

Courage My Friends Podcast Series VIII – Episode 8
Labour Fair 2025: Labour Now: Union Responses to the Polycrisis

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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: With increasing privatization and precarity, what is happening to public sector jobs? Will this trade war ameliorate or exacerbate attacks on workers? How is the labour movement navigating this moment? What are they pushing for when it comes to labour policy and are policy-makers listening? In this age of polycrisis, what are we working for?

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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 eight, *Labour Fair 2025: Labour Now: Union Responses to the Polycrisis*

I'm your host Resh Budhu.

In this episode, we return to the George Brown College Labour Fair in Toronto and a conversation with Ontario Federation of Labour, President, Laura Walton and Chief Steward and 2nd Vice-President of OPSEU/SEFPO Local 556, Jeff Brown. From education and healthcare, to the trade war and the upcoming elections, we discuss the multiple issues facing the labour movement, union priorities and, in this age of polycrisis, what exactly we are working for.

Here now is my discussion with Laura Walton and Jeff Brown.

We begin with an opening by member of the Labour Fair Organizing Committee, Ashley Booth.

ASHLEY: The School of Labour and the Tommy Douglas Institute are pleased to welcome you to this 33rd annual Labour Fair at George Brown College.

For over three decades, this one of a kind Labour Fair has brought unions, activists, academics, artists, and knowledge holders to the college to engage with students, faculty, and staff on issues of labour, rights and social justice.

For this year's theme, we ask, what are we working for?

As you listen to today's presentation we invite you to consider what it is that you and we are working for when it comes to the security and dignity of our workers, our humanity, and our planet.

RESH: Thanks Ashley. I'm Resh Budhu, part of the Labour Fair Organizing Committee, along with Ashley Booth and Ben McCarthy. And it is my great pleasure to introduce today's guests.

Laura Walton is the President of the Ontario Federation of Labour, or OFL Canada's largest provincial labour federation. She has served as the President of the Canadian Union of Public Employees Ontario School Board's Council of Unions since 2019. Laura also serves on the CUPE Ontario Executive Board.

And we also have Dr. Jeff Brown, who is an experienced educator, researcher, and labour activist. He is a full-time professor in the Liberal Arts and Sciences Department at George Brown College and Chief Steward, and Second Vice President of OPSEU Local 556, representing unionized faculty at George Brown. He is also a member of the Ontario College Faculty Divisional Executive.

So Laura and Jeff, welcome. Thanks so much for joining us.

LAURA: Thanks for having me.

JEFF: Yeah, happy to be here. Thanks.

RESH: Lovely. So Laura, the OFL currently represents over 1 million Ontario workers belonging to 54 unions, and is tackling, I would imagine, numerous labour-related and social justice issues. So what are currently the priority issues that the OFL is dealing with?

LAURA: You know, the field is flooded and I think that's the one thing that everyone is taking away. There's no shortage of things that as workers we need to pay attention to. And so the trick becomes the prioritizing and ability to effectively deal with all of these.

Recently it was the provincial election that we were deep in the midst of, knowing the impacts that that would have on so many of our members. But also simultaneously dealing with the ongoing threats of the tariffs. But also recognizing what does that mean? Like it isn't just responding to tariffs, but also ensuring that we're well-placed to deal with tariffs, that we're educating people properly around tariffs. And then just

when you think you've got that kind of wrapped up, in comes the federal election that then poses another layer.

LAURA: And that is going at the same time that we are still working with workers that are facing job loss, the continuous underfunding of the post-secondary education system, the education system as a greater whole, the underfunding of our healthcare system. It's just never-ending. So trying to really keep a mindset in all of those things.

And we still have workers that are still fighting to ensure they're getting good first collective agreements and that they're negotiating strong collective agreements.

So, it's a little bit like playing whack-a-mole sometimes because things are just popping up and you're trying to keep things managed. But I think it really speaks to the depth of the labour movement that we have in Ontario. That we are effectively, you know, addressing these issues and keeping these issues front of mind for folks.

RESH: Absolutely. And Jeff, I also wanna ask you about the current focus of OPSEU and I think I know at least one of them. So could you tell us more about that?

JEFF: Yeah, I think we'll probably have multiple opportunities to talk about this in the coming hour.

OPSEU, as an affiliate member of OFL, it shares many of those same concerns that Laura's just given an overview of. I mean, polycrisis is the right word. It's feels like it's nonstop, it's coming from multiple directions.

So OPSEU obviously operates in many sectors: healthcare, corrections, the broader public service, the colleges. And obviously, you know, one of the main concerns for OPSEU right now is what's happening with our post-secondary sector, specifically in our colleges. You know, trying to raise awareness of what's going on and what the cause of the crisis is and also organizing around that.

Right now, actually in the midst of all this, we'll soon be welcoming probably about 15,000 new members to OPSEU with the new part-time and sessional bargaining unit. That's a very positive thing.

It's also somewhat mind-numbing to be trying to organize this while all this is happening. But we don't get to choose the timing of these things. So, I think a real emphasis on organizing and really grassroots organizing. Membership-driven campaigns to build the sort of strength that we need right now.

I'll go in-depth with what's happening at the colleges perhaps a little more shortly.

RESH: Well, why don't we go into more? Yeah. Right now. Let's just start from where we stand, because here we are at George Brown College. So Jeff, continue with that.

