

**Courage My Friends Podcast – Episode 2**  
**Labour & Economic Security: Bread and Roses in a Post-Pandemic World**

[music]

**ANNOUNCER:** This is a rabble podcast network show.

**VOICE:** New voices in your head. It's radio...free...

[music transition]

**COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER:** COVID. Capitalism. Climate. Three storms have converged and we're all caught in the vortex.

**STREET VOICE 1:** How do I feed my kids and protect myself from this virus?

**STREET VOICE 2:** I'm safe here in Canada, but I'm worried about my family back home.

**STREET VOICE 3:** I'm scared about the future. When this pandemic is over, we still have the climate crisis to deal with.

[music]

**COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER:** What brought us to this point? Can we go back to normal? Do we even want to?

Welcome to this special podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell Foundation.

**VOICE 4:** Courage my friends; 'tis not too late to build a better world.

**COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER:** This is the *Courage My Friends* podcast.

**HOST, RESH BUDHU:** Welcome to episode 2 of the *Courage My Friends* podcast. I'm Resh Budhu, co-producer and host of this special 6-episode series and coordinator of the annual Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College.

In today's episode, *Labour & Economic Security: Bread and Roses in a Post-Pandemic World*, anti-poverty activist John Clarke and UFCW union president Paul Meinema discuss the really dire situation facing those who have been on the front-lines of this pandemic right from the very beginning – Low-income (largely Black and Brown) communities and front-line workers, who have somehow become both essential and expendable.

John Clarke became involved in anti-poverty organizing in the 1980s, when he helped to form a union of unemployed workers in London, Ontario. In 1990, he moved to Toronto to become an organizer with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty and stayed in this role until 2019. He is presently Packer Visitor in Social Justice at York University.

Paul Meinema is the National President of United Food and Commercial Workers (or UFCW) Canada, the country's leading and most progressive private sector union with more than 250,000 members. He is also an Executive Vice President of the UFCW International Union and a member of its International Executive Committee. Paul's service with UFCW spans four decades, beginning in the 1980s when he was a shop steward on the floor at the Fletcher's Meat Processing plant in Red Deer, Alberta. Paul also serves as Canadian Sector Representative on the Board of Directors of the International Foundation of Benefits.

In our discussion we look at the situation facing our vulnerable communities – who have been made to shoulder the most dangerous and devastating consequences of this pandemic. Can we move from banging pots to making policies that support poor communities and essential workers? Is the answer in a universal basic income? What about unions? How about communities themselves? Can a post-pandemic world also be a post-poverty world?

Here is my conversation with John Clarke and Paul Meinema.

**RESH:** Paul, John, welcome.

**JOHN:** Thank you.

**PAUL:** Thank you, Resh.

**RESH:** So here we are, at the convergence of COVID, capitalism and climate. And we are seeing the disproportionate impacts of all of these forces on low income and marginalized populations. John, I want to start with you. So we're now over a year into this pandemic. What are some of the critical issues facing the poor and vulnerable at this moment?

**JOHN:** Well, there's a whole series of questions. I mean obviously we're dealing with a pandemic that at this point is completely unpredictable. The vaccination program is now underway, but the horrors that are being unleashed in India, for example at the moment, make for a completely unpredictable situation. So the public health crisis, that this pandemic represented, is not finished, and the health impacts disproportionately hit poor and racialized communities to an enormous degree.

We've also seen a situation of really unprecedented suffering, even with the intervention of emergency income support measures that the government has taken. We're seeing

this hit poor communities to an incredible degree. We're seeing a situation where people are forced to go into the most dangerous forms of work because there's no paid sick days. We're seeing people's income massively interrupted. We're seeing a crisis of eviction taking place. Right in the city of Toronto where I live, there are potentially hundreds of thousands of people impacted by this extreme precarity of housing. We're going to come out of this period with what the International Monetary Fund is calling "economic scarring". So I think we're in a situation of really unprecedented economic dislocation, unprecedented suffering. And clearly, governments were not prepared for this crisis. And governments have not responded to this crisis in a way that meets people's needs.

**RESH:** As you said, we're really seeing this with those traditionally, very marginalized groups and those same groups that are represented within those essential or frontline work sectors. Paul, from the beginning of this pandemic, we've been seeing the impacts on frontline workers. First of all, what types of workers or sectors does the UFCW represent?

