

**Courage My Friends Podcast Series VIII – Episode 6**  
**Labour Fair 2025: The Critical Need for Labour Education**

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**ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to *Needs No Introduction*.

*Needs No Introduction* is a rabble podcast network show that serves up a series of speeches, interviews and lectures from the finest minds of our time

**RESH:** In an increasingly unpredictable world of corporate driven inequality and the pitting of worker against worker, climate breakdown and billionaire colonialism, post pandemic inflation, AI and techno feudalism... What are we working for? Our communities? The corporations?... the Cloud?

Where jobs are more precarious, less supportive, and steadily inhuman, as well as inhumane and occupations are more about the search for jobs rather than the job itself... where comfortable retirement is as much a pipe dream for more of our seniors, as secure employment is for more of our young... What are we working for? To live or just to work?

However, where our work should not only guarantee us a stable and decent standard of living, but help us forge a sense of purpose and identity for ourselves and within our communities, and where our income should never come at the cost of our integrity, but our labour brings us together in union, solidarity and power... What are we working for when it comes to the security and dignity of our workers, our humanity, and our planet?

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**COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER:** Welcome back to this podcast series by rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College.

In the words of the great Tommy Douglas...

**TOMMY (Actor):** Courage my friends, 'tis not too late to build a better world

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

**RESH:** Welcome to The Courage My Friends podcast, episode six, *Labour Fair 2025: The Critical Need for Labour Education*.

I'm your host Resh Budhu.

In episode six, we focus on the 33rd annual Labour Fair at George Brown College in Toronto. Under this year's theme, *What Are We Working For?* JP Hornick, President of OPSEU/SEFPO, the Ontario Public Service Employees Union, joins us for the fair's opening discussion on the critical need for labour education, labour organizing amid the changing nature of work and the crisis facing Ontario colleges.

Here now is my discussion with JP Hornick, beginning with an introduction by Labour Fair coordinator Ben McCarthy.

**BEN:** Hello everyone. The School of Labour and the Tommy Douglas Institute are pleased to welcome you all. This is the first event of the 33rd annual Labour Fair.

The School of Labour have been putting on the Labour Fair since 1992 and we've been inviting unionists and activists and artists and academics and knowledge holders into the school to talk about the pressing labour issues, worker issues and social justice issues that concerns students and the broader community.

As a Labour Fair committee, as engaged democratic citizens we've been witnessing this rightward creep of our corporations and our government and our institutions. Institutions to which we all belong. We feel this year, as we have felt in years past that it's really important to have nuanced conversations about this transition.

This year's theme is, *What Are We Working For?* In a humorous sense, but we also mean it in a serious sense. So we invite you as you're listening today to think through this question of what it is we're working for in terms of the security and dignity of our workers and our humanity and our planet.

**RESH:** Thanks Ben. I'm Resh Budhu and it is my great pleasure to introduce our guest for the Labour Fair's opening discussion on the critical need for labour education in these times, JP Hornick. JP is President of OPSEU/SEFPO, Ontario's Public Service Employees Union, one of Canada's largest provincial public sector unions, representing more than 180,000 members working in many areas, including government, healthcare, community agencies, the LCBO, and of course, our colleges. This is our union.

JP comes from a strong background in the mobilization of working people and has been with OPSEU/SEFPO for over 20 years. JP is also a labour educator and was faculty in and coordinator of the School of Labour right here at George Brown College, where they were also our faculty union steward and led the annual Labour Fair for a number of years.

So JP welcome. It's great to have you back with us.

**JP:** It feels like old home week. I'm looking at the participants list and it feels very good to be in this space with you Resh. So I really appreciate you having me in.

**RESH:** Lovely. So just to really start at the basics. How would you define labour education and how critical is it to post-secondary education and learners?

**JP:** I think labour education is very simply put, any time that you are engaged with workers, with working people about their working conditions, about trying to draw folks into a conversation about why those conditions exist in the way that they do, and what are the ways in which we can challenge and improve them and build

solidarity. Anytime you're in that kind of conversation, you're in a form of labour education. You know, whether it's talking to your kid about like what's happening at their job, to talking to your coworker about what's happening in that space, to a more formal setting like we see in the colleges and the evolution of the School of Labour.

The School of Labour at George Brown, which has been in place since the early 1990s, actually grew out of more traditional education with workers. It was part of a response to structural adjustments that were happening, downsizing that was occurring in manufacturing centers and education that was happening in those spaces.

Folks developing English language skills, job skills, resume skills, like learning to adapt to a changing labour market and doing some of that traditional education.

And what it's evolved into is a series of courses that are offered in general education and things like that, and also in partnership with Brock University.

