

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

CUTS, SHUTDOWNS & CIVIL RIGHTS ATTACKS: FEDERAL WORKERS FIGHT BACK

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LAURA FLANDERS: It should not have come as a shock. The administration's agenda to roll back civil rights was specifically outlined in [Project 2025](#), that 900-page roadmap written by conservative think tanks and former Trump administration officials. Upon his inauguration, sure enough, the president immediately began issuing executive orders, ending programs, halting investigations, and appointing anti-civil rights loyalists to key positions in his government. Some democratic leaders spoke out and roundly condemned budget cuts and layoffs. But in the months since, the administration has largely gotten away with casting its actions as reigning in cumbersome DEI regulations or cutting corporate red tape, to the point that it has taken collective organizing by the very same workers who are the most under attack to sound the alarm about what is really going on. Namely, this nation's progress on civil rights and equality under the law is being reversed, ended in front of our eyes with clear intent and it's happening fast. Most recently, four attorneys and staff workers at the Department of Housing and Urban Development, or HUD's Office of General Counsel and Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, went public with an emergency complaint, which they filed through U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren's office, and taken to the press. We're gonna speak to two of those courageous whistleblowers about what made their actions necessary and what went into them in just a moment. But first, here's Senator Warren laying out clearly the nature of this crisis.

ELIZABETH WARREN: So, I just received internal documents from whistleblowers inside the Trump Administration. And if you buy or rent a home, or hoping to someday, you need to hear this. So, right now, if you're a mom protecting her kids from living with an abusive father, or if you're getting denied a mortgage because of the color of your skin, you have civil rights protection under U.S. law. But the Trump Administration has been systematically destroying these federal protections for renters and homeowners. And now, new internal documents shared with my office from whistleblowers inside the Department of Housing and Urban Development show the extent of the Trump Administration's attack on civil rights and show how the administration appears to be ignoring the law.

LAURA FLANDERS: With me now is Paul Osadebe. He's an attorney working in the federal government, a shop steward for the American Federation of Government Employees, or AFGE, Local 476 in Washington, DC, and a member of the Federal Unionists Network, about which we

will hear more in a moment. We're also joined by Palmer Heenan, also an attorney working in the federal government, and also a member of AFGE and FUN. And these are just two of the four employees within the Department of Housing and Urban Development who have filed a formal whistleblower complaint through the office of Senator Elizabeth Warren, Democrat of Massachusetts. Palmer and Paul, welcome to "Laura Flanders & Friends". Thank you and I truly mean it. Thank you so much for your work. Before we begin, and we're gonna hear about the nature of your complaint, it's very dire, I wanna hear a little bit more about you. Whistleblowers are always brave and courageous people, but there's usually more behind the scenes that we don't know about. So, are you just incredibly brave or what went into this decision to file this complaint? Who wants to start? Paul?

PAUL OSADEBE: No, it's not just bravery. Though with the risks that we're facing, it did take something like that. We knew that the people that we served would be harmed even more than we might be. So, yes, we're facing risks. Yes, it was a hard decision to go public like this, but it was really the only choice.

LAURA FLANDERS: Palmer, what went into your decision to join in the suit?

PALMER HEENAN: I think that Paul has said it really well. I've spent the vast majority of my legal career, I've dedicated it to helping people vindicate their civil rights. And that means that we're sort of called to something, I think a little bit larger. There's huge risk to Paul and I in making this decision, but at the same time, the folks that we're trying to help, the folks that we're trying to bring the cases forward for, are the ones that are also at risk. I mean, the people that we help on a day-to-day basis, they might be on the streets. They might literally be in danger for their lives because their cases aren't being moved forward by our office. And so, at the end of the day, if I'm weighing my career versus the life of someone or a child living on the street, I didn't really see it as being a choice.

LAURA FLANDERS: Lay out what are some of the key points in your whistleblower complaint?

PAUL OSADEBE: Essentially, civil rights enforcement at HUD and throughout the federal government is being dismantled. So, if you are someone out there who's renting or trying to buy a home, if you're a veteran with a disability or a survivor, or someone who's being discriminated against based on your race or just for having a family, for having kids, you're supposed to get help when that happens. And the problem is, we are being stopped from helping you. So, when you come to us with a complaint, that complaint might not even get investigated because of the staffing cuts or because political appointees say that, "We don't want to look into that type of case anymore. That's DEI now. We're just not going to do that."

