Courage My Friends Podcast Series IV – Episode 7
***Labour Fair 2023 Panel:* Food Justice, Labour Rights and Social Gastronomy**

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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

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

STREET VOICE 1: When I graduate, will there be such a thing as job security? Will I still have access to healthcare?

STREET VOICE 2: We're not seeing the same increase in wages as we are in inflation and cost of living. And I'm worried about what that's gonna mean as far as having a future, having a family and being able to grow.

STREET VOICE 1 Everything is more expensive. I don't know if it's because of the climate crisis or all of this conflict but I have kids and I need to believe their future is going to be better and brighter.
[music]

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

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

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

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

RESH: Three years into a pandemic that piggybacked on four decades of neoliberal erosion and a climate crisis over a century in the making, while crises of conflict and capitalism continue to rage around us - these are for many desperate times, indeed. From gig work and privatization of public welfare to the increasing precarity of people and planet, how are workers pushing back and organizing for the collective good?

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

This season's final episode of *The Courage My Friends* podcast takes us back to the March, 2023, George Brown College Labour Fair in Toronto, and features a recording of the discussion panel on food justice, food access, and the rights of workers across food industries.

Chef, social gastronomy, activist and educator and host of the *Hot Plate* Podcast. Joshna Maharaj, organizer, educator and activist with *Justice for Migrant Worker*s. Chris Ramsaroop and Partner and Membership Director at the Full Plate. Charlotte Big Canoe, discuss food justice, social gastronomy and the rights of workers from farms and factories to fine dining and food agencies in these times.

Here now is the Labour Fair Discussion Panel on Food Industries: Feeding Ourselves on a Precarious Planet.

We begin with an introduction by the panel moderator, food policy specialist, and professor in the Center for Hospitality and Culinary Arts at George Brown College. Lori Stahlbrand.

LORI: Today's panel is about food. That is the key today. And many people argue that our food system is broken, and we know that the way that we produce food is at the heart of the planetary crisis. One third of greenhouse gas emissions are connected to the food system.

From a social justice aspect, food security is a reality for more than 4 million Canadians. And BIPOC communities in Canada are more profoundly affected by food insecurity. More than a quarter of Black households in Canada are food insecure. The figure is higher still for Indigenous communities.

And the irony of all this is that the very people who grow, process, cook, serve our food are among the lowest paid and the most precarious workers.

So this morning we're going to explore what that means and what can be done about it. And we have three really terrific speakers: Joshna Maharaj, Chris Ramsaroop, and Charlotte Big Canoe.

And Our first speaker today is chef and activist Joshna Maharaj. Joshna is an old friend and colleague. She is a chef and activist who wants to help everyone have a better relationship with their food. And she believes very strongly in the power of chefs and the concept of social gastronomy, which she's going to talk about to bring values of hospitality, sustainability, and social justice to the table.

She's done a lot of work with hospitals and schools in Canada to build new models for institutional food procurement, and she's written a book about this called Take Back the Tray.

She's constantly finding ways to make food stories come alive including here at George Brown where she is teaching in the hospitality program. And she hosts the Kitchen Help Desk, which is a feature on the afternoon show on CBC here in Toronto. And she also hosts a podcast called Hot Plate, which is currently in its fourth season.

JOSHNA: Thank you, Lori. It's lovely to be here with you. And hello everyone.

I love this topic because I think that while there's a lot that's been super difficult about the past two and a half, three years, it has opened up opportunity and shown us things in our communities and in our industry that we would have never understood as possible if we were not pushed in this direction.

So what social gastronomy is. It's a new-ish idea, but really it's a new name for a thing that has been around for a while. I'm delighted that it exists because it really was a perfect name to the way I am a chef and the kind of work that I do.

Social gastronomy is a practice about the power of the kitchen to change lives.

Now that is a giant thing to say. But essentially what we're talking about is a growing movement of chefs who are finding really meaningful ways to use our craft to support and nurture communities.

It's using our celebrity, our purchasing power and our influence to build a more just and sustainable food system, because people listen to us and they want our advice about things. And it's about providing opportunities for young cooks to grow and thrive. That is something as a teacher now I am deeply involved in.

But also it's about taking the idea of hospitality beyond restaurants, to institutions, to community spaces, and to public policy. And that's the piece that I really want to talk about now.

One of the hugest bricks that has fallen, let's say in the wall in our industry has been this really high level fine-dining concept, right? The crumbling has already happened, but then we have sort of cultural indictments, like we see in this movie that has just come out called The Menu. It is very appropriately titled, a comedy / thriller, because it is intense and wild. And if you haven't seen it, I highly recommend it.

But really the flavor of the moment is that there's a distancing, right? There's too much happening on the ground right now for us to be too involved in the high fancy notion of fine-dining.

An example, Chef Jose Andrés. He is a Spanish-born but very American-settled chef, who founded World Central Kitchen in 2010, built on the simple but powerful idea that it is possible to serve, not just life-sustaining calories to people in times of crisis, but meals that actually taste good.

This really sprung out during Hurricane Maria that affected Puerto Rico during the Trump administration. And importantly to note, it was the sort of dismissal and disregard of the Trump administration that pushed people on the ground to jump in and to help out .

But the thing that is so wonderful, in my opinion about what Chef Jose Andrés has done is that he has just simply taken the way we do things as chefs and broadened

his understanding of who his guests are and who the people are who need to be cared for, right?

The most important thing he understood is that A) people need to eat really good food, all the time, right? This is not just celebration time. And arguably, particularly when they're displaced or when there's a disaster and they're out of their homes or whatever sort of horrible thing it is.

But the other important piece is that what has grown from this is Chef Jose's ability to use his chefy culinary network with suppliers and kitchens and just knowing how to work a network in a community has proven to be far more effective than anything the likes of FEMA and the Red Cross and the Salvation Army have been able to come up with. And that's the magic, that is the piece that I love so much. Because it's just evidence of the fact that the action needs to happen on the ground.

All these board meetings and blueprints and ideas and focus groups; while I understand the importance of it all, sometimes it's just too much.

And the thing that chefs can do is we can land in any given situation and figure it out because the work we do is always insane like this, right? Even sort of a resting dinner service, there's always some madness that happens. So part of our job is to just be ready for it.

To take that principle, he reached out, he landed in Puerto Rico and got people to open sports stadiums to get into those kitchens. Other people brought trucks of whatever. He used Twitter to get plates and forks and you know, this kind of thing over. But he did it in days, in hours sometimes. And that is because he's a chef. And because the role that chefs can play in nurturing and sustaining communities goes two ways, right?

Chefs take care of communities.

But then when things get thick, they're also rallyers, right? And that to me is really where our potential lies.

This is my favorite, favorite quote, "He was trying to make humanitarian aid more human and responsive to the specific needs of people in crisis, rather than determined by massive systems and protocols."

The first thing they did in Puerto Rico was pull out, because he's Spanish, massive paella pan and just made, *arroz con pollo* for everybody.

And just the simple notion that maybe folks needed some culturally appropriate food in a disastrous moment is also another thing that's super important as opposed to the airlifting in of some random, weird calorie-dense, culture-free sort of edible kind of thing, you know?

I love all of these ideas because it still stays true to who we are as cooks and the role that we want to play or can play in society.

One of the great things that World Central Kitchen does is partners with kitchens on the ground locally. And in the pandemic it was particularly important cuz we had all these pretty quiet kitchens not doing very much. So instead of setting up whole new operations, they very smartly understood you just resource the folks who are already on the ground, to activate them to get these meals out.

