

Courage My Friends Podcast Series VI – Episode 3
Labour Fair 2024
Inequality Inc.: Corporate Power vs. Workers' Rights

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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: The cost of living in the city is just soaring so high, it's virtually unlivable.

STREET VOICE 2: There seems to be a widening gap of the have and the have nots.

STREET VOICE 3: The climate is getting worse. Floods and fires. It's like we're living in a state of emergency.

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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: In the 2020s, the world's majority, its communities, its peoples, its workers, have had to contend with COVID, conflict, a worsening climate crisis, and a cost of living crisis.

In the 2020s, prices and precarity have gone up, while wages and security have gone down, right along with our social, political, economic, and labor power.

In the 2020s, the five richest men, all corporate CEOs, have doubled their wealth. While 5 billion people have become poorer.

In the 2020s, we have collectively become witness to a new era of inequality driven by corporate monopolies, but resisted by people's mobilizations. From community activism to union organizing.

It's the 2020s and we're only four years in. Will this decade be one of loss for the world's peoples and planet, or can it be one of resistance and reclamation of our world, our labor, and our power?

I'm your host, Resh Budhu.

This episode of the Courage My Friends podcast takes us back to the 32nd annual Labour Fair at George Brown College in Toronto, Corporate Power vs. Labour Power: It's Our Work.

George Brown College Professor Benjamin McCarthy facilitates the discussion with Lauren Ravon, Executive Director of Oxfam Canada, and Jared Ong, organizer and caseworker with the Workers Action Centre, on how this new age of corporate-driven inequality impacts workers on the ground and how workers are organizing to push back.

Good morning, everyone. I'm Resh Budhu welcome to this morning's session for the 32nd Annual George Brown College Labour Fair, Corporate Power vs. Labour Power: It's Our Work.

And to bring the college welcome, I'd like to introduce Dr. Morris Anthony Beckford, Associate Dean of the School of Social and Community Services and the School of Deaf and Deaf-Blind Studies.

MORRIS: Hello, everybody and good morning.

Welcome to this the 32nd annual Labour Fair's third day. That should be a lot of excitement in the room. The Labour Fair is organized by GBC's School of Labour and the Tommy Douglas Institute, which lives in our School of Social and Community Services. Another piece of excitement.

All of us, I think at this point should know that the rich are getting much richer and are doing so by the minute. The data is pretty much everywhere at this point. So it's only fitting that we focus on Inequality, Inc. Corporate Power vs. Workers Rights with our guests, Lauren Ravon, the ED of Oxfam Canada and Jared Ong, organizer with the Workers Action Center. A discussion that Professor Benjamin McCarthy will facilitate.

The Labour Fair continues to be a unique and innovative event for GBC. It connects labour, unions, and social justice activism to learners like all of yourselves.

As you go through the day, though, I welcome you to think on something that I learned from Eric Liu a few years ago. And Eric Liu said, " Power isn't static. If you are not taking action, you are being acted upon." Thank you all. and a very hearty welcome to all of you today.

Welcome behalf of the college and welcome behalf of our schools and our faculty.

RESH: Thank you, and so I'd also like to join Dr Beckford in, introducing Professor Ben McCarthy, who is faculty, yes, in the School of Labour and organizer of this year's Labour Fair.

So, with that over to you, Ben.

BEN: Thank you very much Resh. We all know that the personal is political.

We all know that the global and the local are intimately connected. And so I think, not to put too fine a point on it, that's what we're going to try and underscore today. We're going to try and make those connections together about how these global trends are impacting workers here in the city. Lauren Ravon, as Executive Director of Oxfam Canada, is a committed feminist and social justice advocate with more than 15 years of international development experience. Ravon has been with Oxfam Canada since 2011, holding a number of roles, including Director of Policy and Campaigns, and working tirelessly to put women's rights at the heart of the Global Oxfam Confederation.

Before joining Oxfam, Ravon worked at the International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development, Rights and Democracy, where she was Program Manager for the Americas and oversaw the Centre's Office in Human Rights Programming in Haiti. She has also worked on programs to tackle gender based violence and promote sexual and reproductive rights with Planned Parenthood Global and the International Rescue Committee. Lauren sits on the Board of Directors of the Humanitarian Coalition.