And then Laura, I'm also gonna ask you about this because both of you have spent so much of your labour organizing within the education sector.

So Jeff, what is happening to Ontario Colleges? How is it impacting workers. But also our future workers, students while they're here, but also when they're gonna be out there. And how is the union dealing with this?

JEFF: So, yeah, this is really the how much time do I have question? But I'm sure being a efficient moderator, Resh, you'll be able to wrangle me here.

We are dealing with a crisis in our post-secondary system. And I'm going to again focus specifically on the college system because it's a particularly acute crisis in the college system.

And I think what we need to really raise awareness of is that, yes it's a crisis, but it's a manufactured crisis, right? It didn't just spring outta nowhere. It didn't happen by accident. You know, there's a lot of focus on the IRCC policy changes, international student policy changes at the federal level. Understandably, because that has triggered the immediate crisis.

But what we need to make clear to folks and really need to raise awareness about is that the ultimate cause of this crisis is chronic underfunding from the provincial government. The provincial government is responsible for post-secondary education, full stop. And we wouldn't be seeing the impact of the IRCC policy changes if we didn't already have a starved system.

So yeah, it's having an impact, but the problem is the system can't absorb it because it's been chronically underfunded for so long. And, you know, this has been successive governments, but it's gotten particularly bad in the last six years under the Ford government.

That's what's leading to this cascade that we're now seeing where, okay, you've got some changes at the federal level and the system can't absorb it because it's been starved. And we're starting to see program suspensions, announced layoffs across all staffing categories. Obviously being with the faculty union, we're particularly focused on our daily work with dealing with the impact to faculty members. But it's happening all also to support staff and to admin.

Right. Here at George Brown, it's all very ominous and vague, but we know that likely layoffs are coming. We're told we're into phase two of the workforce mitigation, whatever that exactly involves, it started with voluntary retirement packages.

But we know, given the restructuring, that there's going to have to be some kind of fallout for other staff. And this restructuring, these program suspensions, this also impacts our students, obviously, right? They're the ones who are entering these programs. They're the ones who we're training for the future. And when these programs are suspended, this limits the options that those students have.

Just last week it was a fairly high profile. We had a group of students actually rallying down at the Waterfront campus, about the suspension of the Jewelry and Gemology program.

So it was great to see the students using their collective voice because they're losing this program as well, and the community's losing it. Our Assaulted Women's and the Children's Council Advocate program is being suspended. That's a vital program.

RESH: The only one of its kind.

JEFF: It's a unique program. It's vital to the community. So we know how that's impacting students, workers in the community.

Our focus from the union perspective is to try to raise awareness of why we're in this situation. Per student funding for Ontario colleges is at 56% the national average. We are dead last and it's not even close.

JEFF: We need an immediate infusion of funds to bridge this gap. And we need to bring that advocacy, that lobby focus to bear against this provincial government. Because they're the ones ultimately who can stem the tide of what's happening.

I mean, what's happening is institutions are making shortsighted decisions from a place of fiscal panic. They're not actually thinking long term. Like the Assaulted Women's and Children's Counselor Advocate program, when they're shutting something like that down, they're just looking at the bottom-line immediately. They're not thinking about what it means to the community. The long-term impact, the value of that program is much more than what's on a balance sheet.

But right now, institutions don't seem able to think that long-term because they're panicking. So that's what we're trying to raise awareness about right now.

RESH: I wanna bring you in here, Laura in terms of the labour response to this.

LAURA: Whenever we're organizing, we're always thinking about what are those external push-pull factors and the internal push-pull factors, right?

And I think what's really unique and one of the things that I've been trying and the OFL has been trying to really amplify for our, you know, siblings that are coming to us with these concerns. Definitely in the college, it's a huge concern, but post-secondary, broader.

I come from Belleville, Loyalist College. You know, the announcements that they have made, including closing the Hospitality program, which just completely redone.

You know, in Belleville we have Prince Edward County, which is the new hub of wines and tourism and it's going to be a 4% GDP loss to the community. And that is something that we're promoting a little bit more.

I wish everybody would just say, Hey, these things are needed because we need to be keeping community colleges and people working. But sometimes we have to start pulling out what are some of those other pieces, those external pressure points that we can actually start saying, Okay, is your small business prepared to absorb a 4% loss of GDP in the community. That means less students coming in, that means less families coming in, etc. and so forth.

And when people start to think about it in that sense, then suddenly they're like, well wait a moment, yeah, I need to be fighting.

And there was a great rally that happened at Loyalist College of the community and people coming en mass. But that's what we need to do. Is we need to start talking about the impact as the greater whole.

Because I think what I'm finding right now is that people are in such a scarcity mindset. And I really like the way that Jeff said it.

It's this financial crisis. I'm gonna make a decision today because I've gotta like stop the bleeding today. That's actually how we got into this mess, right?

Was, gee, there's not enough funding. Oh look, there's some international student funding idea concept that I can use.

And I think that's really where we need to get the communities more involved. What is the long-term impact of underfunding our college system in Ontario? And we can't afford that as a province.

And it really brings to mind the importance of this as we head into tariffs. One of the answers to addressing the tariffs is funding the college system so that we can do retraining and reprogramming of people who are going to be impacted by tariffs.

When we invest in the college system, when we invest in those jobs and we invest in the public, we actually are tariff-proofing our province.