**PAUL:** We represent several sectors in our economy, but we're primarily in the food and food processing sectors. And so we have a large group of our members that are frontline in this epidemic, that are severely impacted by almost all the issues that John raises. And most of it is around, you know, government policies and the issue that we have corporate identities that are driving forces that are setting the rules of this production and the prices of these productions long before it gets to the markets. So you know, we have members who are in meat processing plants, in grocery stores, and other food processing plants. We have them in long term care homes, we have them in nursing homes, and we have them in security - So a lot of membership that is directly involved with all of the industries that are frontline throughout this pandemic.

The other issue with this type of work, and the important work that it is, is that they are usually multi-employed in these areas. So they might be working at a retail store, but also taking part in a long term care home or providing some care, they may have one of the folks in their home working at a meat- or food- processing plant in the evenings, while one is working in a grocery store during the day. They'll have multiple people living in the same home, that are working in a variety of these industries, and they're not receiving the protections that they are due to either being at work or the ability to self isolate at home.

We also do a lot of work with temporary foreign workers. And you know, we all know the issues that have been raised with temporary foreign workers that come to Canada. It's been exposed not only in the industries that I've already mentioned, but in the in the farm industry is temporary foreign workers and field workers. They are clever people, they know what they're doing and they know their jobs very well. And employers and governments think well, we just need to educate them more about COVID-19. Well, you can educate all of these workers as much as you want about COVID-19 and isolation and proper sanitation. But when you ask them then to go back into a bunkhouse with 14

other people, how do you isolate? So you know, we're representing workers in every facet of this. We often say for our union that we represent food workers from field to fork.

**RESH:** And, you know, it's interesting that you bring up that point, that the burden of the disproportionate impacts of COVID that's being experienced by the poor and vulnerable and essential workers are often placed on their shoulders, and really not discussed as a matter of really faulty policy to put it lightly.

So in this current, and what is turning out to be the most serious wave of this pandemic, we're seeing a different group flooding into intensive care units across the country than what we saw sort of in the first waves. They are younger, many are essential workers. Yet, despite calls from across our society, including from medical authorities, it seems that there has been such a hesitation to grant adequate protection to essential workers, including, as you mentioned, paid sick leave here in Ontario - We're only just getting into this now, in the second May of this pandemic.

Why? Why this hesitation? We've seen, you know, emergency supports of all kinds come out, but there seems to be a real hesitation around these particular sectors, these particular workers. I'll ask both of you to come in, but Paul, do you want to come in? And then I'll go to John?

**PAUL:** Sure. I think, it's what I mentioned earlier in my comments, there's a corporate structure that is dictating the price of the goods when it gets to a store. There's the issue of we are going to sell products for less and less and less, right? We see that advertising, it's driven into our minds every day that a certain retailer will have, or is lowering their prices or "we have the best price" or you can do the price-match. So when you dictate what a jar of jam is, or a cup of coffee, or a dozen doughnuts, or a mattress, if you dictate the price before you start any production, everything else has to fit around that, including the speed of the lines in a meat-plant, the amount of production that has to be done in the meat-plant. And the competition that we have from products that come in from other countries. And all of that is based on you know, we start this process from what can we sell the product for? How cheaply can we sell this product for? And then everything else has to build around it?

Well, let's look at it. Corporations or retailers or business people, don't have the ability to judge or to dictate what my power price is. I don't have the ability to dictate what the price of gasoline is to get the product to my store. I don't have the ability, you know, to dictate what my taxes are going to be, although, you know, they have a lot of influence in a lot of those areas. So where do I have control over this situation? I don't have control of the concrete that it costs to build my warehouse. So where, you know, where can the pressure points be? Well, it's in efficiency, how fast can we drive the assembly lines? And what are the benefits we're going to provide to workers? What at this disposable area, what can we do? So, these have long been workers that we've looked past. They're industries that we've looked past. When you go into a grocery store, or

retail store, or often a person who's cleaning your hotel room, you look past those people, you don't say, wow, I wonder what that job is like? Is it a tough job? Is not a tough job? I wonder what they get paid? You know, we do that about other industries, whether it's professional industry, or you know, some professional's a crane operator, we think, "well, those must be relatively good jobs." But we don't do that in these jobs. And what COVID has exposed is, wow, you know, we've not treated these people very well. They're almost invisible people. But they're the people that we are relying on now to get us through this.