LAURA FLANDERS: And who is making these decisions? Palmer.

PALMER HEENAN: I think that the level of political interference we're seeing, so these are recently installed political leaders within HUD, are the ones that are making these decisions. And-

LAURA FLANDERS: So, they have long histories in housing law? Are they attorneys like yourselves?

PALMER HEENAN: Some of them are, and some of them aren't attorneys. But the frank fact of the matter is, is that our office represents the most experienced group of fair housing advocates, practically across the country. And in large part that's because our office was created during the Reagan Administration to do this work. During that time, the government decided that there needed to be essentially prosecutors to go after people who discriminate in housing. And as a consequence, they required HUD to investigate cases, and that's our investigative arm, the Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity. And they created our office, the Office of Fair Housing, as essentially the prosecutors. We're the ones that are bringing the fair housing cases. We are the ones that recruit some of the top fair housing advocates across the country, administration in and administration out. There are many people in our office that have served in Republican and Democratic administrations, and that's because housing isn't political, or at least [it shouldn't be](#). But because of the decisions that are being made now, it's become a political issue and the downstream consequences of that are going to be catastrophic.

LAURA FLANDERS: Is there any part of private law or is there any private institution that could substitute for what you are doing, Palmer?

PALMER HEENAN: Absolutely not. And there's a lot of reasons for that. That's not to say that there's not a role for private attorneys. There are many, many good private attorneys out there. The problem is that there are too few to keep up with the enormous volume of cases that are filed with our office. Our investigative arm receives tens of thousands of complaints every year from the public, and we are a free resource. We've decided, as a people in this country that if you've been discriminated against, you get to file a complaint with the government and the government will, for free and in a neutral way, investigate that complaint. And if those neutral investigators determine that there's reasonable cause to believe that discrimination occurred, the case gets moved to our office and we prosecute that discrimination across the board, beginning to end, for free. And there is not a private institution that does that work, and certainly not one that does it for free. There are some state organizations and nonprofits that supplement the work we do. The problem is that this administration is also attacking those organizations.

LAURA FLANDERS: You, as I understand it, Paul, work within the Violence Against Women Act team within HUD, which forgive me, I didn't even know existed and perhaps doesn't

anymore. What's the work that you do, what's the status of that team today, and what are your concerns there?

PAUL OSADEBE: So, I was recently added to that team because so many people were fired or forced to resign that they needed to add new people urgently to do that crucial work. And HUD just recently got the authority in 2022 to enforce the Violence Against Women Act and go after landlords that HUD itself is funding and making sure that they are not [discriminating against survivors](#), people who've been stalked, people who have been sexually assaulted. We make sure that those people get access to housing, that they can move to a safe unit when someone abuses them or they're being stalked. We make sure that people aren't excluding them from housing because they just don't want to deal with someone's history of abuse or their current partner might be abusing them in the unit. And oftentimes, the landlord just says, "Well, I just don't wanna deal with you. I'm going to evict you. I'm going to put you and your family out on the street." And we are the ones who stop them from doing that.

LAURA FLANDERS: I hear your, both of your passions for this work and your concern about those who are not gonna be served or even helped as a consequence of what you're facing. But I want to get to the teamwork that you are a part of, because we've heard a lot about people being laid off and often, these federal workers are cast in our media as kind of "Ay, poor people. Isn't that terrible?" But you and the folks at FUN, which it's a cute acronym for organization that is addressing a real crisis, the Federal Unionist Network, aren't victims. You are standing up and I wanna hear more about what is making that possible. Because let's face it, we say courage is contagious, but it's not a virus. It needs to be implemented, it needs help. So, who wants to take that on?

PAUL OSADEBE: In this moment, like the thing that will actually get us through this is solidarity, is recognizing what [potential power we have](#) as federal workers in the workplace and building connections among each other, learning the skills to actually do that, even in an atmosphere of extreme fear right now. We have to be clear, that is the method of the administration. They want to create fear, which leads to silence, which lets things be dismantled without anyone standing up and fighting and saying, "This is illegal, this is wrong, and this is harming people." And it's up to federal workers, the ones in the building, to actually do that. And that's what FUN is about. We make sure that people know that they're not alone, that there are people who are ready to fight and know how, and that it is our job and our role to not just sit here and take it or just to be apolitical. When political appointees won't let you do your job, it's up to you to defend your agency and to come together with your coworkers who are all under attack and protect both yourselves, your agency, and the people that we serve.