You know, you don't have to take my word for it. You can go back and look through history of how injections into the public system, into the care economy, into education. Those things are what makes you resilient to those external pressures coming in from other places.

I am a parent of a student that's gonna be going off to college in the fall. We literally watched as programs he was applying for were disappearing from the system as he was applying. And he's looking at me going, well, what am I supposed to do? And I'm like. I don't know. And I think that that's what we need to think about.

You know, these colleges provide huge resources. They are huge part of our communities. The staff are a huge part of our communities. This isn't just a matter of the one teacher in this program. That person has a family. That person is probably volunteering in the community. Their families are participating in the community. And we have to look at this as a community crisis.

What does it mean when we're seeing these attacks on our post-secondary? It means that we're attacking our communities. And we're weakening those communities. And it's up to us as the broader labour movement to really amplify that and push back.

RESH: Now another major area that's experiencing this, you mentioned it before, Laura, is healthcare. I want us to get sort of to the roots of this because the Ontario conservatives, as you mentioned, Jeff, they're not the origins of this, but they are certainly enabling this and they've just been voted back in for an historic third term.

So Laura, what has been happening to public healthcare and healthcare workers?

LAURA: Well, the best thing I would say, it's on life support. Yeah, we can say that successive governments have done this. But what happens is that one government does it, and then it becomes easier for other people in power to do it right?

And so we have to really start putting some pressure and saying, it doesn't matter what government is doing it, it's wrong. End of sentence.

We're seeing in healthcare this little blurb that during the pandemic, the value of those workers, the perceived value of those workers went up. But the compensation value did not match it. As a matter of fact, the ink wasn't even dry on Bill-124, when we began the pandemic. And what the government should have done is at that time completely tore it up and said, Hey listen, you know, this is why. .

RESH: And that was around the wage freeze just to clarify.

LAURA: Around the wage freeze, right. And that really impacted. It impacted Jeff's colleagues and members. It impacted mine and the education system. You know, the K to 12 education system. It impacted healthcare workers. And the government didn't do that. The government did not take that opportunity to say, Hey, in the midst of a pandemic, we need to be investing in our healthcare system.

Instead, what we see is a government who has really picked up the books from Mike Harris and this crisis creation as a means to balance their books. Or, you know, enrich their donor friends. And that's what we're seeing. We're seeing this continuous underfunding. Because if you can create a crisis, if you can underfund healthcare, and make people believe that, oh, well if I just pay a little bit more outta my own pocket, I will receive - you allow privatization to insidiously creep into our system. And that's what you're seeing. You're seeing it in education, you're seeing it in social services, and in healthcare.

And when I see the work that's happening from ONA for instance, the Ontario Nurses Association, this is a group of people who cannot strike right? Legally, they do not have the ability to strike. But the work that they're doing around organizing, the work that they're doing around empowering those workers has been incredible.

You know, they're asking for nurse patient ratios. Well, no kidding. All studies show that that is a good thing. And yet we've got a government who just seems so completely unwilling to invest in healthcare. And instead will go out and say, well, we're investing in healthcare because we've built this hospital.

Well, la dee da! I remind people that if you build a hospital, you have a building. Healthcare and the provision of healthcare services requires people, from the people who are looking after the patients frontline, to the people who are triaging and doing the intake and data-entry, to the person who is cleaning. It's all people.

And if you're not going to actually invest in the operations of healthcare and solely invest in the capital funding of healthcare, you're not truly investing in healthcare. What you're doing is making buildings so that private companies can sweep in and use our taxpayer dollars as their place to set up private industries.

And I have a real problem with that. And I think most of us across the province do as well.

RESH: Well, it's interesting. And a really good example of this is what's happening around the opioid crisis and the closing down of supervised consumption sites. I mean, talking about the pandemic that was the invisible epidemic that just got worse.

LAURA: Predated the pandemic.

RESH: Predated and then shoved to the back of the news cycle because of the pandemic. And what you're talking about, the corporatization, the privatization. I remember when addictions, well, addictions still is treated very much as a criminal issue, but the struggle was to say, no, it's not a criminal issue, it's a health issue. Now is it a public health issue or a private health issue? Because we're seeing the closing down of public sites. Mm-hmm. But we're seeing it's become a real business opportunity as well.

LAURA: Absolutely. And we're also using emotional terms to ply on the public.

I proudly represented education workers for years. And, you know, when we would talk to custodians prior to the openings of those public safe consumption sites, they would tell stories of going and cleaning up the yard every single day. But when those safe consumption sites were built, they didn't have to do that anymore.

And there was this like, oh, well these are by schools. They were by schools because that's where people were gathering already. And actually providing that public safe consumption site kept the public safe.

What we've now done has made everywhere in public a consumption site, which will not be safe. And I really struggle with how the Conservatives, you know, really worked this narrative, because it is a healthcare issue. It is not a criminalization issue, it is a healthcare issue.

And saying that, oh, well, we don't want that. This NIMBY idea of not in my backyard is extremely problematic.

I often would remind people that a bar is also a safe consumption site, and yet we seem not to have a problem whatsoever of the locations of those.

And why is it that we have such a stigma around these safe consumption sites? How about we start looking about why that's happening, right? You know, people don't come into this world saying, I'm going to have an addiction. That isn't stamped on your forehead when you were born.