If we didn't have people that were producing food. If we didn't have people that went to the grocery stores, when everyone else was told to stay home - send one person to the grocery store. You go to the grocery store, well, there was lots of people in there. Maybe their family was in there. Maybe their family's going in there at night. But everybody else had the luxury to stay home. And I shouldn't say luxury, that's probably too cavalier of a word. But a lot of industries had the ability to stay home. So they quickly became heroes. You know, everyone celebrated.

**RESH:** Banging pots..

**PAUL:** ..Banging pots, and so on and so forth. And the reality is that most of them feel like they've become heroes to zeros in a very short period of time.

**RESH:** So we didn't move very far beyond pot-banging to good protective policies for these folks. I mean, we call them essential, but it doesn't seem to be in the sense of being valued workers. And, John, do you want to add in here?

**JOHN:** Well, I mean, I think the one word response to the question of why this has happened is *profits*. I mean, that's essentially the reality. That it's sometimes been regarded as hyperbole to say that the corporate profits are worth more than human life. But I think this pandemic and the experience of the pandemic has actually demonstrated that very, very, very starkly. And the fact that you now have so many people who are termed "essential workers" who are showing up in the emergency departments, showing up sick with COVID, reflects the fact that there has been a readiness to abandon people. A readiness to, if you'd like, sacrifice people. And that really is what is unfolding.

We've watched these waves of this pandemic hit. And we've seen the relatively few places where a strategy of elimination has been pursued, we've seen that work much better. What we've seen in most places, is a mitigation strategy that has been based on too little, too late. And so what happens is, the level of the crisis, of the public health crisis, reaches the point where reluctantly they recognize that they must do something now. And so there's a partial shutdown. It's an inadequate shutdown, and it's removed too soon. And then you have people put at risk and you have lives lost. And the real irony of the thing is that it's a strategy that fails on its own terms. It's clear that trying to continue to run in the face of this pandemic and ignore the health crisis, only creates

more economic dislocation down the road. But that speaks something about how the society is run, and it speaks about the kind of society we live in.

I mean, we're dealing now with a third wave in Ontario that has reached absolute crisis proportions. We've seen them taken to the verge of having to introduce a triage system, where they will literally be deciding who lives and who dies. And already, as the cases start to come down a bit, you get the sense that they're only too ready to start lifting off the restrictions, again too soon, putting more people at risk. Even greater numbers of essential workers at risk. Even more poor and racialized communities at risk. And lay the conditions for a fourth wave. And I think that really for our movements really poses for us the question of how we have to intervene in such a situation.

The United Nations Diversity Panel tells us that we now live in the “era of pandemics”. It's part of the reality of the situation we're in. And we can't allow these public health crises to be dealt with in this way. We can't allow people to be abandoned in this way. So I think there's some very, very stark lessons to draw.

**RESH:** And as you say though, we don't seem to be really learning these lessons. I mean, just in this year, we have engaged in more of a reactive approach rather than proactive. As you said, locking down and then opening up and then locking down and then opening up. And this is really, again, impacting those prioritized communities. Because Paul, what you were talking about, you have many precarious workers who could be sharing housing together, and many of those are within the same communities. So we are really seeing a ramping up between those already at risk communities.

One of the phrases and steady rotation throughout this pandemic is that it has “lifted the veil” on the fault lines, even failures, that have existed within our society long before this pandemic. So, what has this time revealed about our economic system? And John, I just wonder if you could just continue on to that? What does this tell you about where we were before this?

**JOHN:** Well I mean, the pandemic is really a crisis, I think, within capitalism. And it's been engendered by the system. The very fact that we have this pandemic is caused, and you don't have to go to sort of radical researchers and theorists here, you can look at the sort of mainstream United Nations kind of research that's being done. Clearly, the loss of habitat, the pushing of the boundaries, in terms of agriculture, the factory farming kind of agricultural pursuits, have created the conditions for this kind of pandemic threat. And as the pandemic threat, as the pandemic is unleashed in the neoliberal world, the virus literally followed the trail that was laid down for it by the whole neoliberal reordering of the workforce and the neoliberal reordering of societies – So, that you have precarious workers working in workplace settings, and under conditions where they face enormous risk. You have them living in overcrowded housing, in densely packed communities. You have transit systems that they must use that are inadequate and overcrowded. You have a public healthcare system that is in crisis and overloaded

before the pandemic even hits. So in a thousand ways, the neoliberal society and the neoliberal city created a route for the pandemic to go down.

