

Courage My Friends Podcast Series VIII – Episode 7
Labour Fair 2025: Building a Workers' First Emergency Response to the Tariff
Crisis

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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 trade war with a volatile super power, what are we working for? What does this tariff crisis mean for the security and dignity of Canadian workers? And how can we build a workers-first emergency response that unites us and leaves no one behind?

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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.

Welcome to episode seven, *Labour Fair, 2025. No One Left Behind: Building a Worker's First Emergency Response to the Tariff Crisis*.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

In episode seven, we are pleased to feature the keynote address for the 33rd annual Labour Fair at Toronto's George Brown College. Executive Director of the Workers' Action Center, Deena Ladd discusses the current trade war, the dangers facing workers and a solidarity-driven plan that puts workers first.

Here now is Deena Ladd with her keynote address, *No One Left Behind: Building a Workers' First Emergency Response to the Tariff Crisis That Unites Us*.

DEENA: It's a total honor to be here and to be asked to speak. I've done many different things at the Labour Fair over many years since it's been around. And it's always such a great opportunity to talk about one of the most fundamental things of why we're in college, right? To get a job. And to be able to take care of our families, but also to do something that makes a difference in the world.

And I think for many of you who are in the various programs, whether it's community work, social services, the disabilities program, all of the different kinds of programs there to build the strength of our communities, this is a very important conversation that we're having today and very, very timely.

I think so many of us are really worried about the tariff crisis and how we're all gonna be able to survive the impact of this financially for ourselves, our families and all the communities across the country.

There's been talk of a recession. There's continued high interest rates.

We know that in the community sector, many of the programs like employment have been privatized by the Ford government. We've got cuts to settlement services because of the immigration cuts that we've experienced.

And then we have all these politicians lobbying us for our votes and making many promises right now.

And so I don't know about you, but it's been really hard to get real information about how we're gonna get impacted. And all the different sectors, how they're gonna get impacted and job loss. And every day the news changes. We never know what Trump's gonna come out with in the mornings.

Is there a tariff? Is there a pause? Is it gonna be 25%? Is it gonna be all the sectors?

And then everything's taken back and then reintroduced. And so, you know, it's a real time of uncertainty, I think for all of us.

I also think that this theme of George Brown's Labour Fair, what are we actually working for, is really timely right now.

And I think in my work, and I think probably for many of you, many of us are working just to cover our basic necessities of living right now. It's not like we're living the life of Riley or the life of luxury. I think we're all just trying to like, how the hell are we gonna pay rent?

That's why this conversation is so important. I think that we know that our communities and workers and people who are on social assistance have still not recovered from the impact of the pandemic. And I am really worried about the struggles that our communities are facing right now. And I think when you then look at the numbers and you see what's happening, those worries are very well-founded.

We have around 8.7 million people across Canada who are having trouble buying just even food for their households.

And so why is that? Just look at the median wage. So that's kind of like what are the most people making across Canada? And it's only \$30 an hour.

So what that means is that 50% of the workforce in Canada are earning less than \$30 an hour. So that explains why 56% of us are living paycheck to paycheck. That

means many of us have already depleted our emergency funds or savings if we had them.

We're finding that many are dipping into their retirement savings just to cope with the rising costs such as housing. And what's really worrying is that 27% are going into debt every month just to cover the basic necessities. Not to buy the latest car that's coming out. But just the basic necessities. And we're all struggling with these inflated interest rates that were just starting to come down. But who knows what's gonna happen.

I think the other part of this is that over 7 million of us are part of this gig economy, of which many of us are just trying to generate a bit of extra income. And so just in the last three years, this gig economy has grown by 85%. And those jobs, for the most part, have very little labour protection.

And if that wasn't enough, research is showing that over 60% of us are really worried that we don't have enough money to cover unexpected emergencies or expenses today. We think that number is much higher if you take into account newcomers, new immigrants, people who are in precarious work, people who are undocumented, who have precarious immigration status and who are not necessarily interviewed when those research studies take place.

So that's the current context, right? That's even before the impact of the tariffs are already playing out. And so our communities are already in trouble. And we know that the tariffs imposed are gonna have a ripple impact, far worse than the pandemic's.

We know that economists are talking about a one to two million job loss in the country.

It's gonna hit resources and obviously steel, aluminum, the auto sector. So it's gonna hit a lot of men first. A lot of racialized men. But a lot of men in unionized good paying jobs.

But then it's gonna hit all of the secondary and tertiary sectors that rely on those sectors. So subcontracting. All of the business services. All of the kind of related and connected industries.

What we also know is that the pandemic demonstrated that our Employment Insurance system, so this is our basic safety-net across the country, was not capable of dealing with that health crisis. And during that time, temporary fixes were made, but not the permanent kind of changes we needed.

And so here we are again, facing down another economic crisis, and the government, the federal government, before they broke for the elections, and all the parties, are basically telling workers to wait and see.

And so this wait-and-see approach is to presumably wait until seeing what crisis we're in and then responding after it.

We saw Minister Steven McKinnon in early March announce \$6 billion in funding for businesses to offset the cost of tariffs. But there was very little for workers. A few tweaks to the EI job-sharing program to help workers in sectors hit hard by tariffs.