We'll also be hearing today from Jared Ong with the Workers Action Center. Jared Ong is an organizer and caseworker with the Workers Action Center. He empowers workers with the tools and community to stand up against bad bosses and protect themselves at work. But he also knows the systemic changes must happen Ontario-wide to raise the bar for all our workers, because our minimum Labour standards are not enough.

So, to begin, Oxfam's recently published annual report, Inequality Inc. points to 4 trends in corporate power fueling inequality: Squeezing workers while rewarding the wealthy. Dodging tax. Privatizing the state. And spurring climate breakdown.

These 4 cardinal points of inequality are points of orientation this morning. I want to begin by inviting Lauren to unpack these terms 1 by 1. And then I want Jared to respond to these trends, at an individual experience based level with your organizing practice.

So can we start, Lauren, by talking a little bit about how corporate wealth today is connected to squeezing workers.

LAUREN: Sure. Thanks so much for the invitation. Obviously one of our favorite topics, inequality and what we can do to stop it.

For those of you who don't know, Oxfam publishes a report on economic inequality every year during the time of, the Davos Conference in Switzerland, the Davos World Economic Forum. And we do this to shine a light on inequality. And this year's report is, quite particular in flavor because it's looking at the fact that not only has inequality, extreme economic inequality been growing every year, and this is a trend we've been seeing since we've been doing this report. So over a decade.

But right now we're taking a look at this decade that we're in, since basically the pandemic, and we're really seeing this decade of division.

Since 2020 world has gotten significantly harder, between the pandemic, the impacts of inflation, obviously, the health crisis, people losing jobs.

This has been one of the worst decade for most people. And yet this is a decade where we're seeing, 5 richest men in the world, their wealth has doubled in this period. So, this kind of ballooning wealth at a time where most people are really suffering. And the way you framed it, Ben is helpful.

Those four areas where we're seeing that corporate power's basically being built on the backs of people on the planet. You know, a direct, correlation between poor working conditions, poor Labour rights, real pressures on pay and the reality is that in most countries inflation is outpacing pay rises.

So, what you talked about squeezing workers is that corporate power is lobbying governments to lower regulation, legislation around labour rights, but it's also fueling this race to the bottom where corporations are rushing to countries that can offer them the most favorable labour conditions. Favorable to corporations, not to people.

So it's not only something that's happening at a country level. What we're tracking in our work on inequality is how there's this race to the bottom where, countries are now in competition to attract large corporate investments by lowering labour standards. One of the best examples that you can think of, and it's spelled out in a report, is Amazon, where you've seen this ballooning corporate wealth, ballooning individual wealth by its owner, Jeff Bezos. And then the realities of Amazon worker conditions, whether it's in, delivery and the warehouses.

We don't hear it as much anymore, but in the past a lot of people would push back on our inequality report every year saying, you know, what does wealth have to do with poverty thinking that the two could be totally disconnected and what we're trying to put a fine point on and which I think all of you will understand is that wealth is gained thanks to inequality.

It is precisely by keeping wages down, by squeezing workers that wealth is accumulated. So the two are not divorced.

Wealth and poverty are directly correlated.

BEN: An interesting, account of the inner workings of the mega rich.

Can you contextualize what Davos is?

LAUREN: So the World Economic Forum happens every year in Davos Switzerland in January, and it brings together the most powerful leaders of this world. Government leaders, heads of states, and then corporate leaders.

And we use this moment to really shine a spotlight on inequality, because this is when these mostly men, powerful men of the world come together to kind of reflect on the global economy. What's working. .What isn't working? How to influence the global economy. Our role at Davos is to show up and make a point of the fact that not only is economic inequality increasing, but it's actually making all of our societies worse off.

So it's not just a matter of let the rich get rich, leave them alone. Actually, in every country where we see a rise in economic inequality, we also see, less healthy populations. So decrease in overall health rates.

More, violence. So whether it's intracommunity violence or higher rates of violence. And just overall wellbeing, happiness measures are lower in countries with high inequality.

So it's not only about wealth accumulation, but societies are worse off overall when there's high economic inequality in those countries. And this is very much related to the fact that high inequality, is usually directly correlated with an undermining of the state.

So if you're not, creating tax regimes that actually manage to, get fair taxation from the wealthy and corporate powers, then the state doesn't have the means to invest in public services.