Then people get paid to do some work. Local suppliers get paid. Farmers can sell their stuff in a very regional sort of way.

One of the things I loved is that Chef Marcus Samuelson, with I think like empanadas and cornbread for people waiting in line to vote in the US. I mean, amazingly this act has now become illegal, from what I understand, the administration. Because they understood the, I don't know, subversive behavior of cornbread. But let's lean in sometimes I think, to the subversive power of cornbread.

So social gastronomy is about using our craft as cooks to create and nurture social change in the world around us.

It is our values in both front and back-of-house spaces that allow us to do this. What this hinges on, in my opinion, is that the beauty of what we do is that hospitality inherently maintains dignity, right? Ultimately it does not matter where the people have come from who come to sit at our table. The point is they're at our table and they're hungry, and our job is to feed them. It does not matter where people have come from. The point is that they are here with us.

I teach my students as they move forward in their careers, thinking about what kind of chefs they want to be, these two ideas as the most important guiding principles, right?

Hospitality: we understand as the generous, welcoming relationship between host and guest.

Sustainability: meeting the needs of the present without compromising the needs of the future.

I like to drill down even further and just think about the idea that hospitality is how we treat each other and sustainability is the way we treat the earth.

And if we rile with those two things, we will be, I think well-resourced, to meet the needs of whatever the future holds for us.

The kitchen and dining room are powerful tools for social change.

I wanna tell you a little story about time in the pandemic.

Never before in my life did I see grocery store shelves look like this. The panic around the shopping was real, and people hoarded like this was a serious thing.

And I laughed at the fact that it took a global pandemic to get our province to encourage people to cook their own food at home, right? And this was in my Twitter feed. It blew my mind.

Then we had crazy situations like a Tyson meat-packing plant right here in Waterloo. And around the pandemic these spaces really became highlighted as problematic areas for a number of reasons. They had outbreaks that followed the path of the presence of these meat-packing facilities.

It was determined that folks were working too closely together. So plexi sheets were hung in between workers. I mean, we can all debate the efficacy of all of that.

But the stories that came out about the working conditions, about the concern around injury and health and work, well, it was dismal, disastrous report.

Outbreaks declared at meat processing plants. They were all being shut down you know, and returned. And this was sort of a back and forth that happened a lot.

Now simultaneously as this was happening, the most searched recipe in the US for the first year of quarantine was hamburgers. And first of all, I was like, I don't understand why people need a recipe. It's a very simple recipe. So that's a curiosity that people were searching.

But if we imagine simultaneously, everybody is at home, going to places like COSTCO and filling up on meat. So the demand for ground beef all time high. Then launching people into very unsafe working conditions and revealing a whole bunch of other problems about some exploitation and some real problems about how the humans were being treated in these spaces.

But we didn't like... the connection of those two were not made. The idea that we're all sitting at home just wanting to eat burgers. But what does that actually mean? Where's that meat going to come from? What is this really all about? The interconnectedness of all of that was something that really caught my attention.

Meanwhile, while all of this was happening, our restaurants lay quiet, right? My friend Suzanne Barr, she had just opened this space and had to shut it down almost just as quickly. And there was an eeriness. We went into her kitchen to see the quiet, and then all the cups, the full shelves, right? Nothing was in the dishwasher, nothing was at a table.

It was terrible really, because we had no idea how long this was going to last and what this was really going to be about.

Then at the same time as this was happening, we saw this. [Aerial view of rows and rows of cars in line.] Now this blows my mind. An American photo because of social distancing requirements of people in line for a food bank.

This is like May, June, 2020. Right. It's not even deep into pandemic times. It's terrifying this early in the game for this to be the scene.

Now gorgeous lunches were put out by the lovely folks at The Stop [Community Food Centre in Toronto]. They instantly had to move their dining service to takeout service. Where the needs started bumping and rising already by the time May and April showed up. The fact that like almost a quarter of the daily budget had to go to buy takeout containers that were only alive for like three minutes, because people just couldn't sit down inside and eat.

But I love the fact that they continued to put this beautiful food out there, right? This team was committed as ever to making these beautiful meals that they serve every day to people, still accessible for folks in this crazy new environment.

There is this wonderful shipping container market at Moss Park. This is sort of Queen and Sherburne here in Toronto. A lovely little place serving three big apartment towers.

The majority of the folks who live in those towers are isolated seniors. And so their quarantine experience was a very precarious one.

Now so many of us were at home baking, but couldn't actually keep eating all of the things that we were making. The practice of baking, I found super soothing, but for sure my body was like, we can't keep eating all this sugar and starch.

So I got together with some of my chef pals because we saw that these lovely bags of fresh food were being delivered to isolated seniors in those towers.

So we put two things together. We started baking, but packing up the baking to share with others.

I drove by and like safe distance dropped off and picked up all these lovely packages of food. And it was a nice way to sort of connect with people in this crazy moment.

Then we had the notion where restaurant kitchens still had a lot of perishable inventory. The shutdown was maybe two weeks, then another week, then another week. But we had to deal with the things that were in the fridges. So we just cranked out focaccia. We made soup because soup goes far and it's easy and it's simple.

And then I put a call out for some donations and people were super generous. Farmers sent things. Restaurants sent things. And it was amazing to see people just started sending electronic transfers of money to support this so I could buy ingredients and containers and labels and all this kind of stuff.

And my car got full Friday mornings was my delivery run. And the generosity literally filled the back of my car, right? People started baking. It was a thing to do. It was a way to occupy themselves. Making cute signs. Kids got involved too. There was so much care and attention put into all of this because they were super happy to be helpful.

A litre of this soup could keep one of these vulnerable seniors going for a day and a half, day or two. And they were delighted to see restaurants they recognized and that kind of nice stuff. It was wonderful to watch this all happen, right?

Chef Darren from [?], he said, "Come on, Joshna, for sure we can do Thanksgiving meal for everybody."

So I put the call out and donations came in for turkeys, for meat, for vegetables, the whole bit.

And we farmed out different kitchens, put these dinners together that we were able to share. I think we ended up with 210 of these dinners that went out to folks including in the encampments and at the overdose clinic in that neighborhood. And at that moment, for folks who really had no other plan for Thanksgiving, this was a very exciting thing to be a part of.

Now, here's the thing, I intended to do this for two or three weeks. I ended up doing it for 32 weeks. There was more than a thousand liters of soup, hundreds of packages of sweets, all of these lovely people. And me at the corner pulling it together.

And I bring that up, not because I'm so amazing, but it's just the power that a chef, with the mind in this direction, really has to pull things like this together. People were so happy to be helpful.

The kitchen team at the Scotia Bank Arena repurposed the ice to just start cranking out thousands of meals that were shared with agency organizations around the city.

And I love the fact that the spirit of being like, "Alright, everybody, we got masks on. This is crazy and intense, but this is what the need is. And we're gonna move because people need to eat and these meals need to get made. And the fact that we can make these shifts and these transitions is what I love so much.

So what we learned here is that our community is actually about people, not places. We found ways to be helpful and support communities around us, and that a kitchen is a kitchen and can be repurposed when needed.

After being forced out of our restaurants for a while, we more clearly understood the role that they and the people inside them play.

We didn't have tables and chairs, but we still had hospitality. And this is social gastronomy. This is why I love this work so much.