But I think that there are a number of avenues that labour education has taken over the decades. And at its heart, it should be a popular education that meets workers where they are and understands that education is a two-way street. That just because you're in a college or a post-secondary environment, doesn't mean that it is the kind of sage on the stage approach, but rather, what the community colleges have historically been quite good at, which is responsiveness to community needs. So that workers have as much to offer and bring into a post-secondary setting as a post-secondary setting has to offer workers.

So moving away from a kind of credentialism approach into a recognition of mutual knowledge bases

**RESH:** Now where the central objective of post-secondary education, colleges and universities is graduating students into jobs across all sectors. I mean, this is the future working population.

Do we have enough labour education happening in post-secondary institutions. I see you're beginning to answer that question, so do we have enough? If not, how should colleges and universities integrate and or strengthen or foster labour education? So do we, and if not, then what should we be doing?

**JP:** I think the obvious answer is no. And anytime you see pressures upon funding models in post-secondary, you see pressure immediately brought to bear on progressive spaces that are not traditional, that are not seen as classic money- or profit-generating centers, such as the School of Labour or the Assaulted Women and Children Counselor Advocate Program or Community Worker, places like that. They're the places that are always under siege. The minute that there are questions of you know, do we have enough money to provide this?

And to me, the lack of labour education spaces within the post-secondary system is reflective to a large degree of what kind of values we have in this particular moment within academe.

As post-secondary becomes more focused on credentialism, strictly labour market responses I would argue quite frankly my friend, that we see that pressure going all the way down to the K through 12 structures where kids are, you know, what is your career goal? What is your career objective? As early as kindergarten, children are being asked this as if like, you didn't act any kindergartners, they'd be like, what do I wanna be when I grow up? Spider-Man!

We don't value as much curiosity as a basis for education, right? And we don't value as much right now that notion that not all of us know what our career trajectories are or where we exactly fit within that economic landscape. And the importance of labour education, I would argue why we need these spaces. Why we need spaces like, community worker, AWCCA in the case of George Brown... These are the spaces where we learn how to organize, where we learn how to build community, where there are direct investments in a care economy that pays off over decades rather than an immediate labour market response.

So in other words, it provides the critical analysis that people need to understand why there are inequities in society. Why systems of oppression such as racism, ableism, sexism, ageism, homophobia and transphobia, the things that are being used right now in this moment to try and divide workers from one another, the things that are being fostered as the, you know, source of all of the problems in the world - this attack on "wokeness" - programs like these, spaces like the School of Labour or labour education are where we actually start to have conversations with workers about why we're not one another's enemies. Right?

I think about a lot right now, the quote from Angela Davis, "If they come for me in the morning, then they will come for you in the night".

And I think that that is exactly the moment that we're in right now, in North America certainly, but more broadly across the world. We're seeing people turned on one another for what are perceived differences when at its root we are in the midst of a class war. Right? We are well along the way to fascism.

And I wouldn't say that it's gonna stop at the border. It's not just the United States, it's certainly present here in Canada. We saw it right after Trump's election up here. There was a demonstration in Hamilton around "mass deportations now". We see it in the knee-jerk reaction that the Liberal government made around immigrant students, like new students in Canada, right? Where they're trying to limit the number of students who are coming internationally at the same time that we've spent the past 20 years incentivizing the colleges to up those numbers to make up for the funding shortfall.

Without labour education, we don't have the ability to teach students that it hasn't always been like this. That it shouldn't be like this. And that they are not the enemy.

The problem are the structures that have created a system that perpetuates inequality, not the individuals who are impacted by that inequality. And that is why I think labour education is more key now than ever. But I also think there's no mistake about why it's one of the first things cut.

What governments like Conservative governments don't want is an overeducated underclass.

If we understand why we face the problems we do as workers, then it is a lot easier for us to build the solidarity we need to overthrow the powers that are the actual problem.

**RESH:** And one of those powers did say quite famously that he adores the uneducated or the less educated as well right. So very much the critical lens is provided through labour education to learners. How can these institutions integrate more labour education and perhaps more stakeholders, more valuable stakeholders when it comes to building solidarity within colleges and universities.

**JP:** I mean, I think one of the things that colleges do better than just about anyone is that you know, our whole origin story or as the kids today now call "our lore", is to be in community, to be accessible and affordable education, post-secondary education for folks in those communities and to be actually educating the workers that are gonna be the foundation for every single piece of the economy in Ontario and in Canada. Like we're everything from, skilled trades to community work, to healthcare, to dental, to mental health, to education, you name it, it starts here in the colleges. Part of that education needs to be for folks to understand what it means to be a worker in that economy.

And so when we look at funding models in education that pit programs against one another, as you know, is this profitable? Is this something that we can earn money on? If we look at programs as in competition with each other rather than part of a landscape, then the programs we're automatically gonna lose are things like the arts, are things like ASL interpretation and Deaf and Deaf Blind Studies. These are cost intensive programs by necessity.

