

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS
NOT PARTY TO PARTY POLITICS:
MOVEMENT LEADERS CONSIDER ELECTION '24

LAURA FLANDERS - Abolition, decolonization, migration, war, Palestine. How is the Left thinking about the future in this perilous political moment? Corporate media in this country tend to narrow our picture of our politics down to just two parties, two people, and one all-important election. But the truth is, many people working for change don't belong to any political party, and their vision for transformation goes well beyond the White House. Thousands of socialists and activists gathered this September at [Socialism 2024 Conference](#), a four-day event hosted by [Haymarket Books](#), and I hosted a live taping there with three prominent movement organizers. [Nick Estes](#) is the author of "[Our History is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance.](#)" Nick's also the co-founder of [The Red Nation](#). [Rachel Herzing](#) is an activist fighting the violence of surveillance, policing and incarceration and the co-author of "[How to Abolish Prisons: Lessons from the Movement Against Imprisonment.](#)" And [Harsha Walia](#) is the co-founder of [No One Is Illegal](#), a migrant justice organization. She's also the author of "[Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism.](#)" In a packed room in front of a diverse crowd, I started by asking the panel to describe the moment that we're in. That conversation follows, and I'll be back at the end to share a few thoughts on talking to strangers. The title of today's conversation is, "How Is the Left Responding to This Moment?" So I think it's important to define this moment, or at least understand how each of us is thinking about it. Let's start with you, Harsha. As you think about this moment, what stands out? What's significant? How would you describe the contours of it?

HARSHA WALIA - Yeah, I think, so I don't live in the United States, and so when I think of the Left, I tend to try to think of the Left from where I'm located, but also internationally. And there are many Lefts. But one of the ways in which I think Left movements are articulating this movement, this moment that I'm thinking about is just the rise of global fascism. And that looks differently in different places, but there are some synergies in this moment that I think are important to name. And so, you know, we have the rise of white nationalism. We have the rise of Zionism and Zionist violence. We have the rise of Hindutva fascism. And so this moment I think there is just a growing escalation of fascism and fascist tendencies. And by that I also mean the flip side of fascism, which is the ways in which the so-called center is starting to also increasingly become overtly fascist. And also I think we see the crumbling of the ideological center, right, of ideas like liberalism, of ideas like diversity and inclusion. Like there is an increasing crumbling of that kind of ideology and the veneer of it, such that increasingly that center is also moving towards the right.

LAURA FLANDERS - And Nick coming to you, I mean, again, the richness or lack thereof of this moment, its possibilities, its threats, do you see points of possibility right here? And how do you define it?

NICK ESTES - Yeah, and just to kind of pick up on this idea of fascism. It's a term that I'm kind of reluctant to use because I think colonialism should be a strong enough indictment. Like colonialism ought to be a recognizable form of oppression, so should genocide. And so when you attach the label of fascism, it's like just an accelerated version of that. So I think of this in the context of the long resistance to colonialism as a possibility. You know, not to like plug my own book or toot my own horn, but there is a long tradition of Indigenous resistance that we can fall back on. And I really caution against thinking about politics or these really large questions in terms of electoral cycles. It's really debilitating for movements and it's not sustainable because we can't beat corporate, you know, parties and political parties and, you know, the parties of the ruling class. And so I'm always somebody who says, you know, movement work is long-term work, that looking at our ancestors, but also looking at future generations and really trying to break that cycle of these electoral politics and less about thinking about opportunities of how like maybe a Democrat will give us a platform, about how about we just create our own platform and build our own platform.

LAURA FLANDERS - I am haunted a little bit, just to take us back to this electoral cycle for a second, to the governor of North Carolina bouncing onto the stage, introducing Kamala Harris and Tim Walz in their economic speech saying, "I'm feeling 2008." And I've heard some people here say that too, but not in a good way. For those who don't remember, 2008 was another one of those years where there was a lot of kind of vibes, excitement about Obama, Biden. And then we saw some personnel change in the White House, but not a lot of change in people's lives, an increase in deportation and incarceration. Maybe Keystone was stopped, but drilling continued. In this moment, I would say we have seen some change since 2008. We've seen militant action on the labor front, on the migrant front, on the front of abolition, certainly Standing Rock. We're seeing now an extraordinary upsurge of intersectional anti-colonial, anti-Zionist organizing around Palestine. That does change people. And I wonder, even as you think about the perils of this moment, Rachel, and we should add the [Movement for Black Lives](#) of course, are there new possibilities because of some new forces outside of the parties at this moment?

