of moments, I know that that's possible.

AMIR KHAFAGY: It's hard for me to fathom that it's been 13 years since Occupy. I remember when I went down there, there was so much hope and optimism. I really, as a young man, thought things were gonna change immediately. Now, given 13 years have passed, what has been accomplished in combating inequality and inequity in this country?

TAIFA SMITH BUTLER: The fact of the matter is today, 13 years after such an incredible movement like Occupy, we're no better off, right? If anything, things have worsened in terms of the kind of economic inequality that we see, and it has proliferated, by and large, because we believe that we have oligarchs who are controlling our politics and the policy making in addition to the economy. And if we are really going to be about building this multiracial democracy and economy, at Dēmos, our vision is that, but we know they are a host of other people who believe that. We have got to seize control of our economy back into the hands of the people. And we are in a critical juncture right now with this presidential election to really name and claim and state the kind of vision we have and want and need for our economy that centers the people.

MARISA HOLMES: During Occupy, we really rejected representative politics because it just seemed not responsive to people's needs, right? We thought, "Oh, Obama coming in, he's going to save us, or he is going to implement at least some reforms," and that just... that didn't happen, right? Like, there was just this reluctance even then to respond to the crisis in ways that were really transformative and affecting people's lives, and especially Black and Brown communities and poor communities. So we just thought, "We're gonna do this ourselves." What I think is going to transform the economy, people doing it themselves and at scale beyond just like neighbor to neighbor, you have to think about actually building worker co-ops, and confederations of co-ops, and that has grown since 2011. There is more interest in solidarity economies and new co-ops forming across different industries. But, I think New York, there's the People's Choice Communications group, reimagining what the internet can be from the bottom up. So there are options available to us that are not just making demands of politicians and hoping that this change is going to come. I mean, they're only going to respond if there is a real alternative in place.

LAURA FLANDERS: You have been doing some of that work, Taifa, at the Economic Democracy Project, with respect to kind of growing civic power, public goods, breaking up monopolies. Can you tell us about some of the things that you've been tracking out there, some of the experiments, some of the stories?

TAIFA SMITH BUTLER: A couple of the things, Laura. I would just share that we were excited to write some case studies on and document where some of these innovations were happening. One of them, in particular, was in Pittsburgh with the Our Water Campaign. Pittsburgh United fought back to get the water back into the control of the community. As we've seen with government decisions that have been made over time to privatize, to save money, right? Privatizing our public goods in the hands of corporations, who of course aren't bottom line focused on the public good and making sure that services are being provided. They're focused on the bottom line of profit, right? And another one I would say is the Texas Organizing Project in Harris County. One of the things that was insightful about this project was they saw the disparity and the inequity of the FEMA dollars that were being doled out to communities that were

harmful by the hurricane. And more money was going to white neighborhoods who were less devastated than those that were going to Black and Brown communities. And they helped create an equity tool that really helped reform the formula based on what was happening in the community. So those are just some of the examples that if we can show them, and then, like Marisa said, scale them and figure out how we can continue to model the kind of community leadership, the co-governance that's necessary to hold government accountable, and to think about other models that our economy can really thrive on, that's where we'll get, I think, we'll be able to push on the political apparatus to make sure that we can have the kind of reforms that will really benefit the people.

AMIR KHAFAGY: We're told we're living in a democracy, and it seems like most times, democracy is just... You vote every four years and that's it. But it seems like it's an expanding definition. Marisa, you're actively involved in organizing for MACC, right? The Metropolitan Anarchist Coordinating Council. What is anarchism to you? How do you define it? How is it related to people's everyday lives? Can you discuss some of that mutual aid work that your group is doing? And how does anarchism and democracy fit?

MARISA HOLMES: Well, we've been around for about eight years. We started in response, really, to the rising threat of fascism in 2016, and realized there needed to be a more coordinated place for people to come to protect each other, take care of each other. And since then, we've done a lot of different projects, supporting immigrant workers, supporting queer and trans folks who are getting attacked by police. But we've also been doing a lot of mutual aid. And that's really, I think, the foundation of the community that we've built. We're building this space that is both meeting people's needs and is democratic, which I think is essential, and that's what anarchism is in practice.

LAURA FLANDERS: You have an expanded definition of democracy, too, at Dēmos, Taifa. You wanna tell us a little bit about that?