We look at the Preparatory programs. These are about making sure that students have the ability to access education. They're actually at the heart of what we do as a college. The School of Labour, Community Service, these are the things that train people into how to be good citizens. What to expect from a society. How to be a good member of a society. Being productive is more than just your paycheck.

So I think we need to really get back to the basics in college education, community college education in Ontario certainly. Remind ourselves that we need to band together across the 24 colleges and argue for funding, right?

Our problem is not, you know, Georgian versus George Brown versus Algonquin versus Northern; our problem is that we have been chronically underfunded as a system for decades. And the Ford government has accelerated that. So we need to

figure out the ways in which we can encourage our students to work together to push for what they deserve from the government. But in order to do that, they need to understand that they deserve more and that more is there.

**RESH:** And the colleges need to provide a model for that by working together to advocate for these programs, these students. And you know, it's interesting because what we see happening in the colleges right now, the colleges as you've referred to, we're in a crisis.

But what we see again is when it comes to those budgetary decisions, it's those very human centered sectors within the wider society that are cut first. It's the soft sectors and we see that in the colleges as well. Do you wanna say a bit more about this current crisis that the colleges are facing.

**JP:** Yeah, I mean we can all point to the fact that the federal government's, what I've been terming as a knee-jerk reaction to, I think the Conservative pressures to say immigrants are the problem, international students are the problem. That's a load of hooley, right?

Like this notion that housing is impossible to find because of international students really declines to mention the fact that these are folks that bring in like somewhere in the neighborhood of \$10 billion into the Canadian economy every year, and that they lack the supports that they deserve in trying to pursue an education.

The Ford government when they came in froze tuition in the colleges, but then said, you know what, go nuts on recruiting international students and there's no cap on those tuitions. So, simultaneously like we're gonna take all the money outta the system that we can, but we're gonna allow you to pull it in on the backs of folks who are quite marginalized. And we're not actually gonna offer adequate supports or deal with some of the human trafficking issues that have arisen as a result of these.

So when the federal government stepped in and said, we're gonna go along with the Conservative playbook 'cause we wanna get reelected and we're gonna blame, which is a classic trope, we're gonna blame international students, we're gonna blame immigrants. When they laid down the limits on those programs, we met with folks from Mark Miller's office, who was then Minister of Immigration and said, you're gonna tank yourselves in Ontario because you're not creating a gradual slope. You're pushing folks off a cliff.

That policy and the way that it was written would've resulted in 2.3 million deportations over two years. This is over the postgraduate work permit. And beyond that, it didn't take into account, particularly in northern and rural communities, international students on these postgraduate work permits were not just in transportation and STEM and all these things. They were actually in ECE, they were providing mental health services. They were in exactly those soft sectors that you're talking about.

Those sectors on top of that tend to be dominated by women. They tend to be dominated by racialized women in particular. They tend to be lower pay sectors, and they're seen as easy targets as a result.

The Ford government, quite frankly, if you look at history of their policies over the past seven years, is one that is a direct attack on those sectors that are dominated by women.

They love manufacturing, they love construction. And I'm not gonna begrudge those unions or those workers their desire for jobs, but man their kids need education, their families need healthcare. Their communities need exactly those social services supports that are under attack and that are increasingly being privatized. Which means that you are worsening working conditions, you're worsening pay, you're driving people out and creating the same recruitment and retention crisis that you say you can only correct through increased privatization.

It's a vicious cycle. It's a deliberate one. It's nothing new. But we can also talk about what we can do to fight back.

**RESH:** Okay, so do you want to talk about what we can do to fight back? Let's have a moment of hope here. So what are some of the things that we can do to fight back?

What are some of the strategies that's happening in OPSEU that is happening within the labour movement?

**JP:** Oh, I'm super proud of what we're doing, honestly.

We've been organizing workers on the ground. Like one of the major things we're in the midst of right now in OPSEU is what we call our broader public service, includes those folks who work in social service agencies and developmental service agencies. And these are people that tend to be in very, very small workplaces, that did not see a remedy under what was called Bill 124, which was the Ford government legislation that was found unconstitutional twice that cap public service sector wages at 1% for a period that approached five years by the end of it.

So what we are doing with those units is bringing them all together so that they're bargaining together. Even though they have separate tables, tabling common demands around an increase that's equivalent to what we got in the colleges.

We're also tabling broader global demands about the types of working conditions.

What we're doing is trying to leverage money not from the individual agencies, but organizing over about a hundred agencies together to target the government to release the funding that they need. Because the agencies are underfunded as well. And so many of the employers we're finding are standing with us on this. So we're calling it the *Worth Fighting For Campaign*.