And we have not, I say, we, they, I should perhaps more accurately say, they have not responded in a way that was rational, just or credible or sustainable. And that is, I think, the lesson that we have to draw is that you have to realize that we're living in a world that's unfortunately run by people like Doug Ford. And we can't expect them to behave rationally or fairly, or to be just, or to put human lives and human needs above profits. We have to organize to confront and deal with such a reality.

**RESH:** So again, we come to this topic of neoliberalism. And just to go back and provide a quick definition - The basic ingredients of neoliberalism is privatization, deregulation, cuts to existing social welfare, all in favor of, as you said, John, prioritizing profit over people within this global economy. So free trade, global economy. And we've been going through this for what, four or five decades, I think it is now? So Paul, how has neoliberalism impacted unions? Impacted the job sector?

**PAUL:** What it has done is you know, to sum up the description you've given of neoliberal, it is a path forward to create an unfettered, unbarriered, capital market system. Nothing should get in the way of the producing of economic wealth. And obviously, that goes to a certain group of people.

And if I could just go back for a minute, because I think it's a very important part about, when we talked about governments and Doug Ford and Jason Kenney reacting to things; that was reactive.

I would almost argue that it wasn't reactive. I would almost argue that these were intentional decisions to make sure that the economy kept chugging along, that money kept making, and we let that glass get to the point where it just about overflowed, then we turned off the tap for a while. Get a bit more breathing room. Let it let everything get rolling again. And then, well the glass is getting a bit full. And I think what happened is they miscalculated and the glass continues to overflow. But I don't think it was reactive. I think there was some calculation there. And I think we're seeing the fallout of it in Ontario and Alberta now. And turning off that tap is getting more and more difficult.

But it is, you know, as we say, like the free trade deals, all of them, even the most recent one, NAFTA Two, they had measures of discussions around labor issues. But they were not serious discussions about the repercussions of what happens to workers in these industries. And we've established ourselves, as you said, as, let's reduce taxes, which, you know, what does that do? It reduces the services available to people who need them the most.

And again, go back to the comments I made earlier, is that there's a capital structure in place. There are franchise operations who determine what the price of a dozen doughnuts, or a large pizza, or a can of beans is going to be, and everything else has to fit with that because that can of beans can come from a different country at this price, so

we have to make it fit. And then we have to compete in our own country, so I have to do a little bit better on price than the next guy beside me. So we're basing it on the price of a can of beans. What can we sell the can of beans for? Not, what does it cost to produce that can of beans so that the farmers are getting the appropriate due? The people working in food processing are being paid appropriately? And people in the retail? That's not the system? The system is how cheaply can we sell and manufacturer that can of beans, and then everything else has to fit in that package? I think that's a reverse from what things were before. We see it expended so much through COVID. It happened, you know, it was happening before, but as you said, it was exposed; the veil is lifted.

Have a look at the Canadian housing economy right now. It is hot! Houses, you know, that our average price of housing is \$617,000 in Canada. Well, there aren't a lot of people working in food manufacturing or long term care homes that are buying that \$617,000 house. It is a system that has been well designed to do it. It now has no borders to stop that process. And we continue to welcome that system. We continue to open it up. We continue to watch on TV that, you know, "we're lowering our prices! We're lowering our prices!" Well, you know, there are a group of people that no matter how far you lower those prices, they're not going to be able to purchase it.

We've seen it with Walmart two years ago where they had food collection hampers in their own stores to provide Christmas dinners for their own people. What does that tell you about the philosophy or the mindset of these organizations that don't even see how bad that is, that you're assisting workers in your own employ to help them bring food so their other co workers will have a Christmas dinner? It's become acceptable. And it was acceptable before. It's become more acceptable.