TAIFA SMITH BUTLER: Well, ultimately, it is about control. It is about ensuring that people, communities have control over our economy and the sort of democratic practices so that they are beneficiaries of the decisions that they make. And for us, it's... Dēmos has always talked about the inextricable linkedness of economic power and political power. And today, as I think about sort of where we are historically, sort of with the retraction of resources, with the threat of authoritarianism and fascism, and this demographic shift that is happening in our nation, and the inequality that continues to proliferate, if we do nothing, we'll be looking at apartheid in America and we'll be looking at sort of this growing diverse population who will be a majority in 20 years with no economic and political power, no net wealth.

AMIR KHAFAGY: I think people would be really interested in knowing how we're gonna get there. We know a lot of people are aware of what the issues are, and they feel it every day in their lived experience, but what are those strategies we're going to do to accomplish those things?

TAIFA SMITH BUTLER: So, our team, along with a host of organizations, are really working this year as we are going into this new election cycle and the reauthorization of the tax and Tax Cuts and Jobs Act in 2025. It is likely to be reauthorized. Some of us are fighting for more provisions in there around exemptions for families and to fix this corporate tax cut and the cut at the top. So those are one of the ways that we do this. And then the other thing is: How do we seize the moment with labor? With the industrial policy that has passed the Biden Administration with the industrial policy from the Infrastructure Bill, and the CHIPS, and the BIL Bill. Like, there's an opportunity for us to take those investments and really get them into the hands of communities, and that's the thing that we see over the next 10 years. If we can move those dollars to really rebuild infrastructure, internet access, and all the things that are really critical for families as a baseline to help ensure that economic security, those are some of the things that we think are really, really important. So, seizing the labor movement, always looking at wages and workplace democracy. How do we improve it and reform it, so that people are not exploited, like I said, and are getting fair wages and able to do all the things that they want, like take leave, paid leave, care for their families, and those sorts of things. And I would just say, on the other side of what's really important from a democracy standpoint, how are we actually reforming the access to the ballot, but also creating more ways where, like Marisa said, communities have a voice.

LAURA FLANDERS: In the '30s, there was that discussion of sort of the laboratories of democracy, what people did on the ground to address need and crisis during the years of the Depression. Some of those things became policy in a positive kind of way. But I'm also haunted by stories we have in the recent history where things like the American Rescue Plan child tax credit did a great thing, reduced inequality, and then wasn't extended by the Congress. So I just would love your thoughts on how do you operate in this moment, on the verge of another super important election? Well-

LAURA FLANDERS: And I hear that sigh. We want better, we want different, we got this. Now, what do we do?

MARISA HOLMES: I mean, this moment is kind of a long time coming, though, right? Because the Democratic Party was challenged internally by progressive members who tried to push it and get elected, and the DNC didn't really make room for them, right? So, what we have in the Democratic Party is really a neoliberal elite. So, I think we need to keep that in mind that it is actually like the entrenchment of a political class in this country, and its alliances with capitalism that creates an opening for fascism to come in. Hopefully, we're not just blindsided by the fact that there is this rising and institutionalizing of fascism, and it's very scary-

LAURA FLANDERS: And we should say it's not just in this country, but internationally.

MARISA HOLMES: But internationally, yeah. Yeah, and how to prepare for that. I mean, there are a lot of conversations happening, but I think we need to, first and foremost, like keep each other safe, like keep communities safe that are directly affected by like the violence that is going to increase. So undocumented folks, Black folks who are getting hassled by police, like queer and trans folks who are gonna lose their healthcare, et cetera, et cetera. Like, there's so much violence that is going to be unleashed, and that needs to be at the forefront of our minds. Like, how do we protect each other? How do we keep each other safe? And then long term, it is still building alternatives, building alternatives that meet people's needs so that fascists don't have this inroad, right? Like, they can't just use populist rhetoric, like we have to actually address the underlying problems.

LAURA FLANDERS: Taifa, you're nodding.

TAIFA SMITH BUTLER: I completely agree. And to your point, Laura, just being able to talk with some folks in the UK recently and folks from around the globe at the Skoll World Forum recently to realize the threat of authoritarianism and sort of this fascism is global in nature and sort of this rise of the far Right, but also the sort of anti-LGBTQ, the rise in Christian nationalism, it is happening on every continent on this planet. And so what does that mean for just like global economy and global sort of wellbeing of people as not only... In the US, we see the rise of a sort of a different and diverse demographic of Black and Brown folks who will be projected to be majority people of color nation. But also sort of, I think, it's projected over the next maybe 40 years, one in three people will be from the continent of Africa. And what does that mean in terms global migration patterns and climate change? And so there's a host of things that we need to be thinking about long term.