What's most exciting about it? Is it's not just our union. We're working together with CUPE, who's our counterpart in Ontario, 99% of the sector is these two unions. And we are building the solidarity we need so that unions are working together for the benefit of all workers versus just their own members. So I'm super proud of that.

In the CAAT, in the colleges, we're seeing support staff, faculty, part-time and full-time support staff, all work starting to come together to discuss how we are going to strategize our approach with a common employer over the next several years. And on top of that, I expect on April 17th that we should have organized after a over 10 year process, close to 16,000 part-time and sessional faculty members into our union.

In the Ontario Public Service, we're doing the same thing. We're pulling people together across those 30,000 members. We see it in our hospital professionals division.

What we are doing is the same thing that is the answer to almost every question that plagues workers. It is organizing. How do you build the solidarity you need?

And I'm gonna say this, relationships are built at the speed of trust. And social change is built at the speed of relationships.

So every conversation, one by one, by one, worker to worker to worker is what will win the day.

There was a time that we thought the Divine Right of Kings could not be overturned. And it was. And it was through people coming together, right? And having these conversations when realizing that we share more than we don't. I often use quotes sometimes just to keep my own head sane, was it Mandela who said, "It always seems impossible until it is done".

And you know what, we're gonna get it done. Because there's no other choice, man.

**RESH:** Well, there's no other choice. And it's about time. I mean, when we're talking about, you know, bringing in the part-time, the precarious workers. I mean, traditionally when we've been talking about labour, we immediately think of organized labour, but we've always had people who have been left out of the union movement.

But in the last couple of years, suddenly the designations are becoming wild, right? So we, we are seeing so many workers who are not unionized. We have gig workers, we have platform workers, casual workers, migrant workers fall all over the place, precarious, non-standard workers. Many of our students right now are part-time casual labor where they're trying to balance so much of this, so many of our faculty as you were pointing out are part-time workers. Could you first of all speak to how the world of work is changing and how unions are continuing to adapt and are they doing enough to adapt to this changing definition of work?

**JP:** Unions will never be doing enough to adapt quickly to the changing world of work. I mean, we're in a pretty reactive space a lot of the time, to be honest. And the rapidity with which these changes are happening, particularly with the unpredictability of the deranged Dorito that is running the country down south is that, you know, it's almost impossible to predict what's gonna happen.

And so the question of how do you develop the skills that you need to be able to react in a given moment, you know, you have to proactively be engaged in organizing on the ground in the grassroots. And that doesn't mean unionized worker to unionized worker if we are not working with unorganized workers in direct concert, then we are undercutting ourselves at all times.

When we're talking about raising the floor, you know, everybody talks about unions raise the floor for all workers. Well, that's only if we make sure that we are being responsive to community needs.

The origin of the labour movement that I love is not the xenophobic labour movement that was like we gotta protect our own and nothing else. It was the International Workers of the World who were the first union in North America to welcome workers regardless of a specific trade, regardless of a particular race, etc.

And they were the ones that were doing things like, well, what workers need is a place to collect their mail. They need a place to shower. They need a place where they can read, where there's speakers. Where there's a place to lay your head.

If unions are not responsive to what is happening in their communities, if we are not responsive and actually lending things like our capital.... you know, we have huge investments in pensions, for example, like billions of dollars between the unions. If we are not engaged in pension activism, we are undercutting ourselves. And we are allowing and participating in a system that is exploiting workers and contributing to global unrest and inequality.

Part of our role is understanding ourselves to be true citizens and global citizens at that, and to be uniting with our unorganized counterparts. So with migrant workers, with gig workers.

You know, the gig economy is just in many respects a modern form of piece-work, like we used to do in the garment industry. It's about ensuring that people don't have enough time to enjoy their lives, but more so to organize.

These are deliberate strategies. Like this idea that you know, everybody's got a side hustle. You don't have a side hustle; what you don't have is a reasonable job. That is actually a sign of a very sick society.

"Flexibility" is often the code word for you don't deserve decent working conditions. But we deserve enough profit to be able to exploit you further. When we look at the conditions we're living in right now, we haven't ever seen income inequality like this,

certainly since before the Great Depression. And we also are dealing with the techno bro oligarchy. And they have perfected the art of exploitation of their workers.

So we need to understand ourselves. And I'm somebody who has a lifelong history of issues-based activism from reproductive justice to 2SLGBTQ stuff.

What I see now, is that class has to be the organizing principle. And we have to understand that only through lenses of intersectionality. And we have to be able to actually, figure out how to have the conversations we need to have.

Right now, we're in conversations as a union with the National Council of Canadian Muslims because we identified pretty quickly that we're going to marches targeting trans folk and the so-called SOGI curriculum in Ontario. And the people that are being targeted to fight against us are, new Canadians primarily. So, we had a very frank conversation about how do I, as a union leader, ensure that my membership, that we are building meaningful bridges and actually offering something back.