And so a direct link between this kind of stronghold on wealth, and then the depletion of state capacity to act in areas like health, child care, elder care, education, and that has direct impacts on things that I was mentioning around health and happiness and safety and sense of social cohesion.

BEN: And so what I'm really hearing you saying is that there seems to be this transfer of power from the state to the very wealthy and everybody's feeling the impact of it; whether it's their happiness, their satisfaction with their work, even in the home.

LAUREN: Transfer is probably too nice of a word. I'd really say it's a robbing of the state of its capacity to govern. If you look at lobby registries around the world, these large corporations have such influence over our decision-makers, because they have armies of lobbyists trying to push down anything from environmental regulations to workers push for living wages.

We saw that in the States on the 15 minimum wage push. Lobbying, on everything that's to do with regulations around the sector. But also, pushing back around, government attempts to break up monopolies. And a big emphasis of Oxfam's report this year is on corporate power in the sense of corporate monopolies, because that too has a huge impact on people and inequality.

Over the past 20 years, we saw that there were 60 big international pharmaceutical companies and over a 20 year period, those went from 60 to 10. So those pharmaceutical companies have merged together to create 10 giant global, big pharma companies, and it's had a direct impact in the pandemic.

So these companies have so much control over the pharmaceutical market that governments don't then have the capacity to be negotiating with them.

We talked about vaccine inequality during the pandemic. But the fact that for most there wasn't access to vaccines precisely because of this monopoly power of the pharmaceutical industry. That's one example.

Another example I can give is that there are now just two companies in the world, two companies that hold almost half of the global market for seeds. And seeds are what create food, which feed our planet.

So, two companies holding half of the seed market is really concerning at a time when food prices are skyrocketing and we're seeing famine in parts of the world that we hadn't seen in recent years. And there's a direct correlation between the two.

So, monopoly power makes it even harder for governments to have control over these companies in areas that are critical to life, whether it's the right to food, the right to health, etc.

BEN: This further enclosure of the commons where it's like moving from the level of land to if you want property rights over seeds, over the genetic code of seeds, even.

Jared recent actions and policies forward by the Workers Action Center have centered important calls for raised minimum wage, protecting the work of migrant workers and tackling precarious work generally.

Can you draw some parallels to, Lauren's description of how workers are being squeezed to the benefit of the wealthy and corporate profiteers? How do you see contemporary workers being squeezed in your work?

JARED: So, hi everyone. My name is Jared. I'm from the Workers Action Center. We organize workers across Ontario, fighting back against bad bosses in workplaces, but also provincially and sometimes in Canada, pushing for better policies because as Lauren mentioned, there is a rise of corporate lobbying, corporate power. But I think workers collectively, we are organizing to fight back.

I believe change is possible. But positive change is not inevitable. And positive change, it's only possible if workers can get together and fight back, right? I would also emphasize that all the inequality that we are facing right now, it is not like the natural state of nature.

A lot of economists be like: this is the way the economy works, it has to be this way. It is the ideal free market that causes it. But no, it is structural. It is caused by laws that governments make, and the governments make these laws in response to either worker power or corporate power.

is it fair to pay men and women differently in Ontario? Is it fair to pay people differently because of your race? or your age? Ideally, no. There is legislation to protect against human rights discrimination. There is no law against equal pay for equal work.

So women, younger people, migrant workers disproportionately work in precarious part time jobs.

So employers are allowed to "discriminate", by just hiring more of these people in part time work. So in effect, even if they do the same work. If you're working part time, if you're working temp work, you would be paid less.

There are no paid sick days in Ontario. If you are sick, will you go to work sick to pay your rent?

It is a very tricky situation. British Columbia has paid sick days. Federally regulated workers have paid sick days. Quebec and Yukon have paid sick days. Ontario does not. Your mom would be like, stay at home, right? If you spoke to your family doctor, they would say you are sick, you should stay at home.

I know you need to work. If I spoke to my wallet would be like, listen, Jared, you're cuckoo bananas. You're not going to be able to make rent this week. You must go to work, right?

Is it fair that our minimum wage, even if you work full time, is not enough to make ends meet?

Even if you work full time, the cost of rent is so expensive. Lauren mentioned inflation is going up. Everything's getting more expensive. I remember when the TTC was \$2 something, now it's \$3 something.