But this whack-a-mole strategy is not gonna protect workers from the impact that we're experiencing right now. And as I've mentioned, this damage that the tariffs are gonna bring in, is not just going to be just for a few sectors. And responding after the fact doesn't help anyone, workers and business and small businesses particularly, who are gonna be impacted.

What we do know also is that the impact of the threats of tariffs are already being felt by workers. And we're seeing companies feeling that instability already in terms of what could happen over the next four years.

Relationships are changing to the US. And no one can really trust what's gonna happen in the future. So Trump has already permanently changed the trade environment.

We know a lot of businesses who rely on import, export businesses are already starting to sell off their goods and are already feeling quite nervous about making any investments.

So employers and workers need predictability. But Trump has made it very abundantly clear that he will act on any whim that comes his way.

And so that's why this conversation is so important at this moment. Because if we don't fight for what we need and what it's gonna take for us to survive - and not just survive, but actually thrive - then we have to know what's happening and we have to be active in this.

I think it's pretty clear that Canada needs a serious plan in place, and that's why we are calling for an emergency preparedness plan that leaves no one behind. Because as we saw in the pandemic, many of us were left behind, especially essential workers, and especially those with precarious immigration status.

And so let me just give you an example of what that means.

So one group in our community that is very vital for us, are farm workers, for instance. They grow our food, they process our food. They bring our foods from the fields to the grocery stores. And yet these essential workers are workers that were left behind during the pandemic and are also facing the same situation.

I'm gonna play you a quick two-minute video from Lionel Naval. Who is a farm worker member of the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change.

LIONEL: Hello, my name is Lionel Naval and I'm member of the Migrant Workers Alliance for Change. I have been a farm worker in Canada since 2014. Like thousand of others, I come here each year to sustain Canada Food System.

We are invisible to many, but without us, there's no food in your table. We work for minimum wage, often in abusive condition, and can only stay in Canada as long as our employer allows. Our homes and life are controlled by bad immigration laws and bosses. There's a lot to talk about tariff in Canada, but the government only mentioned big industries and employers. They never talk about the frontline workers, especially migrants like me.

Many agricultural employers import and export product to the US. Already in 2024, in BC, in the Okanagan where I work, the main packing plants, closed living farmers with no other option than to sell the fruit to the packing plants in Washington. If this tariff continue, many of Canada agricultural business will collapse.

But who work there? It's us, the migrant farm workers.

Many of us migrant farm workers, including me, are scared that if the tariffs continue, we will lose our job and left without protection because Canadian laws treat us like we are second class human beings. We work in Canada, grow food in Canada, and pay taxes in Canada. We are Canadian workers like you, yet we are forgotten.

The tariff war is between bosses, and workers should not pay the price. I'm here to demand emergency support for all migrant workers. No one should face discrimination, migrant or undocumented people.

We are essential and deserve equal rights. All migrants must have permanent resident status, so we don't have to fight for inclusion in every crisis.

Status for all! Status for all! Status for all now!

DEENA: We desperately need a government strategy that is learned from these past economic crises to ensure that no one gets left behind.

We know from the pandemic that the employment insurance system could not cope with the number of workers impacted by the job loss and that the rates were incredibly low.

And at this moment, only 34% of people who are unemployed can actually even access Employment Insurance.

So we need a safety-net that can handle the level of economic instability that workers and their families are facing across the country.

I want to spend a moment just to go over a plan that we think will make sense.

And so, one of the things that's really important in public policy is to make sure that when you are providing supports, that they first of all have to be adequate. That they're not institutionalizing poverty. That they're accessible, so that you're not leaving people behind. And that they're structured in a way that doesn't unintentionally punish people after the fact.

And so that is one of the things that again, we learned through the pandemic.

So I think you will agree with me that what we need and what we learned through the pandemic is that we need weekly supports that are adequate. So we are pushing for an emergency plan that people can have at least \$600 per week to live on through Employment Insurance or through direct grants.

And that we have to ensure those with precarious immigration status, like Lionel and like many of the undocumented workers who provided essential services during the pandemic, are covered.

And those of us who are gig workers, who are misclassified as self-employed, we need to be able to access Employment Insurance after a reasonable hour limit. So we're suggesting 120.

And I wanted to show you that organizing does work.

This PowerPoint was done two and a half, three weeks ago. And so we were pushing for no waiting period and that workers should not have to use up their separation payments like vacation pay and severance.

So actually last week, Mark Carney, before he called the elections, has agreed to that piece. So now there will be no waiting period and workers will not have to use their separation payments. So we've won that. We've won that. And that's because we are starting to organize.

Now, in the whole scheme of things, these are two pieces of a much bigger piece, but I do wanna show that organizing works.

Freeze on the increases in the price of food. We know that Canadian grocery stores are loving this "buy Canadian". And what they're gonna do is they're gonna jack up the prices. And we're already seeing this at grocery stores.

Now, grocery stores are not hurting. They are making record amount of profits. We need a freeze on the price of foods. We need a freeze on interest rates because those of us who are struggling with the high interest rates that came in after the pandemic are really struggling to pay back their loans.