I'll spend all day talking to parents who are afraid for their kids. We all are. And we can find that common ground that we build from so that we understand one another much better than we do now.

**JP:** But I gotta tell you, I understand that if they're coming for trans kids over here, they're coming for mosques the next day. We've seen this in Ontario, right? It's been back and forth for many years now. So we need to understand that how do we build that common front we need is I think, the crucial issue before us.

**RESH:** Yeah. And the diversity for many years, whether it's racial diversity, 2SLGBTQ, even working class has not been as central to the labour movement as it should. It's still very much a White-led labour movement. I was having an interview a couple weeks ago where somebody said it's also turned into more of a middle class movement because again, so many people who are in these precarious jobs, the new working class are the people who have largely been left out of the labour movement of organized labour because of these designations. So we need to move towards a more inclusive back to working class roots? Are we in terms of the labour movement?

**JP:** I'm starting to see a shift within the, the labour movement, to be honest, in the leadership level, certainly toward folks who are from more working class backgrounds and certainly who are more interested in organizing than traditional business unionism, is how I would describe that.

There was a move, through I'd say the late nineties up through the oughts and up until about the past few years, to kind of more cozy up to power. That you would get the best deal for workers if you were, you know, in common cause with the employer.

If you were actually begging for table scraps rather than figuring out how to upend the table itself. And who were more interested in leaders making decisions in a top-down model that was closer to a corporate model. And you see that reflected in post-secondary as well. The same kind of structures of you can import business managers, whereas we used to have folks, when I first started in the colleges, you worked your way sort of up. A faculty member, would become a chair, spend some time there, maybe go back to faculty. Some of them would go on to become deans and the president. But now we see a much more managerial class across post-secondary. And the same was true within the labour movement. You saw people that saw themselves as CEOs.

I honestly am starting to see a shift. Certainly in Ontario, a lot more women and gender diverse folk who are in these roles. But honestly, the one common denominator that I think we're seeing, we just saw this in the recent election in the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, is towards an organizing model. Folks who are really interested in fostering worker power on the ground rather than in the president's office kind of thing. And that to me is the key.

When I look back on the past three years, one of the proudest moments in that is the LCBO workers strike that we just had this last summer where... and I just need to say this. Premier Ford could not pull all that bourbon off the shelves if that had been private. So his little stunt about I'm gonna be Captain Canada and protect against American booze on the liquor shelves. Yeah, you can't do that unless it's public. Because you can't tell private industry to pull product off a shelf. On top of that, the LCBO's retail put in \$2.5 billion into the Ontario economy that's directly in education and healthcare and infrastructure.

But those workers, those 9,000 workers, we spent a year mobilizing, right? Like they were in a systematic program of one to one to one conversations and watching that build from day one to the point of strike. And then frankly, the boss didn't believe they would go out. And the Ford government threw the bomb of speeding up the privatization by months and months. Was willing to waste what's gonna turn out to be nearly \$2 billion on speeding up privatization of alcohol in order to thwart that strike.

That response speaks to the power that those workers were able to build on the ground because they became a threat. And they're still a threat. Like, we're not gonna stop as a result of that.

These are folks that are making just above minimum wage for the most part. These are the workers that are organizing now because they see what the alternative is. And that's not a future that any of us wanna live in.

**RESH:** It also reminds me though, of what was happening around the education workers strike as well, where we saw the solidarity between the public sector and private sector unions as well. And again, in the education setting, the lowest paid workers there, really taking on quite the fight, including the invocation of the notwithstanding clause that could have sent them to prison. That was the threat.

Do you find that the labour movement is getting stronger? Because we're seeing many different types of attacks. You talked about the US. We're seeing what's happening to public sector workers there. Are we getting stronger? Are more people gravitating towards organized labour?

**JP:** I do think you see that in North America, particularly in retail sectors where you're seeing an upsurge in places like even Walmart, the Amazon warehouses. We have a couple of unionized Starbucks now through United Steel Workers here in Toronto even. You can go to the United Steelworkers site and it'll show you which ones you should go to because they're unionized.

So we do see, I think, an upsurge of interest in unionized labour, and I think it is because of the ability to build solidarity, just know, you're not alone, right? We are in a particular societal and historical moment of awful chaos and uncertainty, right? And that's a hard thing to live in. And I think one of the things that organized labour does is give a structure to some of that and a shared sense of cause and common purpose. That you're in it with a group of people. That you are experiencing the same thing. That as we used to say as feminists, the personal is political, right? And so I think that there is that interest.

In terms of the strength of labour in this particular moment, I think will be determined by how we are able to maintain those moments of solidarity.

