

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

COUNTERING AN AUTHORITARIAN TAKEOVER WITH THE LABOR MOVEMENT: ALEX HAN & TARSO RAMOS

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LAURA FLANDERS: The U.S. is changing in ways that are leaving many people afraid. So, what could improve the chances of rebalancing power among the branches of U.S. government and advancing that to multiracial democracy that so many still want? The answer is worker organizing, say my guests, Alex Han and Tarso Ramos. When we look at the history of U-turns from Democratic backsliding to Democratic revival, the success rate generally is about 50%, Ramos told me. Where there is active, vibrant union participation, well, then the odds go up to over 80%. So, what is holding labor back? In early May of this year, I sat down with Ramos and Han at a [conference](#) on the subject of working-class politics in an age of authoritarianism that was held at the City University of New York School of Labor and Urban Studies in New York City. Tarso Ramos is a leading expert on the U.S. Right and longtime former executive director of Political Research Associates. He now serves as senior advisor to Future Currents, a strategic planning group of social and economic justice leaders. Alex Han has spent a lot of his life in the labor movement as an organizer and elected president of a large Chicago local. But in 2023, he became executive director of "In These Times," the long-running, Chicago-based progressive magazine. In the wake of mass layoffs and the abduction of Kilmar Ábrego García, a union member wrongly deported to El Salvador, who, after a massive outcry, was returned to the U.S. by the Trump administration but is still being held in prison, I asked, can enough workers come together effectively enough to make a difference? Here's Alex Han and Tarso Ramos. I'm very excited to be sitting with two very special people, people with an extraordinary sense of both history and this moment, Tarso Ramos and Alex Han. I'm going to start by just asking each of you to introduce yourselves to our audience. Who are you? What do you do? Alex.

ALEX HAN: My name is [Alex Han](#). I'm currently executive director of [In These Times Magazine](#), a longtime magazine of social movements and fights for economic justice based in Chicago. Spent most of the last 20 years as a union organizer and union officer.

LAURA FLANDERS: And what about you, Tarso?

TARSO LUÍS RAMOS: I'm [Tarso Ramos](#). For the last 18 years, I ran a national organization called [Political Research Associates](#). It's a research and strategy center that studies supremacists and far-Right movements in order to support social justice organization and movements to compete and win in the face of accelerating authoritarianism. And just the past couple of months,

I'm working as a senior advisor to a group called Future Currents and doing much the same work but increasingly with national mass-based organizations.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, so let's talk about your sense of where we're at. How would you describe the situation in which we find ourselves right now?

TARSO LUÍS RAMOS: So, drawing on the work of a Hungarian sociologist who's been popularized by [M. Gessen's work](#), if we think of three stages of authoritarian acceleration, authoritarian attempt, breakthrough, and consolidation, we've experienced multiple attempts in the United States, most famously or notoriously, January 6th. We are past attempt, we're in breakthrough. And my assessment is we probably have between 12 and 18 months at the most to try to stop, to forestall authoritarian consolidations, the conditions under which any honest person would say that we are functioning under an autocracy, under an authoritarian regime. We're in the midst of a coup. Actually, we're in the midst of two coups. The coup that many of us prepared for, right? The authoritarian block represented by MAGA with [Christian nationalists](#) and libertarians and sectors of the business community and the Christian Right being its largest player, who galvanized around the project of Project 2025 and a few other pieces, a set of policy prescriptions, and a strategy to concentrate power in the executive branch and to negate the power of checks and balances from the legislative and the judicial. I think the coup that we did not prepare for was the force accelerator that most people experience as DOGE. It's the Musk and Peter Thiel and Marc Andreessen set of actors, who are not only lending their support to that but who have a different end game. They're not so much interested in a strong state through which to advance authoritarian and pro-business policies or merely to enrich themselves, although they are enriching themselves. They are not interested in the nation state system. They're interested in wringing the profits out of the public sector, and they're interested in accelerating the demise of civilian governance altogether. They're not interested in a state that mediates between corporate titans like themselves, oligarchs like themselves, and everyday people and workers. They want to cut out the middleman, their interests, in forms of direct corporate domination and rule. And so both of those coups are unfolding in real time and they're both in cooperation and in competition, in tension with each other.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm seeing a lot of people in the streets and a lot of people wondering what their marching orders are. Like, what exactly to do. Can you just talk a bit about what you're seeing, where you are living, and where you're acting and what it signifies to you? 'Cause it's not as if there isn't energy of resistance there, but as you've pointed out, it's not organized. And one has to wonder, "Well, why?" at this point.