A moratorium on evictions.

Legislate a rent freeze and rent control. This is not pie-in-the-sky kind of ideals. We had this during the pandemic. So these should be part of an emergency plan. And it should be very easy to put these in place. It's been done before, merely four years ago. It can be done again.

We need to increase Social Assistance, Disability Supports, Workers' Comp and Old Age Security to at least \$600 per week. It is shameful that people are having to be institutionalized into poverty by the absolute horrendous rates that people are surviving on, especially OW [Ontario Works].

And this is a moment, because we're in this crisis, to really push hard on these issues.

We need to end misclassification of employees. So many gig workers, all they wanna be done is recognized as employees, so they at least are making minimum wage. That they get vacation pay, 4% vacation pay, public holiday pay. All the kinds of entitlements that all of us should be entitled to. And we think that that will actually restore a lot of lost income for Employment Insurance, pension plans, and workers' compensation funds.

And really quite critical, in these kinds of moments where we're seeing such a huge impact on job loss.

Public funding, increasing public funding for things like healthcare, education, public services. Increasing public funding for infrastructure, such as public transit and social housing. These investments are going to provide jobs, not just in construction, but long-term investments in public services that are always good for our communities.

And we need to make sure, and we learned this during the pandemic, is that if you are going to provide supports and money to businesses that they should be used for that and not for profit rates or to issue dividends for shareholders. And that they should not be misused and put into whole bank of corporate profit. And so we found this. And boy did they not get asked to pay that back, but they went after individual workers.

And most importantly, there are corporations that are making more profit than they ever have before. They need to pay their fair share of taxes so that we can fund the kinds of infrastructure and public services that we need and create the jobs that many of you are going to be wanting when you've graduated from George Brown.

And then there are a whole slew of things that we want in terms of fixing EI permanently. So setting a universal rate so that we can access this vital social safety net income support. Making sure again, that we eliminate harsh qualification rules and extending Employment Insurance to all the people in our communities.

DEENA: Raising the benefit to 75% right now.

If you're a precarious worker and maybe you're working 20 hours a week, you only get 55% of that income. And so we need to ensure that you are actually earning enough so that you can actually use this safety-net and pay your bills. So again, pushing for that minimum of \$600 per week to be able to survive and not just again, be falling deeper into debt and poverty.

Restoring annual contributions. Raising the cap on insurable earnings so that we can get more money into Employment Insurance. And to make sure that those funds that are collected by the government are only used for the EI fund and not being used to fund other kinds of corporate tax cuts or fund other kind of military expenditures, which is how it's been used in the past.

So I think it's always really important that we have a very clear sense of what we're fighting for. And this wait-and-see approach that we're seeing by the people in power is not gonna build the confidence of us. And a lot of people in our communities to help us feel like how are we gonna cope with lost jobs, with our lost income, food prices, our rent, evictions, all of the things that we saw during the Covid crisis.

So there's a lot at stake here, right? In terms of the tariffs and then what are some of these measures that we need? And I've been talking about how we need to fight and the tough times that people are facing.

I just wanna kind of now draw your attention to who gets pointed to as the source of the problem. So we have all of these problems that are happening. We're struggling with all of these economic issues. But who gets pointed to as the source of those problems?

Is it the grocery stores that have made massive amounts of profit like Galen Weston and Loblaws, jacked up prices, have been found to be price-fixing the price of bread, meat and things like that. And these are well-known facts now.

Is it these huge corporate developers and landlords that have made huge amounts of profits over renoevictions or unfair increases of rent? Or is it the banks that are making record profits year after year, making more profits than they ever have?

During the pandemic, I think Shell made the most profit than they'd ever had in the history of their company.

Do we blame the for-profit privatized healthcare clinics that are now making massive amounts of money as the government privatizes healthcare services?

Do we blame the provincial, federal government that have failed to adequately protect us from rent increases? Or haven't built affordable housing units? Or failed to tax corporations? Or failed to make sure that we are not gouged at the grocery store?

I want you to think about in the last year or two, who has been pointed to as the source of the problem? And I think it's quite worrying when we do look at that because we can just see, even in this election campaign who's being pointed to.

We see Pierre Poilievre, who's talking about, "Out of control immigration, this is one of the problems what we're facing!"

And then in the next breath saying, "Crime is out of control!"

And so people are putting the two together.

We're seeing immigrants and international students, "There's too many, they're taking away our jobs. They're to blame for the lack of affordable housing."

Even Mark Carney is saying, "We've gotta stop folks from coming into our country before we deal with the affordable housing crisis."

Migrants and refugees, they're being blamed for the lack of shelters for people, the lineups at the food bank, the fact that we can't get healthcare services.

We see far-right parties blaming people of colour. And I think it's really important to know that we have over 300 white supremacist groups across Canada and every day they are being emboldened by the attacks in the US that we are witnessing against Mexicans and Latinx communities, South Asians, and many more.

And then on top of this, to show that this is in fact who are to blame, we see governments then punishing these same groups of people.

So , even though Justin Trudeau promised as in 2021, a regularization program that would give undocumented workers that stepped up during the pandemic and did essential services... He promises a regularization program for undocumented people, that was totally canceled last year. And basically said, Nope, that's not gonna happen.

