

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

LABOR MOVEMENT V. FASCISM: WORKER ORGANIZERS & LABOR EDUCATORS ARE UNDER ATTACK

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LAURA FLANDERS: After decades of struggle around the balance of power between workers and employers, during the second Trump administration, we are witnessing a shift. The Republican regime moved quickly, stripping collective bargaining rights from most federal union workers, appointing employer-friendly officials to the National Labor Relations Board, and making it harder for workers to form or join unions. There are efforts afoot too to privatize government jobs and restrict unemployment benefits. So how are workers and their organizations responding and how do their struggles intersect with others like those we're seeing on US college campuses? To find out more, we attended a labor conference on Working-Class Politics in an Age of Authoritarianism, held this spring at the CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies right here in New York City. [Becky Pringle](#), president of the [National Education Association](#) kicked things off.

BECKY PRINGLE: This is a coordinated power grab by billionaires and extremists. They are mercilessly targeting and scapegoating the vulnerable. They're attempting to enter schools under false pretenses, whitewashing and rewriting history. I know that you were paying attention to the news when the Oklahoma standards were released and teachers are now required to teach that the 2020 election was stolen. Why are Donald Trump and his cronies attacking public education? Why? Well, you and I know why. Because they know that public education is where democracy actually takes root and is allowed, if it can, to grow and flourish. Because critical thinking and collaborative problem solving and civic understanding are all threats to an authoritarian rule. They know that if they can control what we know, they can control what we believe and what we do.

LAURA FLANDERS: A former middle school science teacher, Pringle represents 3 million people who work in higher education, both faculty and staff, many of whom are already feeling the impact of the new Republican regime as she explained when we talked backstage.

BECKY PRINGLE: Our members all over the country are obviously worried. They're overwhelmed. They are frightened about what will happen for their students and to their schools. And so many of them are already experiencing cuts from the Trump administration that are very, very real for them. Larger class sizes, fewer educators, and the threats to afterschool programs and summer school programs, the opportunities for their kids, after they've done everything

they've asked them to do and they want to go on to college, they can't, they can't do it. So they are rightly concerned about what the Trump administration has done to diminish public education, to try to destroy it honestly, and to diminish them as educators. Let me tell you, as educators and as a union, we do feel the weight on us. You can study any authoritarian reign, any oligarch throughout history. And you know that the people who fight, have the most success in fighting against them are educators and they are unionists. And so with that intersection for us, we feel that responsibility. And we understand that this is a multi-pronged, these are multi-pronged attacks on every front. So we have to actually have a multi-pronged approach. And for educators, so where do you think it begins? Education, and then we have to communicate. We have to talk to all kinds of people because he's hurting. Donald Trump is hurting all kinds of people. They may not know it yet, but he is.

LAURA FLANDERS: How has the NEA responded thus far? And what would you lift up or single out as your most successful wins?

BECKY PRINGLE: We, the NEA, have been litigating, we just won a case last week, an injunction to stop this government from threatening school districts with teaching diversity and equity and inclusion and access in ways that we know our students need to learn. So we know that litigation is a powerful tool, but we can't stop with litigation. We have power in numbers that people are just realizing and people power will always win over organized money and powerful people and all of that.

LAURA FLANDERS: In Utah, after the legislature passed legislation taking bargaining rights from public workers, the Utah Education Association led an effort that collected so many signatures on a ballot measure that, in an unusual move, the Lieutenant Governor declared that the law would not be implemented.

BECKY PRINGLE: So in Utah, the reddest of red, right? But we believe, and we got together and unions, our union, the Utah Education Association, led the efforts with our financial and strategic support and reached out to labor unions across that state and across the country. And they came. They came in solidarity. What they try to do is divide us. And especially with union-related laws, they try to carve out the police. So they carve out the firefighters. In this instance, they had a carve out for the firefighters, and the firefighters said no. No, we are gonna fight you because our brothers and sisters deserve it too. And they worked with us, they were strong part of our coalition and helped us win.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is that what you mean by solidarity as a verb?

BECKY PRINGLE: That is exactly what I mean by solidarity as a verb.

LAURA FLANDERS: I've noticed that you don't use the acronym DEI, why?