When we think about the education worker strike the OSBCU strike, and I know you're having Laura Walton in who led that effort. The moment that Ford went after basically the principle of being able to go on strike, that is what galvanized the private and public sectors. But in this last election, then we also saw him throw tons of money at private sector unions to try and effectively buy their votes, as he was doing across the board with the \$200 checks and things like that.

So any time you build that kind of groundswell of strength, the follow-up work has to be there to maintain it.

So the question of labour education and organized labour for me is when my education workers, because we represent about another 9,000 education workers, heard about what was happening with the CUPE education workers, I remember being on a meeting with them and they were saying, we wanna make sure we can support those workers.

And I said, okay, well how do you wanna do that? And they're like, well, you know, we wanna support them in their strike. And I said, okay, then get your buy-in from your members and if you wanna go on an illegal strike in support of their illegal strike, we will do that. And so they met and they came back and they said, yep, that's what we wanna do. And we said, okay, we'll make sure there's strike pay, that there's legal supports that you are, you know, as protected as you can be. And it was a really great day.

What was awesome on the day that we went out in support of CUPE and literally we were on an illegal strike, we kept getting calls in what we call the "mob room", the mobilization room. And they're like, I think I'm an education worker. And it would be like somebody who was in the colleges or somebody who... Because people wanted to be part of that show of force. And then when we came together as the private and public sector unions and the press conference to push back against the Ford government's use of the notwithstanding clause, that was a powerful moment.

But I feel like what we could have done in terms of a general strike or taking it that next step further was the piece that's still missing. I think we have a lot of work to do in organized labour, in rebuilding that solidarity now, because the attacks are gonna come fast and furious. They're gonna come for the public service certainly.

And honestly, I want us to be prepared with the labour education we need to do internally so that our members know how to push back. So that workers know that there are alternative visions. It's not a fait accompli how society has to be structured. That what's coming out of the Conservatives mouths is not in your interest. It's not for students, it's not for workers.

And I think we are still in the movement-building phase. And hopefully always will be.

But people don't remember how radical labour used to be.

Right? We're a long way from the Days of Action that all of us with gray hair like to point to as, "see, look at what we did!"

**RESH:** Yeah.

**JP:** And I'm like, yeah, you know what we need to do? We need to pull all the radical activists from before and all the radical activists from now because my God, the kids are organized.

I look at what's happening in Black Lives Matter. I look at what's happening around the SOGI curriculum. I look at what's happening in Indigenous, race, around Palestine. The organizing that is happening on the ground, in the streets is incredible. And we need to bring these generations together so that we build something that is a more beautiful future. And it is gonna mean we need to put our bodies on the line again.

**RESH:** Yeah, absolutely. So how again, can labour education within post-secondary institutions prepare our students now for these trends that are coming? Because they're coming fast.

**JP:** I think we have to make sure that we're engaging our students in those conversations, not just in specific labour-centered classrooms, but in all classrooms.

What students are facing now in post-secondary is an unprecedented onslaught of crises and absolute uncertainty about what the world of work's gonna look like over the next few years, let alone over the span of their working lives.

I think we don't close things like the School of Labour or, you know, blend all of the progressive groups together in the face of cost-cutting measures. I think these are times that we need to stand firm in this college in particular, as a progressive forward- looking center within the college system, right?

I think that we need to create oases for students where they can actually engage in these conversations together. We need to pose the questions that they have interest in. But also we need to listen to what their experiences of work are right now. And we need to figure out how to connect them to one another, to support them. We need to make sure that every conversation we have with students is kind of an organizing conversation where we help them to identify the source of the problem.

One of the things that I often do as an organizer is you go in and you ask somebody, what are the top three issues you face in your workplace right now?

And they'll tell you something along the lines of disrespect, you know, scheduling, things like that.

And then your next question is, well, who's in charge of that?

Well, my boss.

Well, is your boss aware that this is a problem?

Well, yeah. You know, they know, but I mean, they don't have it.

I'm like, well what is it that you think? Why haven't they done something about it? If they know it's not just you and they know it's a problem?

And you start to point to like, okay, and what do you think you could do about it?

Well, I can't do anything about it. I'm just one person.

Well, that's funny 'cause I just talked to your buddy over there and they were telling me the same thing. So why don't we get the three of us together and we start to talk about other people who have this problem and bringing them together.

So you actually move people toward collective action, rather than sitting in their individual anguish. And that's hard, right? It takes people time.

But we do it through reminding us of the humanness in each other and seeing that reflected back.

Not only do you have a problem, but I care about your [00:39:00] problem. And I think together we can start to address it.

**RESH:** Absolutely. Thank you JP.

And now for some questions from the audience, read by myself and Ben McCarthy.

**Resh:** First question. I'm a frontline worker at a non-unionized community agency and since last year my coworkers and I have been trying to unionize our job classification within our agency, working with a really incredible organizer from OPSEU.