AMIR KHAFAGY: Taifa, Marisa, let me just tell you right off the bat, it's hard not to be really pessimistic right now, right? It's really hard. A lot of young people are really apathetic to what's happening. It seems like we're not even watching an election or watching some weird reality show, right? It doesn't feel real to us. What would the both of you say in terms of: What should we do? How do we shake off this pessimism, and really do something, and take charge of our democracy?

MARISA HOLMES: Well-

LAURA FLANDERS: Occupy Wall Street.

MARISA HOLMES: Yeah, Occupy Wall Street. But what does that mean like for the whole society, right? Like, beyond one particular park in the Financial District, how do we do that in workplaces and neighborhoods in our everyday lives? That continues to be the question. And we are doing some of that work in MACC through the care assemblies, through mutual aid projects, and also talking to young people. I mean, since you mentioned young people, this summer, I've been working on a Summer Liberation School, and it's basically an anti-authoritarian collective liberation framework. So trying to really think about how to do direct democracy and mutual aid and solidarity economy work in exactly this intersectional way, dealing with equity. So that's what we're talking about with 18, 19, 20-year-olds who come, and it's been really great just to sort of see their questions and work through things. And of course, it's one contribution, but if everyone makes these kinds of contributions, if everyone holds a school, or does a mutual aid distro, or participates in some way, then we can change things.

TAIFA SMITH BUTLER: Agreed. I will say one learning that I've seen from an organization in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, is BLOC, Black Leaders Organizing Communities, and they have a Youth Ambassador Program. And to hear these young people present, these are 17, 18, 19-year-old young folks who are actually galvanizing and organizing their community, canvassing, knocking doors, telling people why they should engage. It's that kind of activism at such a young age that even if they're apathetic and feel like their vote doesn't matter or their voice isn't being heard, to actually be so close to the issues, I think, is the thing that really will light people up and keep them engaged. And so I know there was a lot of apathy for this election in particular, but there's also so much on the line. The stakes are very, very high and people cannot sit out. I think it's better for us to engage. And so that's the encouragement I see right now from young people, and would continue to encourage them to just engage.

LAURA FLANDERS: Taking control of our destiny, and the banks, just for a thought. Amir, how's your pessimism doing?

AMIR KHAFAGY: I don't have as much of an optimistic view of where we're headed, and it hurts me as a reporter. I see every day the struggles people are doing, going through, and experiencing, but what I do know is this. Nothing will change, unless we make the change.

LAURA FLANDERS: Thank you, all, it's great to have you. Amir, Marisa, Taifa, thanks for joining us here at "Laura Flanders & Friends," and please, everybody, keep up the work.

MARISA HOLMES: Thank you.

TAIFA SMITH BUTLER: Thank you so much for having me.

AMIR KHAFAGY: Laura, it's always a pleasure.

LAURA FLANDERS: Tammy Kim, The New Yorker writer who appeared not-so-long ago on our program, wrote a piece at the end of August about the head-spinning turns the youth vote has taken this year. Voters under 30 spent the first half of the year favoring Donald Trump over Joe Biden in polls. That's changed with the emergence of the Harris-Walz campaign. And in polling released in September, Democrats were enjoying a 24% advantage over Republicans among voters 29 and below. That could be explained by that ticket's speaking to the issues of employment and inflation and student loans and the record of the Biden-Harris team. But what will happen in November will depend largely on turnout, and it often strikes me that it's extraordinary as many young people manage to cast a vote as do, given how hard we make it for them. So, what organizers say is, "Partner and plan." Partner with young people to actually navigate the registration system. Plan with them to actually go to the polls. And then for those organizers, activists, and volunteers out there, not to mention the candidates themselves, speak to the issues they care about, including war and peace and genocide. Speak more clearly and not just in the run up to the election, but on the day after, and weeks after, and months after Election Day. That's my two cents. Take it or leave it. For "Laura Flanders & Friends," I'm Laura. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious, and if you want the full uncut version of every week's conversation, you can get it through subscribing to our free podcast. All the information's at our website. Thanks for joining us.

For more on this episode and other forward-thinking content, subscribe to our free newsletter for updates, my commentaries, and our full uncut conversations. We also have a podcast. It's all at lauraflanders.org.