RACHEL HERZING - Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS - Okay, good. Thank you so much.

RACHEL HERZING - Yeah, you know, I think that thank you, Harsha, initially for kind of laying out, you know, in such rich detail, your analysis of where we're at. I really, really agree with that analysis. And, you know, I would add to that, that I think the period is marked, you

know, not different from what you're saying, but by these kind of intersecting crises and the pace of the crisis cycle seems to be very, very accelerated, right? And so for organizers, we're also seeing people like really, really exhausted, really, really overwhelmed, right? And those of you who know me will know that I don't really truck so much with the burnout, but I will say everybody seems really tired because we're all fighting a lot simultaneously and at this kind of increased pace. But what I will also say is that I think these crises and the acceleration of the crisis cycle does offer different opportunities. The sector that I work in against imprisonment and policing, you know, has demonstrated in kind of stark relief what happens when we prioritize and invest only in containment and control, right? That is untenable, that does not last. And so you see these fissures, you see these kind of moments of explosion like you saw in 2020, for instance, right? The biggest mobilizations in U.S. history against the violence of racist policing. So that gives me hope. And I am a little concerned, I will say that we're in such a mobilization period that seems to have displaced long-term organizing a bit, and we can talk more about that if you like, but the ability to activate people quickly and more coherently, I think is a real opening.

HARSHA WALIA - It is incredible that there is such an internationalist analysis of colonialism that is not new because people have articulated anti-colonial analysis for a very long time, but that acceleration of crisis has also meant an acceleration of the ways in which we understand the crisis and the ways in which capitalism and imperialism and extraction and climate change and abolition and migration are just like all connected and that people are connecting the violence in Palestine to what is happening on Indigenous communities around the world, to what is happening to Black and Brown communities around the world, to what is happening in Sudan, in Congo, in Haiti. Like those threads are being connected in deeply meaningful ways, I think is just such an incredible moment and really also signals that we're not talking about liberal politics. We're talking about meaningful, revolutionary, anti-colonial, abolitionist analysis, and then how to put that into practice in the long term. And so I think there is so much possibility in what that means for our futures.

LAURA FLANDERS - Nick, we are here at a socialism conference, so I want to talk for a second about capitalism. You're talking systems, superstructure.

NICK ESTES - Yeah, I guess to just kind of pick up on what both my co-panelists have said, I would say another weakness is just not acknowledging colonialism. That this is like Canada and the United States are settler colonial entities, and that's directly related to their imperialist policies. And it's like, I don't know why I have to keep saying that. It's the organizing principle and it's so easy to lob off. Like there was one of my friends here in the audience, I won't point them out, was in a conversation about why extractive economies are fundamentally bad for Indigenous people, even if they do promote so-called green energies, you know, because it's still an extractive economy. You're still stealing people's resources and their livelihoods to build your

green economy or your nuclear utopia or whatever you want to build. And it's like easy to like, yeah, we'll just give 'em a landing acknowledgement, or you know, like let 'em put, you know, a headdress or a blanket on one of, you know, the settler elite, you know, but it's never framed as a question of settler colonialism.

LAURA FLANDERS - And you, Rachel, of course talk about capitalism in the context of the prison industrial complex. You just want to make that connection for people that just need that penny to drop?

RACHEL HERZING - Yeah, I mean there is no prison industrial complex without capitalism and vice versa, right? I mean, it is the enforcing arm of capitalism. It does the bidding of capitalist forces and it protects, you know, the bourgeoisie and the elite. That is what the point of the prison industrial complex is. It has nothing to do with safety. It has nothing to do with security. It has everything to do with the protection of a particular power structure and this economic system, so I think they're deeply embedded with one another and mutually reinforcing.

LAURA FLANDERS - And Harsha, you make this point, and forgive me if I have it wrong, but to me the title of your book, "Border and Rule" is all about making those words verbs, clarifying the function of border, the function of rule, which is also connected of course, to the capitalist system that we're talking about. But do I have that right that we we should be thinking about border and rule as actions?