But we have had to pause the process since we faced a lot of barriers: toxic management, people having different concepts of having or being part of a union, many being really afraid of the process and possible consequences from management. In your opinion, what would be the most useful and practical ways to educate or inspire those who are not yet seeing the importance of being unionized?

**JP:** Yeah, that's a really awesome, awesome question. And I think one of the things that's always key to remember in terms of unionization efforts is to remind people that the union is a car you drive, it's not a shield, right?

A lot of folks, a lot of workers want to believe the union will come in, take your money and then automatically protect you.

I'm constantly attentive to the fact that every dollar that comes into OPSEU/SEFPO is out of a member's pocket, right? And so unions have a lot of work to do in terms of making sure that members understand that their dues money is actually going back into building worker power on the ground.

And sometimes that's a little bit hard to point to, depending on the union or the kind of work that you're doing.

If you're in a community mental health agency, one of the other things that happens a lot of the time is this notion that union equals strike. Strike means that we're not gonna be able to support our clients or that we're gonna be out of the community.

But like, what I'd said to Resh earlier, about just starting with what are the problems that we're facing at work? If you could change three things about the workplace, what would they be? And just to get people talking about what those things are, then moving them into that sense of you're not alone in it.

And so one of the ways we can address those things is if we stand together. And one of the ways you can stand together is through this process of joining a union. If you want, there's a couple of good books on this. There's No Shortcuts by Jane McAlevey which is all about organizing within your workplace.

There's also labornotes.org and it's spelled the American way, L-A-B-O-R notes.org. And they have a lot of resources on there about how to organize and how to overcome some of those questions.

And you gotta remember that organizing a new workplace, even if it's a smaller one, takes a lot of time. It takes a lot of time and a lot of energy and a lot of repeat conversations.

Chris Smalls, the guy that organized the Amazon Labor Union, for example, talked about standing at the bus stops that the workers for the Amazon warehouse in Staten Island used in order to get back and forth from work and having to talk to people over a period of three years in repeat conversations and being like, Hey, can I talk to you about your working conditions? And having people blow 'em off, blow 'em off, blow 'em off, and then, you know, one point, just stop. Okay, okay, you've been here forever. Let's have a conversation.

And so I think part of it is to not get discouraged.

The other piece, and this is key, is mapping your workplace to find where those natural leaders are. So rather than trying to get everybody all at once, who is the person in your workplace that people go to when they're trying to solve a problem? Who's the person that organizes those activities, whether it's a birthday party or everybody's gonna sign a card for so and so, to somebody who's gonna confront the supervisor if there's a problem.

Who is the person in there? Because there's usually somebody that everybody goes to for advice or for help, or who organizes. That's the person you wanna get on side, right? Because even if they hate unions, that's the person that you need to flip and bring them into the fold to say like, okay, I need to talk to you. You're the one that everybody goes to. So if they're against a union, you could say like, why do you not want a union in this place? Let's talk about that. What can we do together otherwise. And start to actually get to understand them a little bit and bring them around.

But I would do a little bit of background reading about some of the ways in which you can structure those conversations to start to think through some of the traditional ways you wanna talk.

**BEN:** I don't understand why our employers are downloading the funding issue to the students and faculty, closing programs, laying off employees. It feels really shortsighted and makes it seem that our problems are each other. It seems like a good divide and conquer strategy by government, by pitting the management and faculty and staff. And I wonder if the senior management sees that or if they really think that the colleges are going to be saved by creating poor quality education programs.

Do you have any thoughts about how to get our employers to see that?

**JP:** I honestly am really mind-boggled by this as well, but I also think that some of this stems back to even as far back as the 1990s when they removed the geographic boundaries around the colleges and started putting the colleges in competition with each other rather than creating a more cooperative system.

Because that's what allows for things like every college in Ontario to have a site in Toronto and be competing for the same pool of students.

I think to a large extent, the colleges have been frankly, incentivized to use increasingly risky financial strategies in order to hit their bottom lines rather than argue for funding. But because they're in competition and because many of them come from the senior management levels, come from business and come from outside education, or have been schooled now in a way of thinking about education as a business and as a competitive process, that I've heard tales of senior management sitting at tables, coming to an agreement across the colleges, then going out and stabbing each other in the back.

We saw this between Conestoga and Sault when they were at each other, not just a year ago.

I honestly am not sure how to interrupt that conversation with the college management, as much as I think that we need to really figure out how to have these conversations among ourselves as faculty and support staff and students.

I don't think that management will figure out a way to make the change, even if a manager or an individual manager sees the problem. I don't know that they have the faith or ability in this particular moment, or certainly the belief that they can make the changes that they need.

If faculty, support and students come together and force the issue, that we may be able to get that buy-in, but it's not gonna be a short term project and it's certainly not gonna solve this crisis in the next few months.