It is a long process that actually leads them to this. And we need to be addressing those factors. And that's not going to happen in a privatized system right? A private system actually wants there to be an increase in addiction because that's where they get their money. The more addicts that there are, the more recovery opportunities there are, the more times that they can take money outta people's pockets.

And we gotta think about it that way, right? What is in it for them? They actually want us to be sicker, weaker, tired, poor, less educated, because that's how they can take our money from us.

RESH: And our votes.

LAURA: And our votes. And we're seeing it. And that's why it's imperative that we have to start thinking about organizing for the long-haul. Not just organizing for one particular win or one particular moment, be that an election or a contract, but how do we organize long-term so that we're building that education, that community education about what we really need in the province of Ontario?

RESH: And again, when we're talking about public healthcare, whether it's safe consumption sites, whether it's the public hospitals and whatnot, these are major employers of public sector workers.

So, Jeff, do you wanna come in on that? What is happening in this growing privatization? Really the loss of public healthcare in terms of the workers in those areas.

JEFF: Obviously, the colleges train quite a few healthcare workers. This to me comes back to what Laura was talking about the colleges and this broader issue really being about communities. Not just with healthcare. The colleges extend into so many fields in our province. Obviously healthcare, nursing community workers, but also things like all the skilled trades, forestry, aviation. I mean, these are the

workers in communities that are the backbone of our economy. I think it's over 900 programs that the colleges offer in over 200 communities.

So I think bringing it back to that focus of the colleges being sort of the backbone of our economy and the concern that being this underfunded, now with this trade war, this being something that the provincial government will use as an excuse to further starve the system.

You know, Oh, there's tough times. We don't have the money to fund the system.

Well, we know that this is about priorities. So as I was saying earlier, by the college's own projection, at one point, there's gonna be a \$1.4 billion shortfall in the coming year because of this immediate crisis.

And we know that to bring funding up to the national average per student, it would require another \$1.5 billion. A lot of money. But keep in mind just last month, the provincial government found over \$3 billion to send out pre-election rebates to folks, right? So there's money there when they want it.

And so to me this is about, you know, you're failing the colleges, you're failing communities. And therefore failing students and workers.

One of the concerns is that the trade war and tariffs will be a red herring that's thrown in there to distract from what we know needs to happen in our post-secondary sector.

RESH: That was actually my next question, so thank you for segueing to that, the trade war .Because we are seeing such an upsurge in nationalism, which can go in a good direction or a not so good direction. You know, what you're talking about, the red herring. There are tough times ahead, but as Canadians bannng together, we gotta pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and whatnot.

Are you already seeing signs that workers are being asked to make more of a sacrifice. Because, you know, in any war, whether it's a hot war, a cold war, a trade war, it's always those on the front lines who are being asked to make the bigger sacrifice.

Are you already seeing that happening?

JEFF: I'll burrow down to our specific context, and Laura might have a broader perspective on this. But I mean, you can never be sure what's at play. But we've seen over the, you know, the last 5 to 10 years, the sort of corporatization of our colleges.

And we're now in a situation where there are austerity measures that are being rolled out. Within this context, how much will that be used to justify some of what the

colleges are doing? Some of this restructuring, some of the programs they're getting rid of the threat of amalgamation.

It's been in the wind for a long time that there's perhaps a desire to amalgamate some of the northern colleges. And those are particularly marginalized communities without those institutions, like some of those northern communities particularly rely on those colleges to provide the training and that kind of lifeline to their economy.

So how much of this will be a sort of disaster capitalism where they're saying, Okay, now's the time where we can do this, because nobody is able to really collect themselves enough to stop this, push these changes through.

It's grim to think about, but we'll find out to what extent these austerity measures are gonna be carried out on the backs of workers.

And it's a scary thought.

RESH: It is a scary thought. And again, like both of you said, it's also this polycrisis where, what's the name of the film?... Everything Everywhere All At Once. I mean this, it feels like that, but the OFL Laura has called for a united response to the trade war. So tell us more about this and what are the unions planning and are they actually being listened to by policymakers?

LAURA: So, you know, right away when we started thinking about the tariffs... I mean I don't know how you have a discussion about tariffs without centering workers first.

And you know, I would've said that about the pandemic. When I was with CUPE and we were working through that, we were pushing for worker-centered and we were able to achieve, along with our comrades in OPSEU, we were able to achieve these worker-centered tables to address pandemic issues in the school. So, there is kind of a little bit of a blueprint on how we can do it.

And so we're still pushing. We're calling for Doug Ford to bring us together on the table. Justin Trudeau, before he was finished as Prime Minister, he did bring together in Toronto, an economic summit. And I did attend. And you know, there's many people who say, well, you shouldn't attend or you should attend.

If there's gonna be conversations about us, they better be with us, is my way of thinking about it. And, I think, It's important to be there in those spaces and holding space for workers and ensuring that our issues are being centered as well.

Because otherwise you're just gonna have all of these big business people talking about how much money they can get from the government for essentially corporate welfare. And the risk of that is exactly what Jeff is talking about, using the tariffs and the impact of those tariffs to further broader corporate desires. And I think that's a problem.

And we saw that during the pandemic. Where the pandemic became the reason for the rationale, "supply-chain management", if anybody remembers those words, that drove almost all of us. And I remember thinking, once you put the price of bread up because of a pandemic or the price of toilet paper, because everybody needed like 9,000 rolls of it, you never could bring the price back down again.