HARSHA WALIA - I think so. I mean, one of the things that I think is important is like, we tend to think about borders as these lines on a map, right? As these kind of static forces. And I think bordering regimes exist in so many different ways, right? Like the border multiplies across many spaces and we literally see that the border is being outsourced right now, right? Like Department of Homeland Security and ICE have all said that the southern border is no longer the U.S.-Mexico border. It's deep into Central America, and Mexico now deports more Central Americans than the United States does, because that is how the U.S. has outsourced its violence. We see that, you know, the border is also like literally you can get picked up by ICE and DHS well past the border. Prison industrial complex and the criminal legal system is completely embedded in immigration. And so to think about the ways in which bordering regimes mean that people are continuously displaced. I like to think with my comrades around, thinking about displacement rather than migration. Like why are people being forced to move? And that can mean people are being displaced across borders. But also displacement happens within borders, right? Like gentrification is a form of bordering. People are being displaced from their communities and are being policed. Indigenous peoples continue to be displaced from their lands and are, you know, around the world. And so to think about bordering as a system that is continuously displacing people, but then also immobilizing them, making it such that people cannot live freely, right? Like that is the function also of the prison, is to contain and immobilize

people. And so yeah, to think about these as verbs and not as just like, you know, in the same way that prisons are not just the building that cages people, the prison industrial complex is all of the conditions that give rise to prisons, in the same way bordering regimes are not just the border, they're all the ways in which borders are reproduced.

LAURA FLANDERS - And what does the resistance project look like?

HARSHA WALIA - Well, I think what's so important is that the resistance to that looks like an incredible number of people around the world literally increasingly refusing the ideology and the regimes of borders, right? So people are not saying like, "Oh, we just need to be, you know, good immigrants or our movements need to articulate what it means to be deserving migrants." People are articulating that dismantling borders means dismantling colonialism. It means the freedom of Palestine. Movements across Europe are saying, "We are just going to cross this border." Right? Because it is our right. Because we are here because you are there. And so I think that articulation and moving through that articulation is what is so powerful right now.

LAURA FLANDERS - Are there movement practices that you want to share in the spirit of helping us get bigger and bolder and braver and endure this moment and the next one?

RACHEL HERZING - I'm happy to start because my answer's always the same. Organizing, organizing, organizing. We have to be working together in collective action, trying to transform our conditions, trying to shift power. We do that by an organizing practice that binds us together. And that's what gets me up in the morning. That's what keeps me fighting. That's what builds my relationships. I don't think that there's any substitute for it,

LAURA FLANDERS - Nick?

NICK ESTES - I'm always hesitant to coin phrases and things because I feel like we have a solid foundation of ancestors to draw upon. And I think that, you know, this moment in time, you know, we are constantly, capitalism tells us to innovate all the time. But there's just some like classic tried and true methods, you know, and when I met Rachel for the first time, it was like, yeah, that's so basic. Yeah, you should just, you know, you should just be having, you know, you should be organizing your community. You should be knowing your neighbors, you should be doing these things. You should be doing study groups. And I think we need to fall back on that. You know, at the end of the day, how are we growing? How are we organizing? But also how are we keeping, you know, our obligations to future generations and how are we being good ancestors to the future?

LAURA FLANDERS - Do you have a practice, Harsha? Did you remember one?

HARSHA WALIA - Maybe one that I'm thinking about a lot in this moment and also thinking, Rachel, about your session with Mariame [Kaba] yesterday was just the importance of thinking about how to be in good relations with one another. And that doesn't mean necessarily, you know, that does not mean that we all need to get along. Friendship is not comradeship, but it does mean figuring out what is it then, right? Like, what does it mean to be comrades with each other? What does it mean to struggle together? What does it mean to have principled disagreements? What does it mean to find unity through struggle? What does it mean to find ways to have courageous conversations? And so that's a practice for me that I take seriously because, you know, there's a lot of things that are like the logistics of organizing, right? Like, we gotta go out and door knock. We gotta go out and meet people. Like here are the tangible things. Someone's gotta look at the data. But there is like the ecosystem of how we are and how we are with each other and those kind of more intimate practices that I think are so crucial to how we move together and work through things that I think is not a singular practice, but I just want to name that I think it is the foundation of how we continue to do this for the long haul.

LAURA FLANDERS - I have known for many years [Judith LeBlanc](#) at the [Native Organizers Alliance](#), and we've had her on the program talking about this question of elections. And she will always say representation is not a destination. But she also is very proud and thinks it was important to get [Deb Haaland](#) into the Joe Biden administration. She feels there has been impact in that, and she feels that particularly the Native vote in U.S. elections has earned, shouldn't have been needed, but has earned Native issues, Indigenous issues, some respect and some accountability. So to come back to this election question, how do you suggest to people that share your breadth of vision and long-term agenda that they engage with this? Without sucking all the air out of the room, but without sitting it out either?