This is wisdom I got from the Toronto Food Policy Council many years ago. And that is good food policy automatically means good health, labor, trade, agriculture, and health policy.

And so if we start with the food and focus in a grassroots way, there's so much that is available to us. A stronger, more effective food system will be built on networks of grassroots communities, of people who care about each other.

And that's the nugget here. That's the magic, right? When I drive home with my empty car from Moss Park on Fridays, I ask myself, this feels so good. Everybody I saw today felt so good. And it's because we have invested in ourselves on the ground.

When things get thick, we can call each other, we can connect with each other. And I feel like this is the opportunity that chefs and food service folks have to really make an impact on how we rebuild our industry. And I mean, ideally, the food system.

As the urgency of global issues rise, there will also be a rise in opportunities for chefs to work in more grassroots way with communities on the ground.

We now have a very rare opportunity to rebuild our food systems in a way that actually serves both the people and the land.

LORI: Thank you so much, Joshna. It's always a pleasure to hear you speak with such enthusiasm and so many lessons that we can all learn -

Our second speaker today is Chris Ramsaroop. And Chris is a longtime organizer with an organization called Justice for Migrant Workers. This is a grassroots activist collective, and it's been organizing migrant farm workers for about 20 years now. Chris is also currently pursuing a PhD at the U of T and he's specifically looking at the role of resistance by Migrant Farm workers in Canada.

He is an instructor at U of T in Caribbean studies and he teaches the food courses and the community engaged learning program at New College, also at UofT. And he's a clinic instructor in the faculty of law at the University of Windsor. I would like to welcome Chris Ramsaroop to tell us a little bit about the work that he is doing.

CHRIS: So first, thanks for having me. I'm gonna try to follow up on what the previous speaker was talking about with respect to resistance and what happened during COVID. And I'm gonna try to get us to understand some of the ideas of the TFW, Temporary Foreign Worker Program and so-called "managed migration" schemes here in Canada.

So basically for many of us, we try to think of the farm worker program or managed migration schemes as part of a longer legacy of what we call indentured labour. And indentured labour is premised on legacy of slavery as well too.

So why do I use such controversial and harsh terms?

People who come to work in Canada are on a Tied Work Permit. They sign a contract. The contract is for a specific duration of time. And the workers have to go home at the end of their contract.

They have no labour and social mobility. And once they try to exert their rights or if they get injured and sick, in most cases they're sent home and they will not be so-called, named or able to return back to Canada.

If, for instance, they tried to continue to work in Canada and they're trying to work as something called unauthorized, this would probably lead in rural Ontario to somebody being, picked up, put in the jail, arrested and deported.

So there's what we termed asymmetrical power imbalances.

It's important to construct the disempowerment through the structures of our immigration system, through a Tied Work Permit. As a result of basically living and working on the farmer's property and having a permit where you don't have any ability to move or to leave, it creates a system of precariousness or vulnerability. So that, that's really, really important.

And for us, we try to contextualize the work that we do through looking at history, right? So indentured labour and the legacy of slavery, both as sites of injustice, but also resistance. So thinking about the tools of oppression and racial subjugation or racial exploitation. But how did people fight back?

What strategies, tactics, techniques and tools did they use to say that they're not going to accept inhumane conditions?

We had this entire conversation that was highlighted during the pandemic. That if migrant farm workers did not come to Canada, we would all starve, right? That it was essential to the nationhood of Canada and to the operations of our industrial farming system for migrant farm workers to be here.

So, the term that a lot of people use, and it's a big boring term, it's called "agricultural exceptionalism" or "corporate exceptionalism". Where because we create something as a crisis, you get rid of all the rules and regulations and you say that the industry can operate without transparency, without accountability. And ramp up production, bring people to come to work and face no accountability when things hit the fan. And at the time of the pandemic, we had warned the Canadian government, the provincial government, everybody. It didn't matter who they were.

We try to warn people to say, look, you cannot have workers coming to work in Canada under very precarious conditions, people are going to die.

Nobody listened. Nobody took the initiatives or steps to protect workers. And lo and behold, we saw what happened during the pandemic and farm workers.

This is courtesy of Statistics Canada. And Hopefully in the next month or so, we'll update information from 2017 to 2022. There's about 60,000 migrant farm workers that come to work every year. The main countries are Jamaica, Guatemala and Mexico. Mexico is now the largest, group of workers. Guatemala is the second and Jamaica's the third.

We have two migrant schemes in Canada. One is the Seasonal Agricultural Worker Program that's been in existence since 1966. And then the newer middle-stream program that's been around since the mid two thousands.

So most people are in tree nuts, grocery, nursery, and flora cultures, vegetable and melons. And this is important to us to understand.

So our first assumption is that if we're bringing people to come to work on farms, that it's to feed our nation.

In fact, a lot of the peeps who are coming to work on farms is for something called "export production". The food that's being produced here in Canada is primarily for the United States, for Asia, for Europe.

The two dynamics I want to focus on are the greenhouse industry, where 34% of workers are working in. The greenhouse industry, about 80% of the crops are for export to the United States. That's why a lot of the greenhouses are located close to the border because they're sent all the way to Florida, to Texas, the Midwest. It's definitely not for consumption here.

The second is also where the highest concentration of workers are. So 35,000 workers work on farms whose income or farm gate income is over $2 million. So these ain't small Mom and Pop shops that a lot of times the industry tries to you know, to represent themselves, right?

So we create this illusion, this idea of what our farming system is. You think about a big, older white guy with a beard, with a white picket fence, two or three cows. But that is not the reality of our farming industry. It's very corporate- driven, industrial, and for export production. So very important.

When we're thinking about this idea of exceptionalism, what is important for us to understand is that, for maximizing corporate profits, for empowering an industry, the idea of exceptionalism also permits that certain people must die.

And as we saw with the meat-packing industry, this was happening all throughout the agricultural industry where people were dying as a result of dangerous conditions. And because production was paramount, meaning we had to - according

to the other side - create these conditions, people had to get rich while the workers died because of dangerous conditions.

So what are some of these conditions that I'm talking about?

The other part of this idea of exceptionalism, it means that labour laws that are supposed to protect all workers, do not exist in agriculture.

So farm workers cannot form unions. They are excluded from any type of real meaningful protections under health and safety. And thirdly is employment standards. Workers do not have a right to overtime pay, to holiday pay.

So federal laws that restrict people's protections for being on a Tied Work Permit, where you're always faced with being sent home and no protections here around labour laws are really important to understand. So in a greenhouse, it's permitted to work on these because there's no unique protections under health and safety laws to protect workers from dangerous conditions, from heat stress, and we get conditions like that.

So the housing conditions. And the other side would always accuse us, well, you know, we try to highlight the most horrific conditions. During the pandemic it came out time and time again the kind of unsocial distances or non-social distancing that workers were living in. A lot of time workers would have sheets to protect themselves, are the only privacy that would exist.

Because we have a multi-jurisdictional system that's supposed to protect workers; rather than actually hold anybody accountable when something like this happens, the provincial government points fingers at the federal government and the federal government points fingers at the provincial government.. So nobody takes any responsibility.

And there is no protection. Agricultural dwellers, agricultural dwellings, employer provided housing is exempt from the Residential Tendencies Act, which enable conditions like this to exist.

It's not just good and bad employers or good and bad housing. Stuff like this will continue unless steps are taken to protect workers and they won't face reprisals for standing up for their rights.