All of these things are choices. Paid sick days, the minimum wage, equal pay for equal work. And all of these things can change if workers are able to fight back because these things impact us every single day, right?

I would just say that workers are fighting back because people know what is wrong, but we need to organize and push the government to make the right choices against corporate power.

BEN: Yeah, very nice. So some of the ways that the individual worker being squeezed has to do with. Having to make these decisions about, going into work when you're not feeling well, making your friends at work unwell by spreading your sickness, not earning enough to be able to pay rent.

As this wealth inequality ramps up, we also notice that people are taking on more and more debt in order to just basically meet their needs. People are feeling it in their pocketbooks. They're feeling it in their relationships. They're feeling it in the decisions that they have to make day in and day out. And all of these discomfiting implications, all of the fear that people have to struggle with. This is being turned into profits.

Another one of these cardinal points is tax dodging. What do we mean when we're talking about tax dodging, Lauren? And how does that function to increase the profits of wealthy and corporations?

LAUREN: There's one point that I wanted to build on that you just said Ben on people having to go into debt just to make ends meet. This is also a trend at a global level. We're seeing countries go into debt to pay their, you know, their bills. So, countries and individuals.

The poorest countries in the world are seeing their debt balloon, especially since the pandemic. If you imagine, a Canadian mining company that's not paying its fair share of taxes in a country in Sub Saharan Africa. That country is then hit by the pandemic, has to invest in public health, is borrowing to do so, rather than being able to have fair taxation from large companies that are extracting mineral wealth from that country.

So this is very much an issue at the individual household level, but also at the country level. So we've seen levels of debt in particular in Africa that are hugely problematic because it's weighing countries down. And it means that you're further cutting things that actually help countries get out of poverty in particular health and education investments.

Tax dodging, this is one of the biggest issues. So it's not to say that corporations can't be making a profit, but need to be taxed on the profit they're making. And we've seen very elaborate schemes from very sophisticated accounting, to minimize tax pay to actual tax evasion and use of tax havens for multinational companies to be avoiding taxation.

So that's one part of it. So there's kind of the bending of the rules or the ignoring of the rules. So hiding wealth in tax havens.

There's another issue that links to the lobbying we were speaking about where companies are lobbying countries and governments to lower corporate tax rates. So we've seen corporate tax rates plummet since the 1980s and a race to the bottom on corporate taxation.

Countries are fighting amongst each other to lower tax rates so that they can attract corporations. And between lowered tax rates and lower labour protections, these things go hand in hand.

So, I can give you an example of the garment sector that Oxfam works on a lot. We've seen the garment sector move from country to country, region to region based on where there's the worst labour rights protections and the lowest tax rates.

So think of the Makila solidarity organizing in the nineties, where you saw a lot of garments companies in Mexico or in Central America and now they've moved to countries like Cambodia, Vietnam, Bangladesh, precisely because of tax regimes and labour rights regimes.

And so there's that global competition on taxation. And this is why. We think we have to have a global approach to corporate taxation because a country like Canada, let's say, was well intentioned and wanted to have a higher tax rate, it just causes investors to flee to another country.

So we need a global approach to this where companies can't make the most of loopholes and low tax rates in certain countries to make a bigger profit.

BEN: Yeah, thank you for that. That's really good context. I mean, we've recently seen, the passing of Brian Mulrooney on the subject of these free trade agreements that sent jobs south.

And Brian Mulrooney was a big proponent of the there is no alternative philosophy. That is to say, we need to cut corporate taxes. We need to ameliorate trade in order to sustain the economy. And through these changes, we saw a shift in emphasis from a state that would support its people to a state that was supporting its corporations.

So there's a shift from the collective to the individual.

Mulrooney, for instance, stopped, charging manufacturing taxes to corporations and we had to pay taxes as individual at the point of sale. Jared, can you point to any other ways that the emphasis is being shifted from the employer, the corporation to the individual, especially the individual worker

JARED: For sure. I always think of it as corporations and the right like to think: oh, we don't believe in socialism. We don't believe in subsidies. We don't believe in public services. And yet often there's subsidies and tax breaks, but it's not for

workers, it's for the rich and corporations, right? So our politicians are the one deciding who is punished or not, who will benefit or not.