There have been hundreds and thousands of international students that have now been cut in terms of their access to coming into Canada. And so even though those international students have come into our country, we have literally wiped out all their savings. They're not allowed to extend their permits. They've been basically told that unless they fit into certain categories of jobs that we want them here in Canada, they have to go back to their countries, even though the promises of status were made.

We've had cuts to how many people can get permanent residency, even though we have a huge backlog of people who have been waiting for years to get access to permanent residency.

Undocumented workers now not being able to access shelters or healthcare that was cut two years ago.

These are very dangerous, racist and destructive actions against people in our communities. And so it's not just happening in the US, right? It's happening everywhere around the globe. And it is absolutely happening here in Canada.

And so we have to critically understand the role of racism and the growing fascism in the United States and its impact. We have to understand that this targeting of immigrants and migrants is not just happening randomly. That the hatred towards undocumented people, towards trans, towards immigrants coming here to study and work is not just because people are racist and homophobic. So let me be clear. Of course they are racist and homophobic, but this is not by accident or random, oh, it just happens to be discrimination happening. This is a deliberate strategy that is meant to distract and divide us. It's meant to distract us from looking at the real causes of our problems and who's making the decisions. And it's about dividing us so that it weakens us and our movement for what we need for our families.

So Trump and these right-wing politicians are creating deliberate enemies and people that we can point the finger to when we lose our jobs, when we can't afford rent, when we're having difficulty putting food on the table.

So it's our job to understand this. It's our job to understand when this stuff is coming out in the media, when politicians are saying, "Out of control, immigration. Crime. Gotta close the borders down."

Is that really the cause of a lot of the crises that we are dealing with?

DEENA: We have to understand why this is happening because if we don't understand that, how are we gonna tackle those difficult conversations at the dinner table, at our union meetings, in our workplaces, with our families, at our places of worship, with our friends?

We have to learn how to do this. The tariffs are already hitting. They've already hit the steel industry. But when the next round of tariffs come. When a lot of those men lose their jobs, who are they gonna point the finger to? Are they going to blame the government? Are they gonna actually put the blame where it belongs?

Or when long-term residents who are immigrants in our communities, can't find an affordable place to live, who are they gonna blame? Are they gonna blame the people who made the decisions to stop building affordable housing?

So our communities are gonna make decisions and take actions at the ballot-box or on the streets that will scapegoat some of us and not tackle the real culprits.

And so let me tell you, the government would like to keep it this way, right? This benefits them. And so I want you to pay attention to who people are blaming.

When people get really mad about the price of rent and food. What is the information that you need, that your friends need, your families need about understanding what kinds of supports we need at this moment.

How do we do the education in our communities in this moment of crisis?

Because really we're only gonna get through this together. No one is gonna fight for these emergency measures. If we think someone is gonna step up and take care of us, we are sadly mistaken.

We are the ones that are gonna have to do this. We are the ones that are gonna have to step up and fight like hell for what we need and fight for our families and fight for our communities.

We have their attention right now. They are looking for our vote. They want our vote. We cannot let them get away with just giving us crumbs or pacifying us with promises and fancy words.

We need to make sure that they actually promise and do and put in place the kinds of measures that we need.

And we need to make sure that we don't accidentally build support for the billionaires, whether they're Canadian, American, Mexican, or Chinese.

We need to fight for a Workers First Agenda. Our communities come first. So let's fight together and do everything that we can do to ensure that our communities have what they need. So that they don't just survive the next four years, but that we can all live a life where we are thriving. That we can lead a life with decent jobs. That we have a roof over our heads, that we're not going into debt every month to pay for. That we're able to buy healthy food. That we can live with dignity if we can't work. And that we have the resources that we need, whether it's childcare, drugs, benefits, dental care, all of the things that we need to keep healthy and strong.

These are not luxury items. And we need to ensure that during these next four weeks, 'cause the elections are happening on April 28th, that they hear from us. And that they know that this is the agenda that they need to put in place if they want our vote.

And so I'm just gonna end off in conclusion that there's a few things that you can do.

We have a campaign called, obviously the No one Left Behind. Our provincial and national campaign, Justice for Workers is having a meeting in Toronto on Tuesday April the 22nd.

We also have a slew of measures and information. So petitions, posters, educational materials, that you can use to talk about what our communities need in order to survive this next little while.

RESH: Thank you Deena. And I'm going to invite Ben McCarthy to facilitate the questions.

BEN: Regarding rent control. Doug Ford made it so housing built after 2018 does not apply to rent control, which I learned the hard way. Can the current demand for rent control override that?

DEENA: Yeah, absolutely. Let's do it. I mean that's the thing, right? We have to be very explicit about what we need. During the pandemic it didn't matter after 2018 or before 2018, it was just rent was frozen. And so in the past we've never had those kinds of measures put in when we've had rent control in the past. So we can absolutely do that again. Because that is really just about supporting development that has happened since 2018.

And there's been a huge amount of development that's happened, which has been all about developing housing, not as a right, but as an investment, as profit. And we need to take profit out of housing.