BECKY PRINGLE: As this Trump administration tries to demonize what are the core values of our country and diminish it to letters DEI or DEIA, I've just been saying to folks, you know, say the words, say the words, diversity. That is the strength and the uniqueness of the United States of America. Say the words. Equity is just a way to make sure that every student gets what they need when they need it. Inclusion is part of the fabric of this nation so that we can see each other and we can see ourselves. That's how we build a just society. And access, that means that every one of our students, everyone, whether they have disabilities or whether they are in a geographic location, a rural area, they have the access to the same tools and resources and educators and opportunities that everyone should have access to because we actually believe it is we the people, we the people. All of us deserve that right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

LAURA FLANDERS: The attacks Republicans are pushing now didn't start at the federal level. Sherman Henry and [Robert Cassanello](#) came to New York from the South, which has been a Petri dish for aggressive policy, given the low level of union density in that region. Back in 2022, Cassanello who was one of the plaintiffs in a lawsuit against the so-called Stop WOKE Act, a Florida state law signed by Governor Ron DeSantis, which prohibited schools and businesses from teaching certain concepts related to race, gender, racism, and social privilege.

[ROBERT CASSANNELLO](#): Florida's kind of a bellwether in a lot of ways because Florida's been captured by conservative lawmakers who, you know, have nothing but antipathy for unions and the same for higher ed. So there's kind of a confluence here. If we look at the colleges, public colleges and universities in Florida, that these attacks are sort of, you know, many fold. And you know, in one way they're attacking higher ed workers, workers, and they're also attacking higher ed workers as teachers and instructors.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sherman Henry runs the [Advancing Black Strategists Labor Institute](#) at Clark Atlanta University, which is the first HBCU with a program specifically about labor in the South.

SHERMAN HENRY: I think the trend, going back to kind of the Southern strategy of having a master-servant relationship in the workplace and going back to poverty wages where there's no voice of democracy, there's no bargaining, it's just my way or the highway. So if you start to dismantle collective bargaining, then you're back at that cultural norm where it's the boss' word and it's the at-will employee versus just cause and bargaining over rights and benefits in the workplace. And this generation, just because you still have about 95% of the workforce in the South, especially in Florida, with no bargaining rights, both public and private, so it then becomes just a total corporate agenda.

ROBERT CASSANNELLO: I think what's being reinforced here on the part of Right-wing politicians is this idea of civil obedience. And you see it not only in regards to the prohibitions against teaching race and gender, sexuality. But if you read those materials, what they're really trying to do is they're trying to make a passive citizenry, you know? And so if you read their materials, you know, you don't see anything about the civil rights movement, you don't see anything about the labor movement. You really see things about how can you use private associations in your community to solve problems. Well, what about the government solving problems? You really don't see any of that being addressed because I think what those materials are trying to do, as well as this legislation is trying to do, is to make a passive citizen, an obedient citizen. And I think that's what this is all about.

LAURA FLANDERS: So is it working?

ROBERT CASSANNELLO: It's working in that people are feeling intimidated. I know, you know, my colleagues, like if we take what's been going on in the state of Florida, when Stop WOKE passed in 2022, I mean, I knew a lot of colleagues of mine, a lot of friends of mine in academia who were just like, "No more. This is the line in the sand. We're gonna stand up, we're gonna say something, you know, we can't take this." And then, you know, a year later when some further legislation along that line was passed along with the elimination of tenure, all of a sudden people who had tenure who were willing to speak out were a little bit more reluctant. So in that regard, yeah, it's working because the intimidation is really kind of setting in.

LAURA FLANDERS: You think it's working, Sherman?

SHERMAN HENRY: Yeah, I think he's right. And I think just the evidence in itself on the legislative actions, and these folks continue to be reelected when you see the gerrymandering of congressional districts having these temporary victories and they get to set the public policies that they imagine, which is the reimagined democracy in the way that they want it to be. So yeah, they're having some temporary victories, and we are having some now through the courts, but this is gonna be a long battle.

LAURA FLANDERS: You both work with the leaders of tomorrow. What are you seeing in terms of leadership bubbling up today?