There is no understanding of what a lot of these workers are going through. We look at the three days of sick days, the sick pay in Ontario. It's not going to cover anywhere near what a person needs. It will continue to add to the pandemic. The federal government, when they put in their sick days, for people who contracted COVID - Well, when you were feeling sick, you didn't get the pay. Then you got tested, you still didn't get the pay. You didn't get the pay until you tested positive. So, that could be five or six days. They don't have the ability to go five or six days, so they go to work. But if they don't go to work, they don't have money. No one's going to help on that end. And if they go to work, others or their families contract this situation differently.

Our Union alone has had thousands, thousands of workers who have been impacted by COVID. We suspect there are more, but we know of at least eight of our members have passed away in retail stores and in meat- processing plants, because of this lack of assistance. Because of the process that we're putting in place.

I think the other remarkable thing here that the public needs to realize that goes well beyond the people that I'm talking about, and John is talking about, is that we need to stop and take a very serious look here. In the time of Canada's most, and most recently

difficult time, the world's most difficult time, we found the money to house homeless peoples in hotels. We found the money to pay for people who couldn't go to work, I'm not saying that this was all satisfactory. We found the money to bail out companies and make sure food processing companies continue to work and can receive money. We found the money to keep small businesses going. And I'm not being critical of a lot of these things. But this was at a worst time in Canada's you know, recent history, the world's recent history. And if COVID was to vanish tomorrow, and as John said, these things are not going to vanish. But if it was to vanish tomorrow, all of those taps will be turned off. And we'll, you know, we'll continue on.

But we're hearing when economics boom, the stock market is going mad, those taps will all get turned off. And people should be able to *pull themselves up by their bootstraps*. And you know, *we're gonna have to cut social assistance and we're going to have to cut taxes* which will impact. They've proven two things at the same time. They've proven we have the capacity. We have the political will if we choose to make good things happen. And they've proven at the same time, we're not really too worried about making good things happen. Because when we can turn around this corner, we'll go back to normal.

**RESH:** Right. And so going back to the same old normal that seemingly led us into this disaster in the first place. But we're hearing that, you know, this doesn't necessarily have to be the way because this could also be a portal to something better. So I just want to move on to that.

So okay, now we know what's happening, right. We also know, as you said, that we are likely heading towards one of the steepest global economic recessions we've seen in perhaps the last 100 years, perhaps more. The fear, as you said, that this will only ramp up the inequality already exacerbated by this pandemic, leaving the vulnerable even more in the lurch.

One of the arguments that we're hearing, though, in order to go beyond these brief contingency measures, is about having a universal basic income, or UBI, which is an idea that has really gained a lot of traction recently from social justice groups to political parties, is also getting a lot of corporate endorsement too. And John, I want to ask, what is your perspective on the UBI?

**JOHN:** I'm part of a, I think, a grouping on the Left, on the political Left, who takes a position of opposition to basic income as a progressive strategy. I think the notion that Milton Friedman had of basic income is likely to trump if it's implemented.

I fully understand that at this particular time of hardship and uncertainty, how readily people are drawn to the idea of a universal basic, adequate payment. But I think if you look at the realities of how income support systems work in this society, they've been provided always as a kind of a reluctant concession that provides just enough to stave off social dislocation and unrest. But the desire has always been to ensure that it be inadequate enough that the supply of people in the lowest paying job is still available.

And so, I don't think that if a basic income system were introduced, it would overcome that.

During the neoliberal years, unemployment insurance, social assistance programs have been degraded, so as to drive people into the lowest paying jobs on offer. And those forces that have argued for that, and been able to win that to a huge degree, would still be attacking the idea of adequacy if basic income were introduced.

But the big problem, I think, with basic income, is that it takes us further in the direction of the commodification of social provision. So that the right wing theoreticians of basic income like, Charles Murray in the United States, stress that the whole idea of basic income must be that it must not augment existing systems of social provision, it must replace them. So that once you receive your basic income payment, all of the public services that you normally accessed, you now shop for in the private market. That's the direction it takes us in.

And also as well, finally, I think it provides in effect, a subsidy to employers. You now extend the cash payment, so that it covers part of the wages of low paid workers. And I think that really sets an enormously unfortunate direction for us.

I think we'd be much better off to put our efforts into struggling for decent wages, increased levels of unionization. We'd be much better off fighting for reduced hours of work and better conditions for low wage workers. And as well, to put our efforts into struggling for huge improvements in public services, including and especially social housing.