This should just be a basic right, just as the basic right for food, healthcare, shelter. We need to divest that. But governments have left it to the for-profit sector to provide housing in the last 30 years.

So 30 years ago, they divested from building housing. And so this is the consequences. This is the result of that divestment from building affordable housing.

This is why we're in the mess we're in because they haven't actually prioritized housing as a right to ensure that people actually have shelter. And so when you have the system built on profit, this is what happens. It's a mess.

And so we need to go back to those principles of housing as a right. And housing for everyone. And housing not just for those of us who can afford it.

Because to be honest, there is enough housing right now, If I wanted to buy or if I wanted to rent a two bedroom apartment right now, I could. There would be no problem at all. I just need an incredible amount of money to be able to do it.

So the issue is affordability, not the lack of housing. We have so much housing on the market, but it's unaffordable because it's profit-driven and that's what we need to change.

BEN: Another question here. What comes to mind is how the American unions are openly talking about a general strike in 2028. What are the rumblings like here in Canada?

DEENA: Oh, I wish the rumblings were happening here too. I mean, to be honest, I think things are moving now. Unfortunately, I think with the provincial elections, with the tariff crisis, with the federal elections, things are a little bit in disarray at this moment within the union movement in Canada.

We're starting to see the unions come together to put forward Employment Insurance and arguing for a strong safety-net. But in terms of actually coming forward with a strong unified "worker first" agenda for the whole of the country, we're not seeing that yet.

I'm hoping that we can learn from the kinds of conversations, strategic conversations that are happening in the US where you've got the auto industry, you've got some of the teachers unions and some of the others. One of the reasons why they can start to plan for a general strike in 2028 is because they're trying to pull all of their collective agreements expiring at the same time so that they can leverage power from many different sectors at the same time, which is super exciting. And I think we need to do more of that.

Every time we see that happening here, we have seen gains. And I think we need to be more strategic. And we need to stop some of the private sector unions from signing 10-year collective agreements, which is what some of the unions are doing. And they need to be more strategic and to sort of align their interests together as working people instead of competing against each other.

And so I think once we see that turn, we will hopefully start to see some of that kind of strategic planning that we are seeing in the US. But at this moment I'm not seeing...

There's been pilots where some of the unions, in a hospital, for instance, if you have five unions, we've had pilots in the past where those five unions have strategically organized, hospital by hospital, to bring those workers together to fight for healthcare, improved staff ratios, all of those kinds of things. That's been very exciting. But that was a pilot and it's stopped now.

RESH: Another question. It's really interesting how fast things got put in place during the pandemic and how supports came up when we were in crisis. And now because of the election and the tariff crisis, it's a moment to act and make demands because we have a little bit of leverage, which is great. If some of these emergency measures get put in place, in the long-term when the crisis passes, how can they be sustained and not be dropped, like they were before, when we are buddy-buddy with the States again?

DEENA: To be honest, we've never seen the kinds of emergency measures that took place during the pandemic. I've never seen that before, to be honest, in my lifetime. And so I think it was a really good education for many to see how things could rapidly change.

And that these things were like, Oh no, we have to take 20 years to get a 2% increase. Like, I mean, the incrementalism makes my blood boil, okay. I'm just like, ah!

But I think what was incredible, what was a real lesson for us was to see how that kind of catastrophic... 8 million people losing their jobs, like literally overnight ...how the government can act and how our interests can be served, right?

And unfortunately, and I don't know if this is just because of Covid memory loss, but we talked about in 2020, 2021... I actually was very hopeful that the kind of recognition that we were finally seeing for people who are considered to be the invisible workers in our communities. .. All the cleaners, all the shelter workers, all the personal support workers, all the people who process food, grow food, take care of kids, the elderly, like these essential public services, and also essential private jobs like grocery store workers, warehouse workers, delivery workers, drivers, that people were like, Oh, let's bang our pots and pans every Sunday. Let's put the hearts in our windows. And then what the hell happened? I mean, this is the thing, right? You saw the Trudeau government do this. And then what we've seen is this incredible right-wing attack by Pierre Poilievre basically saying, CERB was a waste of resources. All of this money was mishandled, misused.

No, that money actually stabilized our economy and kept a roof over many of our heads during that period of time. And so what you see is this sort of very strong right-wing attack and then a blame. And then the Liberal government allowing interest rates to go up and create inflation because of some of these worldwide dynamics that were happening. The war in the Ukraine, the supply-chain crisis internationally.

But instead of putting measures that would actually increase money in our tax system, like going after all of this huge pandemic profit, what they did was they punished us. Because remember there was a moment where they were like, Oh my God, we don't have workers.

Workers don't wanna go back to those shitty jobs that they had before the pandemic. They actually have expectations of being safe, of having health and safety regulations, of having a decent wage, of having health benefits.

And so they're like, okay, we have to put the damper down on that and using inflation to basically create massive job loss and controllers, right?

And so through that period of time, they've created a lot of fear. And then they've created this blame on migrants.