SHERMAN HENRY: As we heard here at this conference with the President of NEA, sister Pringle, they're starting to reimagine leadership development and how we talk about the political season that we are in from a practical perspective. And we are not shying away from talking about race and political partisanship as relates to workers voting against their interests. So the response is we have to educate people and educate them in a truthful way.

ROBERT CASSANNELLO: On the surface of it, it seems like these attacks on academic freedom really are primarily targeted at professors, and they are. But students are really, you know, the center of that because it's the lawmakers who don't want these students to learn certain concepts and don't want them to be, you know, exposed to things that are uncomfortable, exposed to things that might get them to question their government and the things that they're being told. And so I know, like for me when I talk to students, I talk to students about these threats to academic freedom, you know, they really kind of understand it on a personal level. And, you know, I had one experience that I shared with people in that a student from our student government association came to me and, you know, asked me what she could do. And I said, "Have you thought about a student government resolution condemning, you know, Stop WOKE, the legislation that Governor DeSantis passed?" And she said, "Oh, that's a great idea." It took a year. But a year later, she got the Student Government Association of the University of Central Florida to pass that resolution, condemn the actions of the Florida legislature of Governor DeSantis and say, "Keep your hands off our education." The students kind of taken it upon themselves to say, "This is our education. Do not come between me and my professor." And that's really was the message that was there. And I think that is really kind of salient.

SHERMAN HENRY: So the institute that I'm now leading is our contribution in educating folks, engaging folks, and going back out into the community like we did during the civil rights era, and just having a frank conversation about the economy, democracy, and how you and your family fit into this equation. As we reimagine democracy, it's first really having a conversation about what is democracy because it's interpreted differently by folks depending on where you're at. And the African American community and other communities of color don't necessarily see it in the same way. So we have to connect the two, democracy and economy.

LAURA FLANDERS: Connecting and communicating aren't only done through speeches and words. [Annabelle Heckler](#) is part of an artist collective called [Mi Casa Resiste](#), which collaborated with other activist artists in New York on an exhibition they called Give Light, labor drawings, posters, art, and graphics from movements celebrating labor history, people's art and popular liberation. [Mudiwa Pettus](#) is an assistant professor of English Composition and Rhetoric at Medgar Evers College.

ANNABELLE HECKLER: We drew our inspiration from Ella Baker's quote, "Give light and people will find the way." And we think that at this moment, especially visual arts and culture are an essential part of social movements.

DR. MUDIWA PETTUS: My specialty is Black rhetorical education. So thinking about particularly how Black people practice performances of expression for personhood, right? So thinking about what are the ways that people can actually practice and cultivate their individual forms of expression, but also to think about how they can also support the expressions of people

in their community regardless of perspectives and viewpoints and backgrounds. And actually creating a space where people feel empowered and entitled to express themselves, but also to consider the expression of other people.

ANNABELLE HECKLER: There was certainly a lot of public funding and public support in the 1930s for arts in a way that, right, it's also our art is really dangerous. It allows us to imagine freedoms and to imagine connections to each other that we might not otherwise. So it's not as widely publicly funded in this moment in context. But I do think we see a beautiful outpouring of art today if you look at sort of people's posters in solidarity with Palestine that have proliferated in the last two years. I think there's new ways of creating and new ways of sharing with each other that are really powerful today.

DR. MUDIWA PETTUS: So empowering everyday organic, grounded movements to actually think about what does it mean to actually mobilize everyone in the community and not just think that there are these exceptional rhetorical leaders, visibly legible to people who are kind of always looking for superstars. And so I think this idea that art for oneself and art from one's community members is super important.

ANNABELLE HECKLER: It's really cool actually. It's already, even as we yesterday had all of the posters spread out on the floor and we were like picking what order and what thematic groupings they were gonna go in, people coming off the elevator kept being like, It's lovely to like see beauty in your day to day and to see beauty that encourages you to like, think a little bit beyond the limits of this time in which we live.

LAURA FLANDERS: To many workers, the threats they're facing today come as a shock. But for warehouse workers in the South, their lives were never more endangered than during the COVID pandemic. Still they fought and organized and stood up for their rights. Reverend [Ryan Brown](#) is the president and one of the co-founders of Carolina Amazonians United for Solidarity & Empowerment, or [CAUSE](#), which works with Amazon workers based in Garner, North Carolina, who've been organizing at Amazon for years.