**RESH:** To be fair, though, the UBI can mean a lot of things. The UBI envisioned by those on the Right, which is to supplant our social welfare system, is probably different from the UBI that is being championed by those who are more progressive on the Left. So what about those who are saying - no, it would be part of a more wrap-around social welfare state?

**JOHN:** Well, I think the point about it is that there is no question that people putting forward the idea of a progressive basic income, do so with immense sincerity and absolutely, they're not looking for the same things as Charles Murray. But unfortunately, they don't get to pick and choose.

I would suggest that basic income has a logic of its own. And I would suggest that the thinking of the Canadian Chamber of Commerce, which is very big on basic income, or Elon Musk, is much more likely to have resonance and much more likely to influence the thing that is set up, than the progressive wishes and hopes of Left supporters of a basic income. So I think strategically, it's a mistaken direction. That's my opinion.

**RESH:** So what I'm getting is that we have to understand the context, and we are within a neoliberal context. And neoliberalism will not deliberately create policies that help to undermine the profit motive of neoliberalism.

**JOHN:** I think that's absolutely the case.

**RESH:** Okay, fair enough. So, Paul, during this pandemic, we have seen a greater awareness, and more expressed concern over the importance of essential workers and the conditions and risks that they face. Is this a moment that can strengthen support for workers rights and unions, because they've really been taking quite a hit within the last 40 years of neoliberalism? Do you see this moment as more galvanizing, or even rejuvenating, of the public spirit around unions?

**PAUL:** We certainly do. We have experienced it. Our union, and I know the other unions that I'm working very closely with, have experienced it. That the awareness of unions; the acknowledgement of what unions can provide during these times, is front and center. I can tell you that we had a year that organized more workers, than we have in recent years, during this pandemic. And part of that, I'll speak for my union, but certainly many unions are here, in the same areas that, you know, early on in the pandemic because of our international connections, we were able to establish protocols for retail stores and food processing stores - Safety protocols, that some countries already had in place because they were going through the pandemic before we were, before we acknowledged it. And we had them implemented in union stores almost consistently across our facilities. Other stores went to catch up. Other retailers went to catch up. Some didn't implement. Some did. But what it established was a sense that, if you were in a workplace that was unionized, whether it was our union or other unions representing their workplaces, you were better off. You simply had protection. We had the ability of people not to go to work during the beginning of the pandemic, so they could arrange childcare, and arrange all of these issues. They didn't suffer a loss from their employers.

So, there is a resurgence. There is no doubt about it. We've done some preliminary polling and asking people. For example, now that you understand what retail workers go through, food processing workers and other essential workers are going through What would be your opinion if you had to pay two or three cents more for a product to enhance the job stability and income of workers in these industries? And it was just over 90% of people saying, that's appropriate. That's what we should be doing. So there is a real awareness. But again, there are some superficial things, like the Ontario sick days, that make it look like wow, now workers are going to get something. It's not enough, but it's a start. But they're still you know, it took us hopefully, near the end of that pandemic, to implement these things that should have been a no-brainer, right from the get-go.

I think there's a social movement out there. We sincerely hope that as a society, that the cashiers and frontline grocery store workers and meat cutters and bakers that we represent, are no longer looked past, when you go to the grocery store. This is an important part of it. And there is the opportunity to have a resurgence and having people recognized for the work they do - Understanding that the value that unions have played, and the role they've played. I can tell you that we've had more consultations with

provincial and federal governments in this past year than we've probably had in the last 20 years. And they are listening to unions.

One of the issues that has been brought up is that, you know, we're not manufacturing our own our own vaccines. And why isn't it? It was previous government's policies that closed our facilities, that fired researchers, that fired scientists. So you know, the unions that represent these workers too are front and center saying, like, *we didn't have to be here*. We're hopeful that society starts listening to these issues and seeing what's happening.

And if I could just make a comment too on the basic income. The concept of itself that we can lift people out of poverty is a great idea. But I agree with John. I mean, depending on the context that we're doing this in, during a time when dividends to shareholders and stock prices are going through the roof and profits for these companies are skyrocketing, skyrocketing, one of our most difficult times. And the same corporations asked for tax cuts, or not paying tax at all in certain areas, are supportive of a basic income, ought to tell us that maybe there's something else at play here. It ought to tell us that maybe there's a way that this doesn't have to be done through the public purse. And what is the longevity of this? When, we have the same corporations that are backing it, and thinking it's a good idea - some are, some aren't - asking for reduced taxes.