And so the reason why this is a very long answer to your important question, is because if we don't understand the dynamics of that and be able to be educated enough to take that on and to do that kind of deep education in our communities... When that right-wing attack comes on us and starts to blame migrants, starts to blame CERB, starts to go after individuals who, my God had \$2,000 of extra money during the pandemic. "And they are to blame for the crisis that we have." Instead of the billions and billions of dollars that were given to corporations and to for-profit, long-term care homes that then just channel that money into shareholders' pockets. The contradictions are staggering.

And so when the finger is pointed at the individual who "abused the system" by taking \$500 a week and not add the long-term care home, that took millions of dollars. When that finger is pointed, we need to be able to answer that. We need to be able to challenge that.

Because they don't want us to see our self-interest. And this is what's happening, is that working people, we are blaming each other instead of blaming the folks who have made those decisions. And that's why we don't see all of these long-term measures come into place, right?

Because if we'd had a strong movement and we had said to the government, Oh no, no, no, you are not gonna take away CERB. You are going to make sure that Employment Insurance has a \$500 weekly rate. That all of these fixes that are needed happen. That rent control is in place. That we have a continued moratorium on evictions. That corporations don't get to charge us whatever the hell they want for a loaf of bread.

If we'd had a strong movement to take that on, then I think we would've seen these kinds of measures can be actually implemented.

So the lesson here is we were not strong enough when the pandemic happened to keep those measures.

Now what's happening is we have to fight for those measures again. So we have to build our movement, because no one's gonna do this for us. But we have this window to fight for this. And then not just be complacent and just go, Okay, we got those measures.

We have to actually continue the organizing and make sure our communities say you've put them in place now for this emergency tariff crisis; you need to keep them in place and you need to make these permanent because these are not luxury items. This is what our community needs right now. And don't be taking them away. 'cause we will get you out of office and we will make your life a living hell if you do that.

But because we don't have the power in our movements to do that, they feel they have the power to get us to point the fingers at each other and to blame other people, and we fall for it.

So that is the lesson we need to learn and we need to do this organizing so that this doesn't happen again.

And it means that in our organizing, we can't just rely on social media. We have to be doing the deep organizing in our communities. And we have the conversations when we're delivering programs in our communities, at the community centers, in our apartment buildings, we need to have these types of conversations there so that people understand what is actually happening.

We all have to join the movement. If we want this stuff, we have to fight to make it happen because government is not gonna just do it because they see the light.

They see the light and that light ain't working for them. You know what I'm saying?

They're just like, okay, we're gonna do this because it benefits us and we get to keep our power in our elected office, but we're not gonna just continue this just because working people want it.

And so we need to know whose side we're on and how we organize to get it done.

RESH: Two questions. One, when you're talking to voters, how would you reconcile the notions of immigration as a problem while simultaneously demanding that they're treated like human beings who are essential to the Canadian way of life as we know it? Because it's often seen as a zero-sum proposition for people.

And secondly, many middle class people don't see themselves as workers. So what would be your mutual interest pitch, so workers' rights can be fought for on multiple fronts, especially when we are considering huge fiscal costs that people might not see themselves as directly benefiting from?

DEENA: think it's really important to start with a conversation at the doorstep.

So one of the things that we've been doing to try and get at some of this stuff is just basically asking that question of, What are you worrying about? What are you afraid of right now?

Because even though so-called "middle class" people are not seeing themselves as workers, what we are seeing is that the cost-of-living crisis is impacting many people.

Thirty per cent of your wage should be paying for housing, right? So people are basically saying that you need to be making at least \$75,000 a year to be able to afford a two-bedroom home.

I don't know, like there's not a lot of people I know who are making \$75,000, right? And so the thing is, is that that is affecting many people in a way that has never happened before. The affordability crisis is actually impacting a lot of people. And I think that's a question to ask. What are you worried about?

The biggest thing on the doorstep is housing, right?

And then to start the conversation about housing and ask , What do you think is the problem around affordable housing?

We need to be able to feel confident to have those difficult conversations. To not get threatened, to not get mad, but to be able to, just like what we're having today, to be able to unpack those conversations.

People are hearing a lot of shit out there on social media because as you say, they're getting the message that it's immigrants that are the problem. That's what's the cause for the housing crisis. So we have to unpack that at the doorstep and be able to answer those difficult questions.

We need to be able to also talk about the history of Canada, to ask someone what is their history of coming to this country? Because if they're not Indigenous to this land, they came as immigrants.

And we know that every group of immigrants that have come into this country have been blamed for different problems and different issues. This is an age old thing that is happening.

I'll give you an example. So last year when the LCBO strike was happening, I was leafleting, talking to people about the fact that the privatization of LCBO was gonna mean that we would have \$2 or \$3 billion less in healthcare and education.

I was talking to a bloke, he was like, yeah, yeah, yeah. And then he is like, You know what? Also we need to get rid immigrants, like those international students, they're making the housing go up.

I just said, well, you know what, mate? I said, the landlord next door to me, just put a one bedroom apartment on the market for \$2,900. I said, how is that an international student's fault? Like what's that all about? And so then I turned the conversation and I said, are you seeing that in your community?

And then we got into a conversation about landlords that are trying to gouge us, right? And so then I was like, you know what, who's making the decision about the price of housing? Is it that bloke who is delivering food on his bike? I bet you he's having a hard time finding housing.