So workers are tied to an employer. They're exempt from protections. Then when they try to stand up for their rights,they're sent back home.

A lot of the social safety net that's supposed to protect workers doesn't exist. It's actually still illegal for workers to get education to come to universities and colleges. Workers cannot get access to welfare or ODSP. They face multiple barriers to get workers' compensation. And employers feel that they can do whatever they want to workers.

But it doesn't mean that workers don't try to stand up. A group of farm workers engaged in a so-called "sick out" once the employer unilaterally decided to spray their housing accommodations for bugs and insects. When he did it, the workers lost thousands of dollars in groceries. So they're adamantly pretty pissed off.

We could see the power imbalance.

The workers are basically saying that they want to be compensated for the thousands of dollars of food they lost. That they're hungry. That they want to go and do shopping.

The workers did receive through this so-called "sickout", did receive some compensation back.

So the action put the employer on notice, that the workers were not just gonna simply back down, right?

When we're thinking about the industry, we never think about this, right? The farm workers who are predominantly Black and Brown, from all of the Global South, their voices have been erased. So part of the work that we do through Justice for Migrant Workers is to try to provide and show as allies at solidarity, to ensure that workers' spaces and workers' voices can be heard.

A case of where workers were standing up against racial profiling, it was an action that we did a couple months ago.

Not only are workers facing discrimination in their workplaces, there's also community hostility. And this power imbalance that exists...

One of the ways that we try to talk about how to resolve it is by calling for reforms not only to provincial laws, but to immigration status. And one of our demands of all the different groups is Permanent Status on Arrival.

So why do we say this?

One is to address situations like this? Workers should not be at the mercy of their employers.

How do we democratize, our food system so the voices of workers can be heard. So workers can actually engage in civic engagement. And to try to change laws, so that they're protected, not prosecuted.

Employers use laws, immigration laws to divide workers to continue to threaten them. And we're trying to say historically, prior to the arrival of migrant farm workers, White immigrants for instance, could come to Canada as equals. We've only created immigration restrictions once the color of people's skin changed.

So it's about trying to address historical imbalances. And trying to ensure that we shift power so workers are no longer at the mercy of their employers.

LORI: Thank you very much, Chris. Very I think shocking for a lot of people, but very important for people to understand that this sort of thing is happening right here in Canada.

We move on to our third speaker now, Charlotte Big Canoe. And Charlotte Big Canoe is the Partner and Membership Director at the Full Plate. This is a Toronto-based nonprofit that provides access to services and supports to hospitality workers in need. And the Full Plate was founded in early 2020, a very important time in the world by a group of women in the hospitality industry.

And its services include access to produce boxes and grocery gift cards, wellness programs and training that's focused on creating inclusive environments in restaurant spaces. Charlotte is of mixed heritage. Her father's background is from the Chippewas of Georgina Island, and her mother's family is of Irish settler background.

And Charlotte has worked in various roles in the hospitality industry over the past 14 years, and her focus is often on wine and spirits education. Welcome, Charlotte.

CHARLOTTE: Hi, good morning. Thanks for having me.

So our organization's name is the Full Plate, as Lori mentioned earlier. We were founded in early 2020, but actually in January of 2020. So before we got into this whole COVID thing, we had started putting the building blocks together to getting our paperwork to become a nonprofit in place. And then as everybody experienced in March, all of a sudden we had a lot more free time on our hands to get things ramped up.

I think it's just kind of interesting that as we were getting started, it was right before we knew how much this would be needed, but the need was already established before the pandemic hit.

Like we said, it's a hospitality nonprofit providing essential services to hospitality workers in the industry. We're often some of the most underrepresented, precarious workers in Canada. And as you've seen today, there's many ways that you enter into the food industry.

And we really wanted to focus on providing access to services that are not often found in hospitality and restaurant workers' roles.

So thinking about things like mental health services, fitness and wellness, as well as legal resources to understanding labour rights.

We wanted to also make sure that whatever we created was free of barriers. So we really operate on a No Cost Model. So we don't take on any partnerships or provide

any services that are going to incur a cost to any workers. We want to make sure that anything we're giving doesn't come out of your pocket. That way whatever you're making or you're working, or if you're on some of the employment funds that we have available in the province, that we're not taking those out of your pocket.

It's 100% run by industry members and nonprofit in the way that we're all still volunteers in the work that we do. So this is something that we really wanted to kind of take some time to figure out what we felt we needed and be able to give that back.

So a few of the first things that we did, we launched this anti-racism training that we developed with a social worker. And what we did was we broke it out into three role-specific trainings. So instead of giving a training on what anti-racism is, why it's important in the food industry, we wanted to take some time to put something together that felt like it really spoke to workers who were working in a food service role.

So a server might have different interactions than somebody who's in the back-of-house and working in a kitchen. And a manager would need different skills as well. So for the servers training, we talked about you know, how it can feel really challenging, especially if you're a racialized person, to come into a space to serve a predominantly white crowd. To serve food that's not from your culture and be expected to learn these things all while we're also existing on broken treaties and that kind of power and positionality that we're in.

So we worked with servers, thinking about how to recognize how they're feeling and processing those feelings. How to support themselves if they enter into a difficult interaction. And also to think about when it comes to peer-to-peer supports and what happens for them in the role.

We wanted to talk about food politics and the way that, you know, back-of-house roles can often be diminished and how that often plays into racial stereotypes.

And for managers, we really wanted to get them empowered to understand that there are politics around food and dining room culture and where their role is in that.

So, we partnered with some restaurants where they would be able to pay for Amilah's [workshop facilitator] time. They would have a number of spots available to their staff so that they could have their staff come. And then we would have a few additional spaces available for people in our community who wanted to come and learn.

So we ran this for a couple months and it was really quite effective to be in this kind of training that's not really a broad strokes training, but is very specific to your role. And it's with peers in the city that you live in.

So there was like manager trainings where we had managers from multiple restaurants who all kind of knew each other and were able to have this dialogue

about what their role was, what they needed, and what they felt that they had challenges with and that they wanted to be able to grow through.

We were also very lucky to partner at the same time with FoodShare. So with our partnership through FoodShare, we were able to offer fresh produce at no cost to anyone in the community. So what you would do is send in to us you'd like a box of produce.

FoodShare, they offer really low cost fresh produce in the the city and have incredible initiatives that when you purchase from them, you're supporting.

We were able to give out a number of free produce boxes to people. And what we did, similar to the food delivery model that Joshna presented, we worked with some of our peers and delivered them out ourselves so that people got to see each other, have a little bit of social connection, and get some fresh produce that they may not have access to.

A lot of hospitality workers in the restaurant industries rely on something called "staff meal", where you get a meal the day for free on your shift as part of your shift work. And recognizing that now people were home, on less money than they're used to making and not having that meal that they might have been able to rely on the day. We wanted to be able to find some food for folks along with social supports.

The Shift was something that we did on social media where we talked through with different people in Toronto as well as Ottawa and Montreal, and how their restaurants or roles had to shift during the pandemic.