LAURA FLANDERS: So, Palmer, bringing you in here. There might be people going, "Well, but how on earth under these circumstances can I do anything like that?" How did you do it and

what's your message to people perhaps who are feeling very afraid and not quite sure where to turn?

PALMER HEENAN: One of the things that is a sort of a natural outcropping of our work in civil rights is realizing the value of community. And that's particularly true when you're doing specifically fair housing work. Because our whole work is dedicated towards making sure that people are able to live where it is that they wanna live and live there safely, stably, and securely, to make sure that there's not a child on the streets that was told, whose parents were told, "Sorry, you can't live here because we don't want kids to live here." That's a protected class under the Fair Housing Act. So, I think building that community and creating that community is a real natural part of what it is that we already work hard to do.

LAURA FLANDERS: And I should say it's not a coincidence that the two of you are union members as well. The Unionist Network is not a union, but you are members of AFGE, which is.

PALMER HEENAN: That's exactly right. It was the fact that we are a unionized office, right? That we were able to work collectively already before all of this and able to extend our natural feeling towards community along with our union membership to come together, and say, look, at the end of the day, whatever risk there is to us is outweighed by the risk to the people that we serve. And part of our duty and part of our oath as federal workers is to take action. And if that means going public and losing our livelihoods, that's what we have to do.

LAURA FLANDERS: Why a whistleblower complaint? Why not just a demonstration? Why not just marching out? Why not mass resignation?

PAUL OSADEBE: Part of it is because we're lawyers, and we wanted to make sure that what we were saying was accurate and protected. So, we wanted to put it in writing and make it something that had support behind it in terms of facts, documents, to make it much harder to just lie about it, essentially. That that was one element. We wanted to make sure that anything that we did was gonna be shared with people who were supposed to be holding our agency accountable. So, that's members of Congress and that's the Inspector General. So, it made sense to do it that way. And it's something that can be shared and replicated throughout the government.

LAURA FLANDERS: Palmer, coming to you, would you describe yourself as a far-left radical?

PALMER HEENAN: Absolutely not. I would not describe myself as a far-left radical. I would describe myself as someone who has spent their legal career trying to help people, regardless of their politics, get help when they've been discriminated against. And that means if you've been discriminated based on any of the protected classes under the Fair Housing Act, that means if you've been discriminated against because of your religion, your race, your color, your sex, your

national origin, because of disability status. There are so many protected categories in the Fair Housing Act. Every American is protected by the Fair Housing Act. And so, in my work, politics don't matter. What matters is somebody comes to me, I investigate their case, and if there's reasonable cause to believe discrimination occurred, I go after the one that hurt them. Because in this country, we don't allow that, or at least we didn't allow that.

LAURA FLANDERS: I can't help but be reminded that Donald Trump and his family in the 1970s, before the establishment of your office, were brought up on charges of discrimination against Black and Puerto Rican, Latino residents in their housing developments. Is it crazy to think the guy just holds a grudge? Paul.

PAUL OSADEBE: They've been pretty consistent from the first administration till now that they're not super happy with housing enforcement. They're much more, it seems like they're much more concerned with the opinions of developers, landlords, people who want to discriminate than they are with the ordinary Americans that face discrimination every day, the thousands of people that make complaints and the far more than that, that never make a complaint. There's so many people who are affected by discrimination. I don't know why they do what they do. It doesn't seem to help people and they never really seem to address the impacts that it has on people.

LAURA FLANDERS: I can feel my spine getting stiffer as I hear you too. Coming to you, Palmer, you talked about actions earlier. What actions do you want the Congress and Senator Warren to do? What do you want to happen?

PALMER HEENAN: That's a great question. Let me take it kind of piece by piece. I think we need oversight from Congress. And Senator Warren has been a leader in that space, but obviously, she can't do it alone, right? We need folks on both sides of the aisle to realize that housing is important. Every member of Congress has someone in their district who our office has helped. And that's because Congress created us to do that work for the members of all their districts. And so, we need every member of Congress to stand up and say, "We're not gonna allow this." We can't allow for it to be more difficult for people to find housing. Costs are already through the roof and housing is so expensive. We can't let it get more expensive. We can't make it harder for a family to find housing. We can't make it harder for a disabled veteran to find a place that his wheelchair can literally get in the door. So, we need oversight to make sure that we're doing the work that Congress required us by statute to do. And to get there, I think we're gonna need people to contact their members of Congress. We need people to reach out and say, "Look, this is how I was discriminated against," or, "This is what happened to my neighbor." We've gotta make it so that these stories are getting through to members of Congress. Tell them, stand up for these rights, make sure that my rights are protected, your rights are protected so that if we ever need this service, it's there for us because you put it in place for us.