ALEX HAN: Yeah. What are the actual practical applications of protests? It's about how do we tie these things together to real, practical applications. In the context of May Day, we saw in Philadelphia civil disobedience action, as a part of it, in support of hotel workers. Where you

had, Bernie Sanders has been barnstorming the country, speaking to tens of thousands of people. He spoke at the May Day rally. At the same time, the president of the Philadelphia Central Labor Council took a rest with hotel workers during that action to protest. So we start to see a bit of how we can bring into alignment big numbers of people with, I think, real, immediate, and tangible goals.

TARSO LUÍS RAMOS: I think there's fairly sophisticated local organizing going on. Where I think there is a vacuum of leadership that meets this moment is nationally. We don't have a national resistance party who's telling us what time it is and is actually moving into action. And the reflexes of many national networks and organizations were built for a different moment, a different period of contestation with the Right and with the state than we're in now. And so much of that infrastructure has been built to rally folks around a particular set of policy solutions to grievances. Well, the courts are not going to save us. Congress is not going to save us. It's not going to be able to advance a robust policy initiative. So, what's required in this period of contestation are a different set of fights with power that most of our movements and organizations weren't built for. And so we're in this in-between moment where there's enormous energy, there's enormous engagement in the streets, and there's a failure of imagination and of containers of leadership to direct that in ways that can be effective in building power.

LAURA FLANDERS: I really want to hone in on that, and I'm hearing you describe a scenario that I recognize too of a certain kind of activism in the streets, you might say, of protest perhaps in the '80s and early '90s, resisting U.S. imperialism internationally, fighting for healthcare for people with AIDS and others. Gradually, I'm hearing you say we saw liberal and left organizations focus more on advocacy of legislation and law work, legal work. Are you saying that has left us in a bad place as progressives?

TARSO LUÍS RAMOS: I'm saying it's insufficient to the moment. And so we have to recognize that we are in a different conjuncture. There's a level of consolidation of authoritarian power, which is very strong and moving very quickly. By some measures, the rate of democratic backsliding in the United States right now has no contemporary parallel. If we look at other cases of the rise of authoritarian parties, it's happening very fast in the United States. And there's still a lot of denialism in the United States about what's here. There's still a lot of, I think, false hope that a reversal could be achieved in the midterms, for instance. I think contestation in the midterms will be very important. It's not going to reverse this. We're entering a phase of contest in the United States where the analogs we should be looking for and at for lessons are much closer to the mass rallies in Belarus or in Poland, or the construction of the United Democratic front in South Africa to defeat the apartheid regime. And those aren't policy coalitions. Those are coalitions that align cross-class and cross-ideology from many different sectors of society to withdraw support for the regime. So, mass non-cooperation. We have to turn our attention away from what are the ways that we fought for policy gains over the last several decades, and learn

from our own history, abolition movement, civil rights movement, early rainbow period, and many examples abroad from what does it take, what are the conditions that produce successful reversals or U-turns from authoritarian consolidation into a possibility of democratic renewal.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, we're talking about authoritarian consolidation, but I would also like the two of you to respond to the election results, which some at least interpreted as showing that there was a growing working-class base of multiracial people for the Trump agenda, at least as they understood it. Were they just wrong?