Where are we four years from now, when we see the attack on EI all the time, we see the attack on workers compensation, we see the restrictions put on abilities for people to get disability or to get on Employment Insurance. We see that people who are on social assistance benefits are constantly under attack for perceived abuses of this situation. Well, how long is it after we get a guaranteed basic income in place, that the same doesn't apply because we don't want to pay any more taxes?

I think that it is a necessity for a basic income. I think that that exists; the necessity exists. I believe the context and how its implemented and how corporations have their responsibility to that basic income, is going to be the huge deciding factor whether it is a good program for the general public, or whether it's another extension of corporate relief, so that we can drive down minimum wage even further because we have this basic income on the other side. So, you know we hear corporations going off all the time. When a provincial government reluctantly raises a minimum wage, all we hear from the Chamber of Commerce and corporations is, *job killer! Job killer! Job killer! Companies are going out of business*. It's never proven to be true. As a matter of fact, there was an experiment in Alberta proved exactly the opposite. But that's not what they say. If we want for another 10 cents in one province tomorrow, watch the headlines: *Job killer! Job killer! Job killer! Oh, by the way, can we have a basic income?*

**RESH:** Which would effectively, and as both you and John have said, which would sort of create another negative market externality where business, would be able to externalize its wage obligations onto the public purse. So for instance, I as a taxpayer

will be subsidizing big business, which would then allow them to decrease their overhead and thereby increase their bottom line. Have I got that, right.

**PAUL:** I agree. 100%.

**RESH:** Okay. So on the other side of this, and what you just brought up, is that this pandemic, it's not bad for everybody. It's actually been sort of a golden age for the rich, for business, particularly the super rich, for billionaires. We're hearing that they're, yeah, their collective profits have just skyrocketed, unbelievably. So again, this is the other part to this massive inequality that we see. John, do you think that the post-pandemic world can also be a post-poverty world? Is there that possibility that exists?

**JOHN:** Well, I think I think the possibility exists. I have to say that I'm dubious. I mean, the Biden administration is sort of leading the charge in this regard. I'm dubious that we are on the cusp of a sort of a golden age that's going to be handed down from on high. I think that the post pandemic reality is going to be one in which levels of inequality, and you just alluded to it, have been driven up enormously. There's going to be a vast, as the International Monetary Fund describes it, economic scarring that takes place. It'll be very, very major in countries like Canada, but in the poor countries of the Earth, it's going to be absolutely, it's going to be absolutely devastating. And I think we're in a period really of crisis. And in a crisis, the question is always, who's going to pay for the crisis? And I think the readiness to impose it on the backs of poor communities, of working class people, is going to be a defining feature of the period ahead.

But on the other hand, I'm in agreement with the comments that Paul made about possibilities for trade unions in the period ahead. I think there is an enormous mood that exists in society at the moment - That people don't want to go back to the way it was before. I think there's a real basis to change things. And during the pandemic we've seen incredible social mobilizations take place.

I mean last year, the Black Lives Matter mobilization, following the killing of George Floyd in Minneapolis, was enormous. Over in the UK at the moment, the Kill The Bill, mobilization against the attempt to rein in protests rights, has been really inspiring. Colombia at the moment, people are rising up, workers and communities, are rising up against the situation there. And we look at the Indian Farmers Movement. I mean, I think this is a time of incredible possibilities. I saw a poll, close to the beginning of the pandemic, put out by ECOS, in which 70% of people in Canada were responding that they believe that fundamental changes were needed in Canadian society.

I think that mood is there. I don't think we need to be pessimistic. And I don't think we need to be conservative in our approach. I think radical ideas for change are going to resonate, probably as we've never seen them resonate before in our lives. So I think the post pandemic reality is as yet undecided - Potentially very harsh, but with incredible possibilities. And I think it is a time for great hope, great optimism and great boldness, and I think we need to seize it.

**RESH:** I'm hearing this too and I think all of us are. That for the first time we're hearing in mainstream discussions, people talking about systemic racism, about generational poverty, about "She-Session" and what's happening with women within work and needing to have, you know, women's work in the domestic sphere recognized as income work. These were always discussions that were sort of happening in just the more progressive spaces, but suddenly have become mainstream. So there is that appetite that's out there.