So this was something that we wanted to think about. You know, who was getting highlighted in the media And we were seeing a lot of stories from owners and operators, which is, you know, an important perspective, especially in the business world. But we also wanted to talk through like a bartender and how they were doing and a server and kind of give them that opportunity to speak through what was happening with their role so that their peers could see that that was happening for them too. Cuz we were noticing and hearing from some folks that they felt a little bit left out in some of the coverage. So this was an opportunity to talk through your small experience, your role, your restaurant, your at-home cocktails delivery program or something that you were doing. And that was happening because of this new way that we were working. People would text on our social media to say, oh, my friend's doing this really cool project where they're making pancake mix and delivering it out to people. So come and check them out. And so we would do this kind of like grassroots initiative to connect with folks.

We also offered a legal clinic. In restaurant settings particularly, there's a lot of labour laws that don't get recognized. So things like breaks, overtime shifts, scheduling and on-call shifts.

A lot of times when you enter into a restaurant role you get trained by the folks who are there. They tell you how to work in the space. And then you take that as almost

gospel or how it's supposed to be. And that's often not the case. So we wanted to give people a space where they could go and ask a question and see if they needed to maybe take more action.

This was not something where folks would be able to be represented if they did have a case. But it was a place where they could feel a little bit more helped than just a frantic Googling of is this okay or am I being taken advantage of?

We wanted to give them a dedicated space for like restaurant workers. Because sometimes when you're reading things like Ontario Labour Board, it can feel very obvious for a different role. But then you have questions about your role. Like what about if it's busy or what about if somebody calls in sick?

I've worked in many roles in hospitality and I've also worked in many roles in education. I felt more confident calling in sick when I cared for children than I did working in a restaurant, I was more nervous and more anxious to call in sick as a restaurant worker than I was caring for other people's children. And that's because of the culture that's really bred in these spaces. You need to be there. You can't call in sick. There's no one to cover you. And that sits into your psyche and makes space for these things to happen where you're not being, protected by the labour rights that are there to serve you.

We also were able to do some really great partnerships.

We did a hospitality dinner with Lot 40, Bartenders Benevolent Fund, that supported people through this time where they could apply for all sorts of different funds. To cover medical bills. They had tax clinics. They had all sorts of things to do.

We all partnered together to host a hospitality holiday dinner. People were able to kind of come and connect and see each other and say hi on the street and have that hospitality for each other that we were so used to giving and didn't have a space for.

Also because people weren't able to travel in and out of the city, maybe they weren't able to go home and see their family. And we're so used to in hospitality spaces, spending holidays with your coworkers. It's not a time that you often get to take off. You end up working New Year's. You end up working holiday hours. That's kind of your busy time of the year. So we're used to still being social over that time, but maybe not being able to be with family. But now that we can't work, we also can't travel. So what do you do? So we wanted people to not feel that sense of like deep isolation.

We also hosted a Fall harvest dinner for folks to come.

We were also able to offer with Bartender's Benevolent Fund, a scholarship for WSET [Wine and Spirit Education Trust] Level I. So if you are all George Brown students, you're probably familiar with WSET.

In hospitality, you learn so much on the job and I think that's some of the most valuable learning you can do. But it can seem really daunting to take, you know, a couple hundred to a thousand dollars to do additional courses once you're already in work. And I think there is an assumption that anyone who works in hospitality is making incredible amounts of money. We have this myth of the tips which can be, depending on where you work, quite a bit of money. But it's also relative to your cost of living.

We wanted to also create a space where it would be racialized folks coming and learning together as wine can often be very elitist and be a space that not everybody feels that they are able to access, even if they do have the costs available to them.

From my own perspective, as an Indigenous woman working in wine and spirits has been a real challenge. People are really kind of shocked that that's something that I would be interested in or be able to do.

There's a lot of myths and racial stereotypes around Indigenous people and alcohol that still really persist today.

And same goes for you know, other racialized communities where when we learn about wine, the language that we're learning about wine is through a very European lens. We learn flavor profiles of foods that are relative to a European viewpoint.

The fruits and things that we use would be lemons, limes, oranges, and things that you can find in Loblaws. But there's also all sorts of other ranges of palettes and flavors that become another language of wine. So we wanted to create a space where folks could learn together. Could feel a little bit more comfortable with each other. And have a space that's dedicated for them.

And again, thinking of inclusivity and access, we wanted to also do some trainings on gender inclusivity and trans-inclusive environments in the restaurant space.

We looked at the histories of colonialism and how that intersects with gender. And then with the 519, creating these queer and trans-inclusive environments, we talked through how to make sure that your staff feel that the space is trans-inclusive and gender inclusive, but also for the people that are coming into the dining room as well. Cuz food again is such a political thing, especially with fine-dining culture it can be quite exclusive.

The winter wellness program was launched in 2021, and that was for racialized folks to have access to a much broader package of services that we hadn't offered before. We had therapy sessions. Sessions with the dietician or nutritionist. Peer drop-in counseling. Fitness programs. We had all sorts of things that you could access for free.

It felt really, really great to be able to pay for professional therapy for other people. Like that's something that is such a cost prohibitive item, but so needed, especially

through the past few years. And especially in hospitality where you're always in a little bit of a stressful situation.

And then we did another session that was open to everyone, so racialized or non racialized folks where you could come in for a 30 minute session and meet with a therapist.

We also had different peer drop-in sessions where you could kind of come in a space and talk through what was happening for you.

And it became a really nice moment of community outside of what you're used to with coming in for your shift. So they became places where people could connect and it was really, really wonderful to see restaurant workers talking through their roles, talking through things that were hard for them, and finding a sense of community to realize, oh, I actually enjoy having the support and talking through this and I need to think about what my next role is.

And it became conversations about how they were gonna pick their new job in a way that we weren't having before. Like, well, I want to evaluate how they treated their staff through the pandemic. I want to look at what their initiatives are when it comes to inclusivity. And these were things that were not necessarily happening before.

So one other thing we did that I think is really important for hospitality workers and restaurant workers and any type of care, is we offered about $20,000 in grocery gift cards. So we were able through different funding sources to be able to offer grocery gift cards. And the reason we did grocery gift cards was that we could offer them to people without taxing them as charitable donations. So people were able to access these funds without having to put it on their tax receipt. But at the same time too, we also wanted to make sure we were doing this as low barrier as possible. People were able to write in and apply for amounts of up to $500 with no qualifications.

If you need it, it's there for you. And we were able to offer this on a rotating basis to really help out people with bills.

We didn't ever want to be in a position to be kind of the arbiters of who needs it the most. If you feel that you need the need, then that's kind of enough for us. And if we're able to provide something for you, then great.

And same thing with the grocery gift cards. We were really careful to select places that had the broadest offering of products.

Even though they're not necessarily the company that everybody wants to support, the Loblaws group would be something where people could go and they can get household supplies and get toiletries. They could get a bottle of wine in some places if that's what they wanted. They could get medicines.

So we wanted to make sure that if they were applying for this amount of money, it covered the broadest amount of things that it could. It had the lowest amount of barrier for folks. And it was something that would alleviate a little bit of their bills.

And that's one of the initiatives that I'm really proud we were able to offer for people through this time.

So what we want to focus on at The Full Plate is thinking about those little things that might make a difference for you in this role and might make it so that you feel you can stay in hospitality a little bit longer as we have really high burn-out rates.

People will come in and they'll work really hard for a long time, and then often you get to a point where your body can't take it anymore. You're mentally drained. You just want to do something else and kind of exit. And that's a really hard place to be in because it makes it so that people don't value this industry and the way that we want them to. We want people to love it.

Because for a restaurant setting, people come to you on their best days. They come to you to like celebrate. They come for birthdays, they come for weddings. They come for all of these great milestone moments in their life.