ALEX HAN: Yeah, I mean, I think that's undeniable, like, the results of the election. In a lot of ways, we do have a divided country where partisanship reflects a set of different cultural questions. That's the reality. There is no kind of magic bullet that is going to change that or shift it. It's also that the changes in political coalition, electoral coalition, these things are not gigantic shifts. These are gradual changes that can be changed, that can be pushed back in different ways. I do think something that's been in my mind is really thinking about how do we actually interpret and analyze what a victory is and what a victory isn't, and how we think about the ways that are not going to be traditionally satisfying are the ways that we're going to actually be able to push this kind of authoritarian rise back.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, elaborate on that just a little.

ALEX HAN: Yeah, I think about the kind of like list of policies. And actually Project 2025 is a perfect distillation of here is the utility of your list. Are you going to campaign on this list of policies? No, you are going to identify the wedges that drive your political opposition apart. And so, as people who are very engaged in politics day to day, we are not normal everyday people. And so, the kind of changes and shifts of mindset that regular everyday voters, especially those who show up every four years in a presidential election, those are not, like, deeply felt beliefs. There is this contestation for a chunk of the electorate. There's contestation for a chunk of people who have dropped out of the electorate. There's a contestation for people who have not come into the electorate yet. And I think that's really what we have to think about.

TARSO LUÍS RAMOS: Trump certainly benefits from the mass base. It's probably a consolidated 40-million-person block in the United States which is pro authoritarian, believes that the exercise of political violence is totally legitimate to accomplish their goals. And then he had benefited from a global phenomenon of the crisis of legitimacy of the economic and political order, and ruling parties around the country took hits. And that's far Right parties like the BJP, the Hindu fascist party that governs India, to neoliberal parties like Macron in France sending that country into political crisis in terms of a governing coalition. And Trump benefited from that. There was a certain level of "throw the bums out," right, that really helped Trump in that period of time. So, to Alex's earlier point, a 40% approval rate and falling is nothing to build a

lasting regime around. Well, there are a couple problems then. There are a couple directions that that could go. I think that's exactly right. And those numbers are going to fall, and they're going to fall including because of the economic destabilization that the Trump regime is causing. And I think we're only beginning really to feel the ripple effects of the supply chain issues, right, and the mass firings and dislocations that are going to touch every corner of this country and every constituency, regardless of whom they voted for at the top of the presidential ticket. And those are going to create tremendous organizing opportunities for us. They're also going to create incredible incentives for repression. And I think we have to believe the regime is willing to exercise - extraordinarily - repression in order to hang on to power. And so, there are going to be lots of opportunities to politicize and mobilize people, and there's going to be a very difficult set of organizing conditions under which to do that work. Both of those things are true. And so, when I take that insight and I apply it then to the question of how do we build, I think there are examples, like the United Democratic Front in South Africa. There was a negative coalition. It was massive. And there were parts of the business community that joined that, not because they were interested in racial equality, because it came to the conclusion that apartheid was bad for business. And at the same time you had the Freedom Charter. And it was not produced by a few wonks, right, and the policy wonks in a back room someplace. 50,000 organizers fanned out across the country, much smaller than the United States, right? So the density of that. And they collected people's ideas, and they produced a vision statement, not a list of policy but a vision statement, about how they were going to improve the lives of everybody in that country if apartheid was defeated. You have to have a positive vision, but then you had a mass no coalition that brought together people who, in many cases, were antagonists, they were fighting each other. That kind of orientation is outside the lived experience of most of the people in this country who are actually responsible for leading organizations. And we're going to have to learn, we're going to have to socialize those lessons in order to advance into a different period in modality of power-building in the United States.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, is that why you're here at a labor conference, looking for that kind of thinking and organizing?