Just in our last couple of minutes. I'm going to ask you both - We have this incredible surge, or convergence, as we said from the beginning, of capitalism, COVID, and of course, the climate crisis. And it can seem so big. Each one of them are big on their own. When you put it together, it is just enormous. What is one crucial step that you can each speak to now, that we need to take, that workers need to take, that communities need to take, in which we can really strive for economic justice in the post pandemic, which could also be pre-pandemic normal? Paul, I want to start with you,

**PAUL:** Well Resh, I think the approach that our union is taking in this regard is that we are working very hard to keep the like-minded coalitions, very much in the public eye, to not forget the value of these jobs. To not forget, when we're able to all hang around our families and hug them again, the difficulties that are gone through, and there's a group of society that can then go back to being looked past. It is important that we affect all of these changes through political action.

It would be a horrible opportunity missed if Canadians do not look across this country, when everything is said and done, and view the leaders that we had in the aspect of how they treated their own citizens. Did we look past all the people in long term care that passed away and didn't pay any attention to the members? We banged on pots and pans for nurses and doctors and grocery store workers. And that momentum is there. We know one thing that has to be done is that it cannot be forgotten. We cannot let it pass us. And that we have to stay ever-vigilant. And for us that means our political action, as well as keeping and building coalitions that maybe, pre-pandemic, we never thought would be of value to maybe the organization, or society as a whole.

So, you know simply put, we have to be bold. We have to be courageous. And we cannot let any of these things that have occurred to us slip through our fingers and not remember them. They must be pursued and pushed forward and remembered and continued to build on.

**RESH:** Absolutely, absolutely. And John, what is, you know, one crucial step we need to undertake here?

**JOHN:** I think the crucial step is to begin to give some organizational form to exactly the mood that I was talking about.

I mean, during the pandemic, we have seen incredible upsurges of what I think I could describe as social resistance taking place. But the system is very good at containing

those things through a combination of concession and repression. And at the moment, there is, we take the situation of evictions taking place in the city of Toronto. People are resisting and people are fighting. People are agitating around paid sick days. There's all these issues that are being put forward, Workers are organizing in various ways. But I think we've got to find a way to bring it together. To give it organized form. Not just establishing some organization with a nameplate - But taking that organization into the workplaces and communities in a much deeper way than we've done before. So I think we need to start thinking in terms of, at the local level and at the higher levels, bringing together all those people who have grievances and issues and demands to put forward. People from communities under attack, trade unions, bringing those things together and hammering out a really comprehensive set of demands for what we need in the period ahead, and a plan of action to fight for them. I think we have to.

We're in a period of great danger and a period of great opportunity. And the question is that we can't just leave it to, we can't just leave it to chance. We have to start consciously organizing to advance a progressive set of demands and a plan of action.

**RESH:** Solidarity, political action, finding our power, and our compassion. Thank you to the both of you. Thank you, Paul. And thank you, John. It's been a pleasure.

**JOHN:** Thank you so much.

**PAUL:** Thanks so much. It's been my pleasure.

**RESH:** That was Paul Meinema, National President of UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers) Canada, and John Clarke, anti-poverty activist and former organizer with the Ontario Coalition Against Poverty.

Please join us for our next episode, *Sustainable Food and Zero Hunger: The Future and the Right to Eat* with anti-Poverty activist, federal NDP candidate and Executive Director of FoodShare Toronto, Paul Taylor.

I'm Resh Budhu, host of today's episode of the *Courage My Friends* podcast. Thanks for listening.

**COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER:** You've been listening to the *Courage My Friends* podcast, a co-production between rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute (at George Brown College) with the support of the Douglas-Coldwell Foundation. Produced by Victoria Fenner of rabble.ca and Resh Budhu of the Tommy Douglas Institute. With planning committee Ashley Booth, Chandra Budhu, John Caffery and Michael Long. For more information about the Tommy Douglas Institute and this series, please visit [georgebrown.ca/TommyDouglasInstitute](http://georgebrown.ca/TommyDouglasInstitute). Please join us next week for another episode of the *Courage My Friends* podcast on rabble.ca