And they also come in on some of their worst days and they want like a little bit of a lift up. They wanna be cheered up and they wanna connect with folks. So we're really this space where it's so valuable to our community interactions that if we're not taking care of the people who are providing, that we lose out so much.

Like it's not just a set of hands bringing food to a table. It's so many things that happen behind the scenes that make it worth it for the people there to stay in that industry and continue to provide hospitality to others. We have to also give the hospitality back to those folks.

It was something that we were really happy to have all of a sudden the time when the pandemic started to really dive into. But it was also something that we saw before that. The need was there and we'd been talking about it for quite a few years.

So we'd submitted our paperwork to be a nonprofit, I think in January of 2020. So what perfect timing that was.

But we're looking now too to like working with similar groups in the city to start to offer more programs like the scholarship program for the wine program. Or what we can do as people are entering back into the restaurant setting that we can continue to support them.

Before looking at how to speak up for yourself in a shift or thinking about what proper PPE you need during work. That's still very relevant and important. But we continue to grow into our needs as we enter back into in-person dining.

LORI: Fantastic. The Full Plate is an amazing organization and providing much needed initiatives. Really. Great.

I have a question for all three of you. A phrase that really stood out in my mind that Chris had said was this idea of an asymmetrical power imbalance that exists among migrant workers vis-a-vis their employers. And it struck me whether you are a low-income person facing food insecurity, a migrant farm worker, or a hospitality worker, this is something that you're dealing with and this is exactly why people organize and form unions.

And since we are in Labour Fair Week this week, I wanted to ask each of you, what role can the Labour Movement play in addressing these issues that you've all raised here this morning?

Maybe we'll go in the same order, Joshna.

JOSHNA: Sure, thanks. I've had a delight of working with union folks and union teams in my work in public institutions. And one of the real open spaces and the needs that I see from the perspective of the union, to be quite honest with you, is to drill down a little more and value, preserve, protect the importance of culinary skill. I know that may sound a little bit odd in the context. But one of the real surprises I had when I went in to try and rework job descriptions to put my sustainability values and all that good food business in there, was that the job titles were like Dietary Assistant, Tray Attendant, and all of these things that just required two working set of hands, right?

The skill and the intention and the mass, like none of that was part of the story. Yet, regardless of the circumstances and the microaggression budget cuts and all of this, these incredible people were pouring everything they had into their work with the limited resources.

And so it felt really important to me to start naming culinary skills and to talk about the fact that I need this human with these ideas and these skills to do this work, to make this food, to feed... you know, to really protect it. And the union folks really understood, that there's been a sort of erosion of the value of that skill and that what is required now is a bit of a return there.

Yes, it's fair wages and good pay and there's guarantee all of that. But if your humanity is not required to do your job, you know what I mean? And your skill and your passion and excitement, it's not a complete thing, right?

And when more skill is valued, there's more pride in the work that gets done. There's better output on the plates for the people receiving. It's a beautiful chain of events that can happen when we just uplift somebody and their sense of themselves and what they're actually offering.

LORI: Thank you. Thank you, Joshna.

Chris, can you give us your thoughts on what role the labour movement could play in supporting change in these areas?

CHRIS: Wow. Okay. The labor movement is not homogenous, right? There's various actors, there's various interests and there's multiple players. So I think the important thing about looking at unions is that first and foremost it really has to be a multi-pronged approach. It's not just looking at dealing with one person or expecting one particular way of support.

Number two, it's thinking about going beyond skin deep, right? And what solidarity actually means. And this for myself and many of my friends and comrades has been trying to challenge racism, as a house of labour, which continues to be exclusive, continues to be racist and continues to perpetuate white supremacy.

Now, having said this, I want to be straight up and clear. It's not that we abolish the labour movement. It's about fighting for more democracy and fighting within the labou movement to make it more fair and equal. So it's valuing the role of unions as a democratic space, but also pushing boundaries, which is extremely important.

Now, returning to the idea about the homogeneity. With migrant workers the labour movement is very kind of contradictory. It's all over the place. There's not one single voice. So you still get the trades and some of the construction unions, which are calling for the abolition of migrant worker programs.

We've seen some of the service unions also in the past historically take on that role. And very much, I think Labour's achilles heel has been trying to address both racialized issues, you know, Indigenous communities and immigrant communities.

What Du Bois said about race being the the main focal point of the 20th century, for the 21st century race and immigration status continues to be the achilles heel of the labour movement.

What the potential of labour is it's about trying to reach people to think about how do we challenge perceptions, beliefs. To build a different understanding from a working class perspective, of what migration and immigration is.

It's to think about issues with health and safety as something that is in one sense universal, but it impacts people differently. And thinking about health and safety and the dangerous working conditions as a way to organize and to build solidarity and not just think of something that's top down.

So if you're in a kitchen, for instance, or a farm or anywhere across the food chain, right? What are the things that bring us together? To start naming the way that oppression happens?

So groups such as the Food Chain Workers Alliance is something that we've invested ourselves. The Food Chain Workers Alliance is a group across the

continent that is trying to build solidarity, both with unionized and non-unionized workers all across the food chain, from gig workers to restaurants, to farms. And to try to shift balance and power in those spaces.

The other aspect, as all of us know, it shouldn't be a surprise. But the Freedom Convoy isn't just something of the past. This is an ongoing conversation. There is a encroachment of fascism. It's gonna continue to perpetuate itself.

Throughout the pandemic, we've seen a lot of labour leaders and labour rank and file people taking on the mantra of supporting the Freedom Convoy and to be outright, straight up racist. So the labour movement is an important critical space to confront head-on, right? And to build and have these tough conversations.

The last thing I'm gonna say, the labour movement needs to listen to workers. And the perception and perspectives of non-unionized workers is very different than people who are organized.

And returning back to Lori, what you said about the power imbalance, right? So if you don't have a CA or collective agreement, you're not gonna have the protections that are needed to support workers.

So you've gotta think about different ways and listening to workers who are not unionized and they're advocates for finding the creative ways to try to fight back.

Tomorrow we've got actually a delegation, a small action around injured migrant workers at the Workers' Compensation Board. We've got a petition about migrant workers and why status needs to happen.

One of our comrades, Gabriel, has a book launch. It's the first ever book launch of a farm worker talking about his story.

Understanding history, learning the history lessons, the ways that the labour movement has both been successful, but it's also, I apologize, fucked up. Fighting internally within labour, but also outside and pressuring them and trying to build a collective movement right where workers are first.

LORI: These are very, very important issues that you've raised that we have to wrestle with.

Charlotte, I'd like to go to you then for your perspective on what the role of the labour movement is in the issues that you're dealing with around hospitality workers.

CHARLOTTE: Yeah, I mean, what do you add to those two answers? But I think that idea of solidarity and education is a really big one.

I've had the pleasure of working in some restaurant settings that are unionized. And I've also worked in some that are not. And I think often what I see just from the worker and peer-to-peer perspective is a lack of education or understanding on why that's something that's important.

Oftentimes too, you know, restaurants can be a space and are not exclusively a space, but often can be people's first jobs and they might not necessarily have a perspective on union or an understanding. There's also a lot of restaurant workers who, similar to other workers, are coming to Canada and entering into this workforce. They might not have a lot of experience with our unions in Ontario.