Like that landlord next door to me. Why does he need \$2,900 for a one-bedroom apartment? That's insane. Who can afford that? Right.

So I think through having conversations like that we can start to unpack what people automatically jump to because of what they're seeing on CP24 or on CTV. And start to get at those conversations. And to get people to start to critically reflect on how one-and-one doesn't make two when people are talking about these things.

A leaflet or a social media brand thing isn't gonna do it. It's not gonna cut it. Not with this kind of deep, divisive tactics that are very racist and that are dividing because that's what's happened in the States, right? Those divisions are very, very deep.

We don't want that to happen in Canada. We gotta get ahead of it. And we gotta do that hard work in communities.

Those same conversations are also happening in immigrant communities. We have long-term South Asian communities who have become conservative over time and who also want the borders to be closed.

So those are the conversations that I need to have in my community in addition to white communities, and also long-term immigrant communities who are like, Oh, well I came here in the seventies and I'm fine, thank you very much.

It's like, well, bloody hell, no, you don't get to be comfortable. Let's talk about what happened in the seventies when you came. There was a lot of bloody racism and you got blamed for a lot too. So let's talk about that and let's talk about why that is not acceptable.

Let's talk about who's making the decisions about building housing that's based on profit. And I think if you can start talking about who's making the profit, who's benefiting from the food prices at the grocery store, who's benefiting from the high price of gas. All all of those kinds of things. We then start talking about economics and about money and who's benefiting.

And those are the conversations I think we need to have. And that's just the deep organizing that we have to do.

BEN: On the subject of housing, what is also interesting is the cost of the shelter system per person in comparison to the cost of housing people. Homelessness feels like a problem we have deliberately created. And I think the implication here is that it's more costly to keep people un-housed than to house people.

DEENA: I think the real reason we're in this problem is because the government decided to move out of building affordable housing 30 years ago. This is the consequence. This is the consequence of what happens when the federal government says, we're gonna leave it to the private sector.

The private sector isn't interested in building affordable housing. That's not their job. Their job is to make profit. So our job, or if we're working in the public sector, the government's job is to take care of the people.

Now, they have been concerned about taking care of their corporate developer friends and allowing them to make massive amounts of profit on our backs, right? So that's what we have to change.

Unless we change that and we still continue to rely on the corporate sector to build affordable housing or any housing, we're screwed. We are really screwed.

The other thing that they're doing, which is so crazy, is they're giving government land for affordable housing to corporations and then giving them tax incentives and tax breaks. It does not make sense. We need government building affordable housing.

And in that way, you make sure that the people who are building the housing are also in decent jobs. And are in unionized jobs. And have benefits. And have good quality jobs. Because one of the biggest problems that we face here at the Workers' Action Center is working with workers who are working in construction who are dealing with consistently injuries, wage theft, and poor working conditions, and no union protection.

And so we need to make sure that our affordable housing stock is made with good quality jobs and that our communities get those jobs. And that we do not rely on the corporate sector and the private sector to do this work. It should be the public sector that does this work.

If we think that they are going to do it for our benefit, we are hallucinating. The proof is in the pudding.

This is the consequence of 30 years of divestment from affordable housing by the government. We have an absolute housing crisis right now which is absolutely connected to the shelter system and the lack of affordable housing.

RESH: Another question. Something that's really heavy on my mind right now. We just had the provincial election and we've had the government forcibly close our supervised consumption sites. And now we have to go right back to trying to help our unhoused community members even be able to participate in voting.

Do you have any advice in how we can focus on community care and hold each other, while we have this underlying grief and rage? And how we can use that to take care of each other so that we can organize and, no matter what the outcome, make it through on the other side?

DEENA: I think we have to find the joy in the work, right? It's the continued joy in the work and the continued commitment and strength to keep going on regardless. And I think sometimes when we look at the big picture, it can get very overwhelming. And I think for myself anyways, for this year, I've been just taking it one day at a time.

It's really important to build joy and laughter and those kinds of activities in your life at work.

The Workers' Action Center, is built on a membership model. So we support workers with workplace problems. But then we encourage them to become members of the center and then become leaders in the organization. So we have training programs where workers can learn how to do community organizing. And so seeing people that have maybe come to us with a workplace problem, now becoming an organizer

in their community and, doing Know Your Rights workshops, doing outreach on the streets, learning how to tackle these hard conversations, figuring out how to organize a meeting. That's what gives me strength. Because it's about expanding how many people are doing this work. It doesn't feel like it is just the same old people.

When it's just the same group of people that are facing this kind of onslaught over and over and over again, you just get tired because you also are not seeing your strength grow. And the burden becomes heavier on your shoulders.

So for us, it's about building the movement very strategically and deliberately so that we have more people fighting for what we believe in.

If we don't do that, we are screwing ourselves. To be really honest. We are gonna just burn ourselves out, and then the next group is gonna go through the same thing.

We have to take an organizing approach and a movement-building approach in the work we do. Otherwise, we are never going to win.

So what I would say to you is, by the end of 2025, we have this group of people that are fighting. How do we double it? How do we double it? And it could be family members of people who have died. It could be family members who support you. It could be people who are service users. It could be people who just give a shit, right?