I honestly think, from what I can see across the system and the types of program closures or suspensions or pauses or whatever they're calling it this week, the types of layoffs that we're seeing, those program closures are not in programs where it's international students. Before the international student issue arose at the federal government level, Fleming was already closing programs that had nothing to do with international student enrollment.

And as a matter of fact, I think that a lot of the college management are using this particular crisis as a moment to do what they've always wanted to do, which is to close those programs that they don't see as profitable or that they don't see as important or reputationally significant. Rather than figure out how to redistribute the resources in a way that allows these programs to succeed and continue.

Laurentian's an interesting example because they're using the people that did the audit at Laurentian to do an audit on some of the colleges now. So you can imagine where that's expected to end. And I think we need to actually figure out how to get ourselves into a position where we are organized on the ground.

I don't think it's that they don't care. I do think they have a completely different value system that they're using for evaluating what counts as success or quality education.

**RESH:** Another question. I'm really appreciative of the union advancing partial load rights, and of course soon to be part-time rights. But at the same time, what can we do given the precarity of our partial load and part-time comrades in this moment of so-called mitigation? Because it bothers me that we're in the same union, but I feel like we don't have the same rights. And this is coming from a full-timer who's enjoying more job security than my comrades.

**JP:** The first thing is to always work with our colleagues, to remind them that if the partial or part-time and sessional faculty have lesser rights, then we are all at risk.

The colleges will use attrition. They'll use a number of tools in order to get more and more of us precarious, to be honest. Like, if we are not fighting for the rights of the folks with least rights among us, then ours are always at risk of being eroded.

And the belief that full-time jobs are somehow safe is belied by the fact of look around us right now. Like, look around us, what's happening in education. Every tenured prof at Laurentian thought they were safe.

They're closing programs at York. And the programs that they're closing are the same kinds of programs that they're closing in the colleges.

These are the programs that really challenge power structures and that really foreground critical thinking and the ability to analyze our social milieu in a way that isn't just about towing a party line.

And you'll remember in 2017 when we were organizing around that strike, they told us that no one would strike over precarity. And we went out for five weeks, right? Until the Ford government was elected and upended all the work.

But we did the organizing work on the ground so that people understood what the impact of 75% precarity in the colleges is. You cannot build a successful education system when three quarters of your employees, three quarters of the people that are educating students, have no job security semester to semester. It's just an impossible task.

So we have to do that work again even though we're tired, even though it's like, hey, we just did that. Because that was eight years ago now. And there's a whole new generation of students, of workers, of faculty who don't know what this stuff means anymore.

And people are way more used to the gig economy than they used to be. And that's what scares me. Right. And I look at like some of the things that have been put in the chat, like the increase in management is disproportionate by a huge margin to the increase in full-time faculty and support staff frankly.

When you look at the fact that our ex-president is still getting what, a million bucks effectively. It's insanity. It's morally reprehensible and we need to hold our colleges to account on this kind of stuff. On that sense, our local did a really good job.

I also need to say, we need to welcome the part-time and sessional faculty when they join us with open arms and figure out how to support and integrate them in every possible way we know how to do.

There is nothing to be afraid of in that unless we are not doing the work to bring them in and get them integrated. Because if we are not at a bargaining table together in a few years, they will separate us all. And by that I mean part-time support, full-time support, part-time faculty, and full-time faculty. We need to be a united front because together we are the ecosystem of the colleges.

You can get rid of a whole lot of managers and not have the thing collapse. You cannot get rid of faculty and support staff and have it continue.

**RESH:** Thank you JP. So, I would be remiss if I did not ask this last question since it is our theme. JP, what are we working for?

**JP:** We are working for a better world for all workers, period. Full stop. For every single worker in Ontario, for the people who have nothing, for the people who can't do it on their own, we need to be working together.

Labour isn't just about what you get paid for. The work that is in front of us is an existential threat to many of our existences, right? My life is on the line in ways it hasn't been in decades, and so is yours. And if we don't show students what a better world could look like, then we are remiss in our role as workers in an education system.

**RESH:** JP, thank you for that. Thank you for a fantastic discussion and opening to this year's Labour Fair and for your leadership, both at OPSEU/SEFPO and also for your many years leading the School of Labour and of course the Labour Fair. You played a huge role. You continue to play a huge role in where we are today. It has been a pleasure. Thank you so much again.

**JP:** My pleasure. Now let's go save all these programs, shall we?

**RESH:** Okay, let's do that.

That was JP Hornick, President of OPSEU/SEFPO, and our opening discussion from the 33rd annual Labour Fair at Toronto's George Brown College under this year's theme, *What Are We Working For?*

And this is The Courage My Friends podcast.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

Thanks for listening.

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