LAURA FLANDERS: What do you hope will come of an Inspector General investigation?

PALMER HEENAN: I hope that it gives transparency into the inner workings of HUD and how these cuts, these reassignments, this dismantlement has impacted the work that we do on a day-to-day basis. The Inspector General already found that our office was understaffed and that meant case processing times were through the roof. These cuts to both our office and the investigative part of HUD, the Office of Fair Housing and Equal Opportunity, are gonna make those wait times even longer, putting aside the hundreds of cases that have already been withdrawn, stalled out, or cases where settlements have been revoked or reduced, or what have you. So, I think we need transparency from an investigation so that the American people can see the full scope of what it is that's been done at HUD. It's only then that we're really gonna be able to start to fix it.

LAURA FLANDERS: Paul, coming to you, I heard from your colleague there that you were one of the founding members of FUN. How has the organization grown? Would you say there is a rising tide of previously unorganized people moving into action, creating infrastructure?

PAUL OSADEBE: So, I was an early member, not sure if I quite classify myself as a founder, maybe in the group right after that, but it existed before this administration. We saw we would have to be ready for the possibility of an administration that didn't value federal workers and the protections that we provide, or that was anti-worker and anti-union. And we knew we would need to be ready to organize in that moment. Now that moment has come and that's why FUN has really exploded over the last several months. And we are trying to organize people who are currently under attack, who are still employed, the people who have already been fired or who were chased out of their job through the Deferred Resignation Program. Anyone who values federal work and protecting the American people, we are trying to get those people more organized, more trained, and more ready to use every tool at their disposal and to recognize their power, because we all do have power. The administration tries to make people feel powerless. But we are powerful when we work together, when we strategize and try to understand what our power potentially could be and what the power of the people attacking us is, so that we can address that. And that's what FUN is about. I believe that we will see more and more people doing things like what we have just done or whatever makes sense to them where they are because workers are the ones who know best about how to protect their agency and serve the public. And as long as we are thinking along those lines and understand that it's our position to do that and our oath demands us to do that in this moment, I think we're gonna see a lot more action and fight from federal workers and from our allies.

LAURA FLANDERS: I believe that we will see. Thank you so much. I appreciate both of you and those that you are working with who are not with us on this show, for all the work that you are doing and the inspiration truly that you are providing to the nation. Thank you.

PALMER HEENAN: Thank you.

PAUL OSADEBE: Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: Both our guests lost their jobs soon after we spoke. Palmer was let go. Paul was put on leave, pending termination, both in association with having leaked unpublic information to the public, which is to say us and other members of the press. This was a risk they knew they were taking and they were prepared to take it, our guests told us. And on the very same day that they were let go, the organization that they're a part of, FUN, the Federal Unionist Network, was out there again, this time delivering a letter to Congress. It was the eve of the eve of the government shutdown and that letter signed by 30,000 past and present members of the federal workforce called on Congress to approve no budget that did further harm to the American public. By harm, they meant two things, harm to programs, for sure, and the workforce, absolutely. But not just that. They as frontline workers know that many of those critical programs have been in effect shut down for months. No, the fight they said needs to be over power over the public's purse. The plan to fire tens of thousands of workers, impound congressionally appropriated dollars, and shut down government was laid out years ago by the people behind Project 2025 who want effectively and fundamentally to change our democracy. Power. Where does it live? With the accountable representatives of Congress or with the [executive branch](#) and the administration? That's the question. And that's the question the FUN workers are asking. If it's all for one and one for all and that's how we'll get through this, are we all actually for accountable governance or not? We'll continue to cover the folks raising that question here on this program. And if you want to find my entire uncut conversation with today's guests, you can by subscribing to our free podcast. All the free podcasts are there on our website and you can sign up to receive them. Till the next time. Stay kind, stay curious. For "Laura Flanders & Friends", I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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