And so it really kind of instigated this inflationary period because people realize they could profit off of this. That's a big concern that I have, is that people are gonna profitize off of this, this tariff piece. And so it's imperative that we have a worker-centered voice in this.

I've actually spoken to Minister Piccini and said, Hey, listen, like this is your opportunity to really have a worker-centric, it's also an opportunity to talk about the nationalization of things, you know.

LAURA: I've never been so kind of mixed up about how I feel about a Canadian flag as I have been in the last 10 years of my life. One minute I'm not sure, and the next minute I'm like, woo-hoo. And you know, you're not sure again.

But I think the real thing that I find missing in the whole conversation about tariffs is the lack of actual discussion around nationalizing pieces that we are dependent on other countries for. There was a little bit of a glimmer of this when we were in the pandemic and we were talking about not having accessible vaccines and maybe we should go back to producing our own, etc. And then it kind of went by the wayside again.

And I see in the comments somebody saying, well, what's nationalizing?

It's using public funds to create public entities that are owned and operated by the people. Back in my day, and I might be dating myself, sorry, but you know, Air Canada was actually once upon a time owned by the government of Canada. Ontario Hydro was owned by the people of Ontario. And what happened is those profits, much like the LCBO, which folks from, OPSEU/SEFPO would be very familiar about, is those profits from those, you know, those companies then get circulated back into the revenues of the government.

And so, if you think about the housing crisis, why are we not using this opportunity to nationalize houses, right? Or why aren't we looking at co-op housing? Why are we not looking at that opportunity? And I think that that's, you know, one of the things that we wanna be able to push is how do we ensure that workers are centered in this?

Because you and I both know the people who will be paying the price will not be the CEOs, the people who will be paying the price are the workers. And one of the challenges that we're having right now, and we just discussed at the OFL table last week is this push to buy Canadian. I think it's great.

You know, you always should buy from your local. But one of the things that I challenge people to consider is that not everything that is owned by Americans is actually produced in America. So the one that I use all the time is Lay's Potato Chips. There are thousands of workers in Cambridge that are unionized with Steel.

By boycotting Lay's Potato Chips, we are actually hurting our fellow workers in Ontario. And so yeah, I'm all for, and I love when I see that people are turning products upside down and all of the good stuff. I think there's some fun things that are happening.

LAURA: But you know, we're really pushing to be very clear that when we're talking about tariffs and buying Canadian, that we also start talking about are we protecting Canadian workers? Because listen, if you're not gonna protect Canadian workers, we're gonna have a problem because those jobs are gonna go elsewhere.

The other thing that I would say about tariffs, and the one thing that we need to contemplate as workers is, when do we start organizing so that no machinery leaves factories in Ontario?

When do we start making sure that people know how, from all sectors, to be on those front lines, protecting the work that is currently happening in Ontario. Because if you look back to the early nineties, that is some of what needed to take place, right? As we were starting to really contemplate this whole branch economy that existed in Ontario and the American corporations just picking up and moving entire factories.

We as communities are going to have to step in and be there so that that doesn't happen. We have to ensure that we continue to manufacture goods in Ontario. And it's gonna require all of us to be pushing this government to make sure it happens.

RESH: And again public ownership. I mean, one of the, the things we know...

LAURA: Public ownership, please.

RESH: Yeah. Well, this is the age of corporate-driven inequality. That was the outcome of Oxfam report not too long ago. I mean, this is the age more and more power is being shifted to the corporate sector.

Obviously this is impacting people on the frontline. It's impacting workers in different ways because different groups of workers are impacted in different ways. We see that along the lines of ageism, homophobia, transphobia, certainly race, gender, definitely class.

Could you talk about the systemic issues that are impacting workers, but also that the labour movement is not exempt from this? Because we see these same issues within the labour movement.

LAURA: Yeah, I mean it's really like from all sides, right? And I was just thinking, even as Jeff was reflecting on the voluntary retirement. Dangling these packages means that we also are having an exodus from the workforce of significant value. And those jobs aren't coming back. Those are hard to get back after they're gone.

When you think about the ageism, I often think about young workers when I think about ageism. But these mandatory or voluntary, voluntary, I guess I should put my air quotes up there, "voluntary", retirements are ageism in another way. It's dangling it in front of some of our more seasoned workers and kind of pushing them out of the workplace.

And they may not be ready, may not be, you know, ready to do that.

And labour is not, you know, we are not exempt. We are just a complete snapshot of what's happening out in our communities. But it's important for labour to actually embrace the fact that we can do things better and we should be held to a different standard as to how we do things better and how we are communicating and how we are connecting.

I would say that we saw that during the provincial election. There's less diversity in the House in Queens Park than there was before. I can say that when you look at the NDP Party, but when you look at it as a whole. There are less women sitting at Queens Park. There's less racialized folks sitting in Queens Park.

So this kind of like flooded the field, overwhelming, overstimulated kind of place that I think workers are in right now is actually allowing this kind of maintenance of the status quo, you know, pulling away. And then it's compounded by you know. what I love to call the Mango Menace in the south, pushing anti-DEI policies. And there is no border that keeps that out of our mindset in Canada, right. And so you're starting to see that happen as well. And that's where I think labour is going to have to speak up.