And how do you deliberately create a pool of people that you are bringing in to develop their leadership and their skills? So it's not just you always, right?

They are winning because we are not building a movement to support what we need. We are just dealing with crisis, after crisis, after crisis. And of course we have to deal with that. But alongside dealing with those crises, we have to build a movement.

We have to build our base, whether it's in the shelter system, with the drop-ins, with the violence against women, gender-based violence, workers' rights. That is how in our center we have managed to build our strength so that when we came out of the pandemic, we were stronger than we were entering it. Because we used the time to build our membership and to build the power of the people involved. We use that time to do political education and to get them involved, right?

So it's kind of looking at the services that you provide. How do you build in an organizing approach in every service and everything that you do. You have to kind of integrate it into your model.

We started WAC from scratch. We've been able to be very conscious of how you deliberately integrate base-building, organizing into everything you do from the moment a person walks into the center. And it actually strengthens your organizing. You don't feel depleted.

I'm not saying it's perfect and I'm not saying I don't feel depleted. But you have to have a parallel process. If you don't, you're gonna be in exactly this position a year from now. So we have to change, we have to change how we do things.

BEN: A final question. With respect to austerity measures, attacking the social safety net, we see the Americans crashing out as the social security gets dismantled by DOGE. I believe this example may provide us with tangible realities of the impacts of such cuts. What do you think of how the situation in the States may play to our benefit within our politics, generally speaking?

DEENA: In terms of what's happening in the US, I think Trump and Elon Musk and all of his little minions, they're training the right-wing right now in terms of what's possible, right?

They are basically showing how you can dismantle everything, including unions. I think two senators are trying to stop federal employees from even being able to be unionized. They're trying to make it illegal.

There's two sides. On one side, they're showing how you can cause complete disarray and shock to a system by dismantling and attacking on so many fronts and in such a vicious, fascist way.

And so our right-wing is learning from that. And they are understanding what might be possible in the Canadian context.

The flip-side is that it is causing people to question whether or not they wanna vote for Pierre Poilievre.. He's Trump light, but he's definitely Trump-esque. But if you look at Mark Carney as a banker, his policies are not that different from Pierre Poilievre's. He probably won't do more of the racist stuff, but he's still a fiscal conservative.

So I think that people think that Mark Carney is the answer. He definitely is a better answer than Pierre Poilievre in terms of that type of anti-immigrant sentiment. But the Liberals have actually put in massive deep cuts.

So I think really my answer to your question is that regardless of who's in power, how do we organize to get what we need?

Because I don't think anyone who's gonna get elected right now is gonna do what we need. We have a Conservative majority provincially, and we don't know how things are gonna play out in the federal elections. But I can bet your bottom dollar that whoever gets elected is gonna face a very right-wing attack.

So let's say even the NDP, God forbid, got a majority government. The kind of relentless right-wing pressure that they will face to be fiscally conservative will be huge. So what we need on the ground is a movement to hold them accountable.

And so I would say that what we need to do is we need to organize and we need to build our base.

And if we think that just by marking an X on the ballot is gonna do that, it's not gonna happen. We have to fight for this.

And this is what I was saying in my presentation, is that even if it means that, right now, in the next four weeks, if you could take the Emergency Response leaflets and you could go and organize around it in your community to say, this is what our community needs right now. Nobody else is gonna do this. We're gonna hold anyone who gets elected in our riding, we're gonna hold their feet to the fire and we are gonna fight for what we need.

And it's not about their agenda, it's about our agenda. It's about a "workers' first" agenda that we fight for.

If we don't start to understand that we are the ones that have to impose the agenda, and we are the ones that have to actually create the agenda and frame the agenda and organize for the agenda, we are gonna be in the same position that we are right now. And even worse.

Nothing is gonna change without us organizing.

What's happening in the States is our future unless we change it. And that's our job right now, is to actually understand those pieces and understand what role do we wanna play in that. And that we can't just sit out on this one. We can't sit out for the next four weeks. But we also can't sit out afterwards.

With the tariff crisis, what we're facing is gonna be a lot worse.

Let's not get overwhelmed. Let's just take it day by day and let's organize. And you start in your home. You start at your workplace. You start with your friends. But you start. And you organize and you join the movement. And that's what we need to do.

RESH: Deena, thank you. And on behalf of the Labour Fair and the wider college, I really do want to thank you for this timely and necessary talk that brings a great deal of hope in this time of crisis and polycrisis. There's so much coming at us all at once, it is very difficult to figure out what do you tackle, what do you pay attention to first? But again, your message of hope and the power of solidarity is exactly what we need to hear. So thank you so much. And also for your excellent work in the community, your leadership at the Workers' Action Center, you continue to be an inspiration as well.

DEENA: Thank you. Thanks for inviting me and hopefully I'll see you on the streets.

RESH: That was Executive Director of the Workers' Action Center, Deena Ladd with her keynote address for the 33rd annual Labour Fair at George Brown College in Toronto.

A video recording of the keynote is also featured on rabbleTV.

And this is The Courage My Friends podcast.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu. Thanks for listening.

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