TARSO LUÍS RAMOS: I'll tell you one of the reasons I'm at a labor conference is when we look at the history of U-turns from Democratic backsliding to Democratic revival, the success rate is about 50 percent. Now, that's not terrible. That means there's hope. But that's a coin toss. That's a coin toss. Where there's active, vibrant union participation, the odds go up to about 80, the low 80s percent. Without active central participation by working people in the organizations that represent them, unfortunately, we don't have parties, mass parties in this country that represent working people, we don't win. Or it's a coin toss whether we do. And so, I'm interested in winning.

LAURA FLANDERS: "In These Times" focuses heavily on labor. Is this why?

ALEX HAN: I mean, I don't think you can have democratic socialism without organized workers demanding more and creating democracy. I think of labor unions for all of their faults as well, existing labor unions, these are the largest democratic organizations that almost anybody in this country has any experience with. And organizations where you elect your leaders, where you decide on those policies, where you have to work with, you don't self-select who's in the union. It's whoever works in a given place. I've thought about the centrality of Kilmar Ábrego García's union membership in kind of lifting up that story, right?

LAURA FLANDERS: A steel worker. The steel worker who was...

ALEX HAN: Yeah, a sheet metal worker.

LAURA FLANDERS: Sheet metal worker who was exported.

ALEX HAN: Right.

LAURA FLANDERS: Abducted.

ALEX HAN: Right, who was abducted to El Salvador. And I don't think the kind of response would be that sustained were this not a union member. And so that tradition of mutual aid and solidarity, as much as in some places, those traditions have been a bit worn out, I think those are things that can be re-energized. It was so inspiring to me when I saw a video from the National Association of Building Trades Unions saw the president say, "We have to bring our brother back," and you saw everybody in the room stand up and cheer.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I want to go exactly there to close. Perhaps we're thinking about where those moments might be in front of us or even visible today. I think of Grace Paley's book, I think, was "Extraordinary Changes at the Last Minute." I mean, extraordinary things can happen quickly. And I think of Chicago. When the explosion of organizing by Chicago teachers hit the national consciousness, it was like a surprise from no place. But obviously, for people who were in Chicago, this work had been going on for many years. So, one of the questions I have for you, Alex, is, what tendrils are you following? What surprises, perhaps, are you anticipating? What are you looking out for? And what could people be thinking of as, perhaps, turning points in this narrative?

ALEX HAN: You have all of these different union members who are bargaining contracts over the next several years. I actually think some of the interesting places are going to be where workers are in motion and organizing, and where that can kind of sync up with some of the existing contract and potential strike activity over the next several years. You mentioned the

Chicago Teachers Union. That's a project that doesn't happen without a Democratic bottom-up movement inside that union, creating change, changing the leadership, and putting them on a fighting footing. We've seen over the last several years new leadership in the UAW really revitalize that union. You know, my eye is also on where are the unions that occupy critical places where change is really possible internally.

LAURA FLANDERS: We did learn during the COVID pandemic that the international supply chains are fragile, vulnerable, and none more, so it seems to me, than some of the tech supply chains that are backing this vision of the tech bros whom you described. I mean, are there new points of leverage, perhaps, in their dependence on technology that is not going to really be able to sustain itself on this planet?