And I remind folks all the time that the reason why they wanna silence labour is because we do really good equity work, right? So if you can silence us, if you can remove our funding, I mean, you've got Pierre Poilievre who would love to get rid of the Rand Formula tomorrow, if he came into power, that just allows them to silence the really good equity work that so many of us in labour are doing.

And it's only going to further us back into the dark ages. And it's why we have to be fighting.

It's hard because a lot of people will say to me, But how can I fight about an equity issue, where at the same time people are losing their houses and their jobs.

And the thing is, is that we have to figure out how to do both. And we have to actually bring more people into the space in order to be able to do both, right?

We have to really start thinking about organizing in that long-term sense and bringing more people into that space. And also as leaders, letting go. We don't have to do it all. We have to actually embrace the fact that there are really great people surrounding us that we need to empower to do what they need to do.

And I think, you know, that was my big lesson out of OSBCU. The more power I gave away, the stronger we became. And I think as a whole, we really need to start thinking about how we're going to do that and really starting to map that out and making sure that we are empowering workers to do just that.

But also empowering beyond the face value. Who is missing from the conversations? And how do we include those into those spaces? And also make them feel welcome and give them the tools.

RESH: Well, in terms of who has long been missing from the conversation, and I wanna go back to something you were talking about, Jeff.

The world of work has dramatically shifted over the last decade with more workers trapped in precarity, right? So the gig economy, part-time, non-standard, casual, migrant workers. The majority of them not unionized. So this step now to have part-time, contract faculty in the college join the union, that is a major, major step.

So those are our colleagues. Many of our students, students right here, right now are also in this situation where they're in precarious jobs.

And, you know, it sort of occurs to me that it wasn't so long ago where the occupation that you belong to determined your class status. Now it seems that it's the security of your job that determines your class status. So if you were teaching in higher education, you were middle class. Now the majority of people who are precarious are working class.

So Jeff, could you speak a bit more about how unions are responding to, yes, we have this sector of part-time workers who are coming in. But in terms of gig workers, these other designations of non-unionized workers, how are unions responding to the shifting definition of work?

JEFF: Yeah, I mean you brought up the most prominent example, the one that's on our radar, obviously. I think a lot of students at colleges don't realize the extent to which precarity has come to characterize teaching in the colleges.

Because I think there is this image of, Oh, a college professor! Well, that's a really nice occupation to have. You've probably got a nice house and a car. And, for here at George Brown, for example, 72% of faculty, of your teachers, students, are gig workers. Contract to contract. Four months at a time. Sometimes eight weeks at a time.

This dovetails with this issue of the corporatization of the colleges because the thinking is, okay, let's get as much as we can outta these workers, not invest in them and therefore not invest really in education and just kind of churn as many in as we can. Bring them in. Get them to teach. Don't actually invest in them.

And so I think it's gonna be a long organizing effort, but this step to finally have part-time and sessional faculty have representation it is just such a huge step. And it's not gonna be overnight, it's not gonna fix everything just like that, but they're finally going to have a real voice.

And they'll be able to come together and use that collective voice. Really the key for workers in these situations is giving them that forum to be able to kind of come together and actually stand up for themselves because before this happened, there's zero transparency, there's just no way to be able to kinda get that collective force together.

So I think this is a huge first step of being able to say to all these workers, all these precarious employed faculty, you have a voice. You always did, but now you've got that sort of formal aspect to it where we can push things forward along with you.

RESH: Now I wanna get to some questions from our participants. So Ashley, do you wanna take that over?

ASHLEY: Yes, thanks Resh. We have a question for you, Jeff, asking if you have any statistics regarding this underfunding of education that you could share with us.

JEFF: I got a few off the top of my head.

But I think I had mentioned the 56% stat. So per student funding in Ontario colleges is at 56% of the national average. I believe like Saskatchewan for example more than doubles the per student funding compared to our colleges..

LAURA: And they have Scott Mo.

JEFF: That's right.

LAURA: A horrible Conservative government.

JEFF: Go figure, right? Speaking of Conservative governments, remember that the Ontario College system was founded by the Education Premier, Conservative Bill Davis. And at the time it was founded, the Ontario College System had over 70% of its operating grants were from the government. So a publicly funded system.

Now it's about 25%. So, I mean, that puts in perspective what we're talking about here. The phrase that's often used now is publicly... I think "publicly supported

colleges" rather than publicly funded institutions because to say that they're publicly funded now is really kind of actually a misuse of the phrase.

So those are just a few stats. And there's a really good policy paper that's been released by OPSEU called The Better Plan for Our Colleges, that's got quite a few stats and graphs and lots of quantitative info.

LAURA: It's funny just to build on that too, Jeff. Like when you think about it, when people talk about, Oh, I want the good old days back, and people kind of reminisce; you know, I often remind them that yeah, Bill Davis did a lot for education, but when you think about those good old days, the majority of things were publicly funded, right. And that is why there seemed to be this great opportunity. That's why the economy seemed to be so strong, is because there was a focus on publicly funded institutions and in ensuring that people all had an opportunity to access them. There's a correlation between things getting bad and the underfunding of our public institutions.

RESH: And it's interesting that on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the college system, we were all out on the strike line.

LAURA: Yeah,

JEFF: I remember it well. Yeah.

RESH: And trying to uphold the very principles that the Davis government found the colleges for.