NICK ESTES - Well, I wrote a piece called "[You Can't Vote Harder](#)" and you don't need to read any further than just the title because I think they want to limit the sort of political, you know, action to just voting. And it's not to say that there are like severe restrictions on voting. You know, like half the electorate even, you know, comes out for these elections and you know, I'm concerned about those people. My work is mostly in the, you know, the south side of the of Minneapolis with the Native community who we're not actively engaging, you know, who are not, you know, they're not engaged in these, they're not, nobody's going out there asking them to vote, you know? And also that's not the definition of their agency, of who they are. You know, I'm not saying it doesn't matter, but I think there's other things, other ways that we should engage in doing, like, we need to go back to these sort of traditional tried and true methods of knocking on doors, you know?

LAURA FLANDERS - But I think there are people who might hear that you are saying it doesn't matter.

NICK ESTES - Well, that's their opinion. But I also would say that, you know, having Deb Haaland in that position, the Secretary of Interior, has been good in the sense that we've gotten these really amazing reports on things that we've already known, that there was this massive systematic genocide of Native children. If you don't know what I'm talking about, that's also a problem because these are two foundational reports on the federal Indian boarding school system. But at the same time, her department has overseen more oil and gas leases on federal lands than the Trump administration. And that's not an indictment of her as a person. That's an indictment of that department because that's what the Department of Interior were set up to do, was to manage wildlife, extract, you know, be the handmaiden of extractive industries and capital and to manage Indians. And it's no coincidence that we are in the same department as natural resources and wildlife.

LAURA FLANDERS - Rachel.

RACHEL HERZING - Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS - How to engage without losing the breadth and vision of your movement or whether to engage?

RACHEL HERZING - Well, I mean, I think that our movement has a particular set of challenges that might be similar to your work, Harsha, in that many of our people can't vote, right? Period. Even if they want to. Many of them do want to. And those are people who are in prison and people who had felony convictions in states that prevent them from being able to vote with that felony conviction. So that's a not insignificant number of people. And that is, I will mention, not an insignificant number of Black people in specific, right? And we know every single fall in an election season, that Black women get told that we're the saviors of the entire world and everything relies on us, even though, you know, the rest of the time, it's very happily that we're kind of left to die quite literally. You know, we are given this message on a regular basis. And, you know, I don't know what to say to people about that. You know, it's not the policies of the so-called United States are not life-affirming policies for Black people, for imprisoned people, and for, you know, people living as women, right? So it's hard for me to get really, really excited about that. Yet and still, I'm interested in shifting power. I'm somebody who likes to win. So I think if there are legitimate ways that we can leverage power through the electoral process, we should be trying to figure out how to do that.

HARSHA WALIA - As someone who doesn't live here, I'm like, I'm watching a debate where no one is even saying anything that I can, like I can yell at some of this, but half of it's like nothing I could even yell at because you're just like, you know, there's nothing substantive. And so I just feel like I need to say that because I feel like every election cycle, suddenly people in the United States are like, we take politics really seriously. And it's like, I'm not sure you do. And

actually, it's organizers who are continuously thinking about politics and building analysis. And so I just want to bring that into the room because I do feel like every four years people are like, "This is going to go down if we don't do this thing." And I'm like, "I'm not even sure what you're doing."

LAURA FLANDERS - We make you watch our elections all over the world.

HARSHA WALIA - All over the world, right? And so just, I think there's some perspective around how the whole world gets consumed with the U.S. election and of course for legitimate reasons, because what happens in the United States influences the entire world, but it doesn't feel like the United States takes seriously the weight of what it means that your election influences the whole world.

LAURA FLANDERS - Harsha Walia, Rachel Herzing, Nick Estes. You can get all the information about our guests and their books through a subscription to our free podcast every week. Our Patreon subscribers receive not only the full uncut version of every week's conversation, but also the research packet that I try to get through in preparation for each week's show so you can get all the information about how to subscribe at our website. I recommend it. Meanwhile, elections. Here's how I think about things. No matter what happens on Election Day, the more we know about the people around us, the better prepared we are for whatever may follow. Whether it's floods or hurricanes or civil war or armed uprisings, or simply an effort to change something where you live, knowing where your people are matters. And elections give us an opportunity to talk to strangers, even if you don't have a job like mine or our guests. Talk to strangers about what's on their mind and listen to them. Get to know them a little bit beyond the signs in their yards and their bumper stickers and their behavior in the grocery line. Whatever happens on Election Day, knowing where our people are matters for whatever happens afterwards. It certainly matters for the bigger changes we want to bring into being. So I say elect to participate and elect to talk to strangers. And I know you'll do the right thing. For "Laura Flanders & friends," I'm Laura. 'Til the next time, stay kind, stay curious and thanks for joining us.

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