TARSO LUÍS RAMOS: Well, we've seen some of those wedges driven already. We've seen the open fights between the far-Right tech oligarchs, for instance, and some of the initial wing of those that wanted to go in a different direction. We saw it on tariffs. We've seen it on visas. We've seen it on other things that the tech industry in the United States, the Silicon Valley tech bros in particular, rely upon for their business models. A good example is Musk's exposure in China. His largest factory in the world is in China. He's not interested in these tariffs. We also have the contradiction between the far-Right populists and these tech oligarch elitists, and they are elitists. Musk infamously gave the Nazi salute after Trump's election. And shortly after, at CPAC, Steve Bannon gave the same salute. That wasn't in solidarity. That was competitive. Bannon was saying, "No, you're not of the people. We are the people." And so there are these incredible tensions within that coalition that we don't even necessarily have to exploit. They exist, and it's an unstable proposition. So, I do think that there are opportunities to isolate some of the tech oligarchs. We've seen that with Musk and the Tesla takebacks. Marc Andreessen is attempting to raise the largest ever capitalization, VC capitalization for big-tech AI, including Musk's AI, of \$22 billion right now. And so there are opportunities to interfere with that process. And another very prominent example are these mass firings of federal workers and new labor formations that are emerging out of that set of fights. The Federal Unionist network is a really important one. These are people all over the country, in many cases, high concentrations, in states that went for Trump. And there are many federal workers who really did not see themselves as militant or particularly political. And their work through their unions, many of them are disallowed from striking and so forth. There is the real potential that Trump and DOGE and the rest of them have poked a sleeping bear, because now you have tens and hundreds of thousands of workers who are angry. And they're angry not only because of the tax on them individually, but because they're public servants and they believe in the services that they're providing. They believe in providing Medicaid and Medicare, right? They believe in providing occupational safety and health. They believe in keeping our kids from being poisoned by that mass food industry and all of these things. So, I do think that there is tremendous energy, not all of which is being expressed on the streets yet. And so we are moving into a period of increased disruption by the regime of the

economy, of politics of every institution, from universities to businesses, right, to media. But we're also moving into a period of mass dissatisfaction with those disruptions. I think it's going to be a very hot summer.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, last question. How do each of you stop from getting numb? I think when it comes to Trumpism, it's been with us for so long now, that one almost begins to just feel, "This again. This again." You have that, "I can't believe he..." "Well, of course, I can't believe." And as Becky Pringle said, that one of the weapons of authoritarianism is not just demeaning and disparaging, but also the depression and despair that people feel. So, labor organizing requires that you constantly remain angry at the boss. How do you keep your ire up?

ALEX HAN: There's a real hunger, and not just from the usual suspects, right? I remember going out to the Hands Off! rally in downtown Chicago in April 5th and just being amazed, just being awash in tens of thousands of people who I didn't know. And there are so many instances, I think, of all of these times where I've shown up at a protest and I know every single person there. And when that happens, I know we're not winning.

TARSO LUÍS RAMOS: We're losing.

ALEX HAN: I love to read quotes from the [Bernie and AOC rallies](#) of people saying, "I didn't vote for Bernie, I don't even really like him, but he's out here doing something, so I'm going to go show up." People are in motion. They need leadership and direction and strategy. And that is a much better situation to be in than one where people feel demobilized much more broadly.

TARSO LUÍS RAMOS: I do believe that there is a anti-authoritarian and pro-democracy majority. And so that's an incredible opportunity to build the containers that allow it to behave as a majority and to win on the basis of that. I think back to other really challenging phases in American history. I think about the abolitionist movement, right? And I liken our challenge in this period to that. We not only need to defeat as they did slavery, we need to usher in a new progressive period of possibility, right? Out of the defeat of slavery, we get the first experiments in multiracial democracy in the history of the United States with Reconstruction. Same with the long civil rights movement. It not only eviscerates legal white supremacy and the white monopoly and political power, it ushers in a fundamentally new period that redefines the meaning of citizenship. Who gets to be a citizen? To whom is government responsible? Indeed, who has the right to govern in this country? Completely changed by that. Here we are in another very difficult cycle where our job is not only not a small task to defeat authoritarianism and fascism in the U.S. and its tentacles around the globe, but to do it in a way that builds momentum to usher in a new cycle of progressive politics in society that wins. That wins a multiracial feminist and worker-centered democracy that we would want to live in and we would want our

descendants to live in. And that's a big job. It happens that it's come up on our watch. And so, we have to just get to it in any way we can.

LAURA FLANDERS: I think I heard marching orders. Tarso Ramos, Alex Han, thank you so much for being here.

TARSO LUÍS RAMOS: Thank you, Laura, for all you do.

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