I wanted to ask you, Laura, we started the decade in a pandemic. We're dealing with post-pandemic inflation. We're seeing dramatic shifts in everything from huge concentrations of power in the hands of really powerful minorities, tech bros, what have you. Climate technology, AI, automation. Economies are in major upheaval. I mean, we're seeing again, everything right all at once. This is the polycrisis. Are unions getting stronger at this moment? Are they able to respond to the polycrisis?

LAURA: Hmm. So I saw a meme somewhere that said, I'm really tired of being the hard part of somebody's 2060 history exam. And I couldn't agree with that more.

You know, later in my life, I'm gonna reflect back on it saying, the 2020s have been horrible, not a good time whatsoever. Do not recommend. Zero stars.

I am seeing personally a shift in unions. I am seeing a shift and I think a lot of it is coming from the worker base, that is saying like, Hey, what the heck are you doing?

And I just, I wanna commend OPSEU/SEFPO because as an organizer I know the kind of effort that would've been put in to organizing part-time precarious workers. That is the hardest group. Give me a full-time workplace anytime to organize. The amount of effort that would've went in by your organizers to achieve that needs to be

commended because that's a task in itself. And that is, I think, the one thing that people need to take away. And so that to me is where you see the growth.

When we are seeing unions tackling things like, you know, the Steel Workers tackling Starbucks. And now Steel for instance is in Ontario, I believe they have three or four different Starbucks locations that they have started to unionize. Those are difficult places. Those are difficult places to achieve first collective agreements. Those are difficult places to organize. That is amazing.

I also am seeing unions being willing to strike. Workers being willing to strike and saying, yeah, this is what we've gotta do to do this. And you know, just recently I was on the picket line in Waterloo where municipal workers were saying, no, like, now is the time we've gotta do this.

You know, originally it was called the "hot labour summer", if people remember. We went from November, 2022 into this like world of strikes and it's not stopped. I think what you're seeing is leaders in unions also recognizing the need to organize. And that makes me happy.

The shift from business unionism to, you know, we're just a place to handle your grievances and negotiate your contract to really putting the power and empowering workers. And where we're seeing that happen, you are seeing huge gains. And I think that is terrific. And so I do think that it is a magical time.

The question really is, whatcha gonna do about it, right? Like, are we going to, as a group continue to embrace this and continue to push back? Yes. I think that the one thing that is on my mind... You know, we're heading into an OFL convention in November. Workers in Ontario, regardless of what the outcome is...

I think we all can agree it's not gonna be an NDP federal government. It's either gonna be Liberals or Conservatives. And I call them cancer and chemo; one's gonna kill you, the other one's gonna make you sick. We're gonna be under, in Ontario, under two governments that are not worker friendly, both federally and provincially.

And it's going to be incumbent on workers to really embrace organizing principles, to really embrace their community. You know, now's not the time to be quiet. Now's the time that we're going to have to join our voices together to really push back. And I think if we're learning anything, it's not enough to just go canvas or get out the vote. We actually have to be involved in government every single day of their term and really push back.

You know, it was months after, Doug Ford got his second term, that he tried to force the notwithstanding clause on education workers. They were ready to push back. We need to be at that place. We need to be providing education, labour education, civics education, political education. We need to be providing that in our workplaces with our coworkers and in our communities. Because now's the time.

There's a whole lot of white dudes with oligarch tendencies running the world right now. And the antidote to that is going to be worker power.

RESH: Yeah, the brologarchy um,

LAURA: It is the brologarchy.

RESH: The brologarchy. And we do have a question. What would you like to see in a federal platform? So Jeff, why don't we start with you?

JEFF: I mean obviously given the subject we're on, I would like to see clearly worker-friendly, labour-friendly policies.

Laura mentioned what we can maybe expect of a Poilievre government that would not seem to be particularly friendly towards labour, in fact quite hostile towards labour. So yeah, a platform that recognizes the importance of unions and is friendly towards workers generally.

But yeah, I mean, Laura May have some more developed thoughts on this.

LAURA: You know, I've always been a provincial government girl. And it's probably from being a public sector worker myself.

We need to be really reflective of the Charter of Rights. We need to be really reflective of how we are continuing to push for equity.

I have a huge concern and people will say to me, oh, don't worry about it, Laura. It was just a war cabinet, it only lasted seven days or however long. But I had a huge concern that when Carney took over, we got rid of the Ministry of Women and Gender Equity. We got rid of the Ministry of Seniors. We got rid of the official languages.

We got rid of the term "labour" in the Ministry of Labour and replaced it with the Ministry of Family and Jobs.

Those things to me, and you know, I want to be the person to say, oh yeah, those are just seven days. But I tend to be a little bit more pessimistic when I see things like that happening. I tend to be the type of person to believe that when people who show you who they are, you should really believe them. And I think that that was a really poor move by Mark Carney to do that. But again, he's got another guy on the other side in a different party who would do that and more, right?

So I think when we're looking at a federal platform, I think we need to be demanding that we are enshrining those pieces. Our rights are not up for negotiation in any way, shape or form. Whether that be labour rights, whether that be human rights, they are not up for negotiation. They are entrenched and they are enshrined.

I also think we need to look at public ownership again. And you know, I know people are gonna say, oh my gosh, the crazy communist Laura Walton. No, I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about reinvesting our own wealth into our own wealth.