Restaurant workers are a huge, huge chunk of the labour force. So there's real appetite to organize from a lot of folks. But I think sometimes when there's an approach from a union to a restaurant, there's again not necessarily enough relationship building or understanding on how to communicate what the collective agreement can do for you and how to really get those people to understand. So I've seen a little bit of that just anecdotally.

I also think too, in the conversations we have around labour specific to restaurants - cuz that's really the perspective that I can bring - is that we're getting a little lost in the sauce when it comes to buzzwords.

So we're getting a lot of you know, this restaurant pays a "cost of living wage", which is important and it's not something that I wanna take away from. But we, are getting these like pops of that or they're getting now there's no tipping in this restaurant or there's this, like, we're having this kind of mixed bag of a lot of things that are coming out, without a lot of moments to have a consistent conversation. Like, this restaurant's not tipping, but are they getting paid breaks? Are they getting the time that they need as workers? We're losing kind of the collective understanding of what it means to support a restaurant worker. And we're focusing on all sorts of different kind of initiatives that are coming out.

So I think a moment for workers to take a pause and think , What actually makes the most sense for us, is something that we need.

So I am seeing that a little bit in the labour movement.

But I think truly when it comes to a worker's perspective is like more education and education that's accessible to them as to why this is something that's interesting and important. And more relationship building between the unions and hospitality workers to really foster that community solidarity. So that they can see why this is something that maybe they should be asking about or curious about or getting started to get organized.

KATHRYN: A question in the chat. How can we as students with limited influence, support the change we want to see in the industry? So things like looking for fair trade symbols or seeking out unionized businesses.

CHARLOTTE: It's hard. A few things I feel with this one, I really don't like putting the responsibility of things like this on the weight of a single person's shoulders. I think the conversations about solidarity we had are so important, and even being here is a part of that. So it's not all on you.

I think also taking some time to be literate about where you are spending your money and time. Thinking about who you want to support and why.

Like it can feel overwhelming to do that, but it is something that's worth just having a little bit of thought on.

Also too, being able to come to things like this fosters better questions when you're going into interviews. It fosters better consideration on where you want to work and why, and what you're looking for in a workplace.

And then as well, like just pushing back on small conversations that you might have in your day-to-day life. A lot of people will say things dismissive of folks who work in the food industry. And really pausing and thinking about why that came up or why someone might think this role is temporary or part-time or not worth investigating as a full career.

So thinking about how that kind of stigma can really trickle down into people's interactions in their workplace. That kind of solidarity relationship starts the ball rolling to have a different industry than from where I started to what we are now.

LORI: I just saw that there was a comment I would also add the added challenge and limitations that international students face.

Chris, do you have anything to add to what Charlotte has said?

CHRIS: I wanna be careful, I'm not going to like tokenize or romanticize, students got a lot of stuff going on in their lives. But if you look at a lot of the key organizing that's happening across the continent, it's young people, right? Starbucks or Trader Joe's or a lot of places, it's young people who are taking these type of support and actions on, which I think is paramount.

The most important critical ideas that are happening should be from the ground up. And not just simply from talking heads who've been around a few academic conferences for the last 55 years.

The way that people learn from my perspective, it's in the workplace, it's in the classroom. Talking to your peers, right? All you young people are on your Instagram and TikTok and Reddit and everything else. Those are the spaces that people are learning and developing consciousness from one another.

So thinking about the spaces that you're in. Having conversations. Talking to fellow students and workers about what their experiences are, I think is paramount, right?

Learning from other struggles. What are people doing? What are their wins? What are their losses? Important lessons to be learned when somebody loses, right?

But, watching what the Starbucks workers did and how they actually were able to defeat. What happened in Amazon. I know Chris Smalls is becoming a major star and people are looking at what he did as an individual actor, but what they did in Amazon as a collective is critically important, right? So learn those type of lessons, the people talking to one another, the disciplined work that needs to get done.

The other things that people are doing is trying to change labour laws, which are long and boring, but that's one aspect that people do to make sure that restaurant workers or agricultural workers or construction workers have more of a democratic say in the workplaces. Both through the power to form unions, but also changing employment standards and health and safety laws.

And your question about fair trade is a much more contentious question. You know, the fair trade model has worked for some organizations where that focuses on particular aspects of industry. So the Coalition of Immokalee Workers in Florida, for instance, have been very successful at targeting a few particular farmers. And their work has been very good.

Other people may say, well, the role of Fair Trade campaigns doesn't go systemically or try to address an entire industry holistically. So it's kind of up in the air. There's people who do support it. And I do encourage you to do more reading and to try to understand more.

So the other question about international students. Once again, I think for labour organizations and for allies, it's about developing and putting resources into immigration supports.

The Naujawan Support Network, the NSN, has been working predominantly with the South Asian Punjabi community in Brampton. And they've been very effective in showing solidarity with one particular segment of the international, student community.

But I think for international students who are facing exploitation, it's important to develop once again, smaller groups to start conversations. But other big groups, legal clinics, unions need to front money to support international students, by getting immigration support when people are facing deportation, and other forms of exploitation.

Migrant Students United has been doing some very, very important work as well as the Canadian Federation of Students. There are particular spaces that you may want to consider, so I would also get you to want to check out that.

JOSHNA: Something that I'm really reminded of in this conversation is it's familiar and it seems like it's a similar process that we're going through, that we went through

around sustainability. And when we were trying to put those values into our food system and into the hospitality industry.

When we wanted to have more local food and cage free eggs and free run... you know, and it was like, how do you navigate this? Cuz then it's like bamboo plates and, you know what I mean? There were all these elements right when we were trying to embed some new or revisit, reanimate some values that had been lost or dismissed. So I feel like the process is identical. It's just the values are different and perhaps, obviously the world in which we're working in is different than it was like, you know, 2008, 2010.

And so the thing that I tell my students is to learn about what these issues are, understand exactly what all these players are, right?

In the previous conversation it was like, what does "cage-free" mean? What does "naturally raised" mean? What does "organic" mean right? In this world here? Now we wanna talk about what is fair trade? What is a living wage? How do we understand discrimination or racialization right? And what assumptions can and cannot be made anymore.

It can be really challenging as one student and one person. But I do believe that the most important thing you can do is anchor yourself with your own set of values. Really be informed about what's happening. Then you can ask good questions. And then you're poised to refuse things that just don't fit anymore right?

This is a nod to what Chris just said about young people. The beautiful perspective that I see from young people is just zero-tolerance for things, right, that even just me in my life formerly happily put up with as a cost of doing business as a brown lady doing this work in this world.

So anchor yourself in your values. Then ask good, important, contentious questions.

LORI: Fantastic. And I think it's really interesting that you bring up the whole issue around food and the environment, which was so big about a decade ago. But if anything is growing even larger. And I think it's also really important in this particular conversation to keep in mind that the planetary crisis is going to shape our social relations more and more as we go forward.

While I have you, Joshna, there is a question asking you, what was the most challenging part of organizing your kitchen movement during the pandemic?

JOSHNA: The most challenging part about that was all the other data and information about the industry that came leaking out.

It was the same way as the explosion around racism, right? Because people were at very different points of understanding of the truth of what was really going on. And so

when the underbelly was uncovered, those of us who were saturated it were like, yeah, uhhuh, that's the truth.

But for people who didn't know anything about it, everyone was like, what are you talking about? And I felt like I, as somebody with a bit of a loud mouth in this context, I spent a lot of time doing catch-up teaching to be like, yeah, yeah, it's actually been like this for the past three decades.