REVEREND RYAN BROWN: CAUSE was birthed during the pandemic. I was asked to go to a part of the warehouse that we knew was a COVID hotspot. It wasn't because Amazon told us. Workers, we came together and we developed our own communication systems to keep one another safe. This area that I was asked to go to, I was told I didn't have no choice, and I left. I clocked out 'cause it just didn't feel right. It felt immoral. It felt demeaning. It felt like a old demon of that, I have never felt in my life until that point. So I wrote a very long letter to our general manager and I posted it on this platform, a virtual platform called The Voice of the Associate, where everybody in that building could see and arrived to campus the next day, went to his office for a private audience. And when I left there out of that office, my spirit and my soul

was so unsettled that I clocked out again and went home. When I went home this time for the first time in a very long time in my life, I remembered that my grandmother taught me to pray. And I literally got on my knees and just started praying to the God of my grandmother and my ancestors. And sanely enough, I know as strange as this sound, but it's just as real as the two of us are seeing, having this conversation now, something spoke to my heart, and I heard one word, organize. Had no idea what that meant. And ever since then, we've been organizing.

LAURA FLANDERS: And what have been the results?

REVEREND RYAN BROWN: The results have been, they have been positive results. We had an election, as you know. And again, that's not a small feat in North Carolina, in a town that no one knows. And we had an election. We lost the election, but did we really lose the election? That was just the beginning of the process. That was to create a conversation. That was to start the fire that, hey, you know, you don't have to put up with this. You know what? That we do deserve living wages. We do deserve better working conditions. That's just the first round we're reimagining, reorganizing what this movement actually looks like for Amazon workers.

LAURA FLANDERS: What's your message to people today who feel like fascism, authoritarianism is making it difficult for them to even imagine a better future?

REVEREND RYAN BROWN: Solomon said that there is nothing new under the sun. This is nothing new. We are living in some perilous times, make no mistake about it. But it's not the first time that our species have lived in perilous times with pharaohs who are giving people work without any brick, without any straw. This is nothing new. What is the best of our tradition? What have they always done? They have always figured out a way to organize, to mobilize and to agitate. And those very people that we look up to in history, regardless of who that individual may be. For me personally, that's folks like Harriet Tubman, that's folks like Fannie Lou Hamer. If you just take those two, I can stop right there. They were just regular, everyday human beings. No education, but they knew that fundamentally something was wrong about the world or the context that they were living in. And Emerson says, to be great is to be misunderstood. That's why we still talk about them today. They were just regular people. And it may seem like a very big world, but what separated them? It is the resilience and it was the faith. And that's how CAUSE operates. That's how we move. And that's what I would suggest to you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Resilience, faith, and organize.

REVEREND RYAN BROWN: Yes.

LAURA FLANDERS: So today's conversation has me thinking a lot about the relationship between authoritarianism and fascism and economics. We talk a lot about the social agenda of

fascism, but what about the economic plan? The person who put the connection most clearly to my mind at this event was [Bhairavi Desai](#), of the [Taxi Workers Alliance](#). The attacks on democracy have an economic agenda, she said. They're about suppressing the ability of an individual or a community to improve their economic lives. The attacks on education have an economic agenda too. The students of today are the workers of tomorrow. They don't call it a classroom for nothing, she said.

BHAIRAVI DESAI: Without a class analysis, without an economic analysis or a critique of capitalism, we cannot understand this moment of authoritarianism. And the most organized base of workers who day to day live out capitalism, debate capitalism, think through capitalism, find ways of fighting economic inequality, are working people. And you know, unions are critical in this fight because it's our job to organize the working people and the working class and to really develop that consciousness around these issues.

LAURA FLANDERS: So the role of organized workers in expanding our democracy or accepting its contraction is huge. Organized labor plays a huge role in improving our chances of fighting fascism today and tomorrow as it has in the past. So what will we see in this moment, in our time? Well, the other lesson from this conference has been the longness of history, the long span of the struggle. Some of the art we saw reminded me of that. We'll continue to cover this connection on the show and I hope that you'll stay with us. You can find all our archives through looking at our website and get all our unedited conversations through subscribing to our free podcast. All the information is at that website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For Laura Flanders & Friends, I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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