And we know that investment in public sector actually generates more revenue for the government than it does detract it. When we give money away to corporate welfare, we don't see that money ever again, right.

We talked about this a lot when I was in the education sector. When you give us money, we spend our money back in our communities. When you give someone like Galen Weston money, it goes into an offshore account, never to be seen the light of day in Ontario again.

So I, I really would like to see those things. I think it's time to invest in Canada. Into owning what we are investing in. And I think there has to be a continued push to ensure that our rights as Canadians, our rights as workers are entrenched and that there is more of a push.

I think it's great that we have Anti-Scab legislation federally. I'm not sure what the holdup is in Ontario. Those are things that need to be put in place.

I think it needs to be easier to join a union. I think it needs to be easier for people to access things like the Human Rights Tribunal and the Labour Relations Boards.

Those are important pieces. It's how we actually ensure fairness in our communities and it's gonna be up to us to fight for them.

JEFF: Just to quickly add to what Laura said there. The fact that the colleges and the law firms that work for them were able to drag out the unionization drive and prevent it of part-time, sessional faculty for almost, it's over seven years now, Something's wrong structurally when that can happen.

ASHLEY: A question. A lot of responses to the tariffs from our politicians have been to increase military spending to appease Trump. How do we think this rhetoric and tariff responses will affect workers and public services on the whole?

LAURA: I'm gonna try and tackle this by saying I am in an all new world in my new role. One of the things that I love about doing my work is how it has really allowed me to push outside of the boundaries that I knew and to kind of start to consider things.

I think when you think about the investment of militarization, I mean, I'm not a war-loving person. I believe that we don't kill people, period. Full stop, the end. That should be the overarching rule.

The way that I have about investment in militarization comes back to the nationalization again. We have people that we proudly represent in IIM, the machinists who build planes.

Well, if we're going to be investing in it, can we be investing in Ontario workers or Canadian workers that are building this? Because right now a lot of it is being investing into American corporations to fight America? And it doesn't really resonate with me. So when I think about that, you know, that is part of it.

But I think if you're gonna invest in militarization because you think that Trump is gonna invade Canada, I think that you also have to invest in other pieces that make us stronger. It's not just militarization, it isn't just a game of risk. What else are we investing in?

Sure you can have a war and that's going to pump money into the economy. We all know that, right? Any study of history or economics knows that. But I think we have to look at it from are we ensuring that we're investing in our own communities and in our own country?

I think there's other things that we can do before we start down this kind of let's play war. And I think we haven't even started to scratch the surface of that. And it's why I think it's imperative that we have a worker-centered response to it. Because I think if we started looking at it from a worker-centric perspective, we would see that there's a lot of things that we could do long before we get to firing of guns.

RESH: Great. And Jeff, do you have any response to that ?

JEFF: Just that idea that a strong public sector makes us stronger is what we really need to emphasize. And to not let ourselves be distracted from that fundamental truth.

That, that the stronger our public sector is, the stronger we'll be as an economy and as a nation

LAURA: It's actually what makes us most productive. I mean, that was one of the takeaways I had from that meeting with Justin Trudeau. That when they were negotiating to get a Volkswagen plant up here, one of the things that made us more attractive was the fact that we had public health, public education, publicly-funded and publicly delivered. And that actually set us apart.

So I think we need to start looking at public services as the growth opportunity and what actually makes us more productive as opposed to what has been the mindset of, you know, they're bleeding us all dry, which we all know is not the truth. We need to turn that around.

JEFF: And the idea that investing in public sectors it's an investment, it's not a cost.

LAURA: Yeah.

JEFF: And stop thinking of it as a cost rather as an investment.

RESH: Now, the final question I want to put to both of you is really the theme for this year, and it is what are we working for?

JEFF: Well, I think I'll return to what we were saying about the colleges and , I think this applies more broadly. But for us in the colleges, the staff and faculty, I think we are working for our communities.

We're working to train the citizens who will go into our communities and contribute to it. And, you know, that's what drives us. I know so many of my colleagues, they are committed to the programs, are committed to their students because they're building communities. So I think that's what many of us are working for.

RESH: Thank you. And Laura, what are we working for?

LAURA: I think that we're working for, and it was a theme when we were doing the provincial election, the Ontario we need. I think that is what we, at the OFL, that is what we moving forward are working for is, what is the Ontario that we need?

What is the Ontario that we are leaving behind for future generations of workers?

What do we wanna be remembered as? Do we wanna be remembered as the generation that basically just gave up and took all of those hard-fought wins that came from giants before us and shove them on a shelf? Or are we going to double-down and ensure that we're building a better Ontario?

I think we're on the cusp of something pretty fantastic. And I think the opportunity is there and collectively we can see it through.

RESH: Absolutely. Laura and Jeff, thank you so much for this excellent discussion and for your work and leadership in the labour movement.

It has been a pleasure having this discussion with you. And I'd also like to thank all of our participants for being part of this session for your questions as well. And so with that, I will now bring this session to a close.

LAURA: Awesome. Thank you everyone. Take care.

JEFF: Thanks everyone.

RESH: That was Laura Walton, President of the Ontario Federation of Labour and Jeff Brown, Chief Steward and 2nd Vice-President of OPSEU/SEFPO, Local 556, speaking at the George Brown College Labour fair in Toronto.

And this is The Courage My Friends podcast.

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

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