You need to understand that anybody who is a cook mostly does it because they really love what they do because there are much smarter ways to make money.

LORI: And thanks Joshna.

KATHRYN: So there's a question I've always found that the unionized locations made less money and the union didn't understand how to support the cooks. What would you suggest would be some green flags and how could someone in a cook or chef position help to foster inclusivity?

JOSHNA: Wonderful. I love this. I love this a lot. I really feel like this connects right back to the valuing and protection of cooking skill. This is one thing that really seems to have dissolved. right? Just the value of the labour of people who use their bodies and their hands to cook food.

And to Chris's point, talking about how the racialized folks, when we understood that those were the folks working in meat-packing or in quick-serve restaurants or institutional feeding who were also the people who were living in densely populated residences, who had to take public transit and be super exposed. To me, this all connects to our global kind of value of food and who cooks our food and who serves our food and that system and that network, right. Just like Chris uncovered the realities of what's happening on farms. And we're just like, eat raspberries in your smoothies every morning with real disconnect to what it actually means to get those raspberries in a clamshell in your grocery store.

So much of the ignorance, I think plays its way out here because we don't really understand what the system is as long as we can get what we want, when we want it, that's really all that matters, you know?

KATHRYN: For Charlotte. Which of the services that Full Plate adopted was the hardest one to implement?

CHARLOTTE: Ooh. None of them were particularly like hard, hard, but I would say the most, tedious was definitely the grocery gift cards. Relying on outside funding, really tracking where that funding's going, getting it out to people in a timely manner, processing that all from our laptops at home on volunteer time is like a large chunk of just organizational skills.

Also challenging too, because it's really heartbreaking to have to close that when you see that you have a higher need come in than you're able to fund. So I would say that one was quite challenging.

Same thing with the food boxes. There were some times when we did them where they would be delivered as part of FoodShare's deliveries. There were other times where we had to go pick up 500 boxes of produce and figure out how to get them out to the city.

So things like that became quite challenging where it's actually much easier to host something on Zoom for a couple hours and find a facilitator and bring people in. And we were lucky to do that kind of in peak zoom time, so people were home and interested and able to do it. Where I think now, we're seeing a mixed bag on responses to zoom events.

But I think those ones were actually quite easy. The ones that were harder were the large scale ones, but those were actually the ones that we were the most proud of being able to do. Because we have quite a large board of eight members who are all volunteering and helping were able to distribute. But again, like doing something to that size on volunteer time where we're all also trying to work and figure out lives was quite a challenge.

LORI: Thank you. I see a question for Chris asking if there's any kind of collective, a list of farms that culinary professionals, restauranteurs can use when they're making purchases, people who are doing procurement that will give them some sense of the quality of how workers are being treated.

CHRIS: There's a few questions here, but nothing like that exists. And I wanna reiterate the point I said earlier, right, around ag conditions in general and the conditions around migrant farm workers. It's not about good and bad employers. There are some farms that are very popular, that are deemed in the public eye, very ethical that we have some concerns about some of their practices at this very particular moment.

We also think of organic farms being progressive, being supportive. I have to remind people a couple years ago, two migrant farm workers in Ontario died in a small, organic apple farm.

There is no list. I would just suggest do research to see where the labour violations have taken place.

So, CANLII.org, C A N L I I.org.

We've won cases against Presteve Foods, which has a fish processing plant. A massive case around sexual harassment of workers there.

Double Diamond Farms, we won a case against racism that was happening with the Human Rights Tribunal.

The DNA case recently, you could check to see what farm that was.

We're not calling on banning or boycotts at the moment in time, because the workers would not support it. You know, it's about, I guess, development of consciousness. Asking tough questions. And embarrassing the government to try to do the right thing.

There was a question about so-called, workers who are undocumented who are working in restaurants and what to do.

I talked a little bit about legal strategies. I wanna also talk about the importance of non-legal strategies.

So thinking about what role does direct action play in resistance?

When we're dealing with people who are precarious, whether they're housing precarious, immigration precarious, it's not about just selling a dream of a resistance, but talking about the practicalities and realities.

So this means planning, right? If there's a threat of deportation or the immigration being called on people, try to have a plan, a game plan right, to help people who are undocumented or precariously employed to address this before engaging in direct action.

It also might mean that allies or people who don't have precarious status may need to consider undertaking direct action. But!, But! But also fully understanding what the implications are for the people who you're trying to organize with.

When I started to organize with farm workers, I can go home, eat my roti, whatever. But the people who I'm organizing with are still in the terrible conditions. Right? So understanding what jeopardy we could be putting them in from the actions that we're taking.

Thinking about non-legal strategies, number one, I know there's a call for status upon arrival now. There's has been for decades now. But a one size fits all approach will not work with all groups.

The call for permanent status is very universalized. Agricultural workers have been excluded from every announcement over the last two or three decades. And I think over the last couple years, even though the call for permanent status has been increasing, agricultural workers at this point aren't gonna be getting any benefits from it.

So thinking about why that is, and this gets back to the power and control of the industry that loves and profits off the control and dehumanization of Black and Brown labour.

The last thing I wanna talk about is when we're thinking about organizing in industries such as restaurants or agriculture, it's not focusing on one restaurant.

In construction industry for instance, there's something called "sectoral agreements". And in the late eighties and early nineties, a lot of feminist scholars, a lot of anti-racist labour scholars and activists were talking about the idea of sectoral. And this is a way of trying to organize restaurants or you know, across an industry or farms across a sector; as a way of trying to help people who are precarious, racialized workers, mostly women- centered service industries, and trying to build bargaining power across.

So what Charlotte and Joshna said earlier, people wouldn't be pitted against each other or that you'd have to worry about the power dynamics of one particular workplace. So, sectorial bargaining is another concept that we need to have a further conversation about.

LORI: Wow. So much important material that's been raised today.

There is one comment that I think is a nice way to wrap this up, and she says: I really enjoyed hearing from all of the speakers. The common theme I grasped from all of you was that it's down to the core. It is about the people, the workers. And I think it's so important that there are leaders and activists like yourselves to be their voice when being heard might feel like such an impossible thing. Thank you for your work and for being here today and speaking with us about what you do.

So thank you for that comment.

I think it's a great way to sum up our day today. I want to give a big thank you to our three panelists who were just amazing. Joshna Maharaj, Chris Ramsaroop and Charlotte Big Canoe.

Thank you so much for this important talk.

RESH: That was Charlotte Big Canoe from the Full Plate, Chef and social gastronomy activist, Joshna Maharaj and Chris Ramsaroop from Justice for Migrant Workers, along with panel moderator and food policy specialist Lori Stahlbrand from the 31st annual Labour Fair at George Brown College.

And this is the final episode of this season's *Courage My Friends* podcast.

Be sure to join us when we return in the Fall.

I'm your host Resh Budhu. And as always, thanks for listening.

COURAGE MY FRIENDS ANNOUNCER: You've been listening to the Courage My Friends Podcast, a co-production between rabble.ca and the Tommy Douglas Institute at George Brown College and with the support of the Douglas Coldwell Layton Foundation.

Produced by Resh Budhu of the Tommy Douglas Institute, Breanne Doyle of rabble.ca and the TDI planning committee: Chandra Budhu and Ashley Booth. For more information about the Tommy Douglas Institute and this series, visit georgebrown.ca/TommyDouglasInstitute.

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