So you mentioned earlier that inflation is a big problem. A lot of people are going into debt. So one thing that the government is doing is they've been raising interest rates. And raising interest rates results in a lot of workers having much harder time to pay their bills because things are getting more expensive. Their lines of credit are getting more expensive. The credit is getting more expensive. But was it the workers, fault for causing the recession, causing inflation? It's not like we have tons of money and we are going around buying a ton of things that is causing inflation. It's more of a supply-side issue.

Whether it's the COVID pandemic, or whether it is the various wars that Canada has a hand in maybe, or whether it's the climate crisis, workers are being punished for it. And why?

Talking about taxes, the government has a lot of things with richer people to get by.

So we had the First Home Savings Account. There's a Tax Free Savings Account. People have a Registered Retirement Savings Account. And it's great. People should be able to get the tax break.

But how many people for the tax free savings account - I think you can put like \$7,000 tax free in it each year. I can't put \$7,000 each year into the savings account. A lot of the people that I work with can't put it in. There are so many buckets the rich can scurry away, but a lot of workers don't have access to it.

And even basic things like Employment Insurance. Employment Insurance is there for workers when they lose their job, partly because if they raise the interest rates, jobs get lost because the recession may be triggered.

A lot of workers cannot access Employment Insurance. It is hard to access. You need 700 hours. And if you're working 20 hours a week, that's around nine months of working before you qualify for employment insurance. Migrant workers find it hard to qualify for it because if you're on a closed work permit, you're not able to easily find other jobs.

Students are also make it very difficult because you're not able to be looking for work. And the worst part is, you know, Lauren mentioned Amazon, but other big bad corporations like Uber, there's a lot of gig work, there's a lot of tech sector, gigification of the economy, a lot of these jobs are misclassified as self-employed.

If you're self-employed: one, none of the rights that we talk about today cover you, like minimum wage, vacation, sick days, whichever.

And two, if you're self-employed, you do not qualify for employment insurance, regular benefits either.

So I would just say that I don't know about Mulroney and stuff. This is pre-Jared era unfortunately. But I definitely can feel right now, a lot of emphasis being put on subsidizing the rich at the expense of the workers.

LAUREN: Do we have time for any other tax related commentary?

Just, wanted to talk about what we can do about this, because it does feel like there's been this race to the bottom, pulling down corporate tax rates, subsidizing the rich, the tax breaks are there.

I think there's three things in particular.

One is really cracking down on tax havens, and tax avoidance which is a crime and something that we need to be holding companies accountable to, because they're robbing us of our capacity to invest in public services. The 2nd is, as I mentioned, having fair corporate tax rates. So that corporations that benefit from the workers of a country, the natural resources of a country, are actually paying back into the economy.

But there's also how we look at taxing excessive wealth because there's corporate taxes and there's lots of corporations that are small creating, employment in the country. But then there's the major corporations, the big corporate wealth.

And so there, there's two things that we think are needed.

One is taxation on the windfall profits of some companies. So if you think of in particular during the pandemic, pharmaceuticals and food companies, food and beverage companies made huge profits at a time where people were struggling, and that needs to be taxed.

So we can say it's one thing for a company to make a profit, that's their bottom line, that's their role. It's another to have these windfall profits that are being made on the back of people suffering. And so we've really focused on getting Canada to have those windfall taxes on food and pharmaceuticals in particular.

And then the third thing is looking at, having a tax system that taxes the super rich. So, having a tax regime that has additional tax brackets for the super rich, and we've done polling on this. We know that Canadians are in favor of this sort of taxation.

And, our proposal would be that we'd have kind of a 2% tax rate on wealth over \$6 million, a 3% tax rate on wealth over \$66 million, and a 5% tax rate on wealth over \$1.3 billion. Now, these are very few Canadians that would be paying this, but if you actually put into place that super wealth tax, you could generate about \$65 billion a year in Canada.

Now, if you look at investments that are made just in the historic investments in the National Child Care Program, this would pay for that kind of investment in one

swoop. So we could be bringing in over \$50 billion a year in Canada in the taxation just by taxing a few rich men.

BEN: Yeah. Students often ask, okay, so where is the hopeful outlook? How can we orient ourselves to get someplace better than we are now? Thinking about taxes might make your eyes cross. I mean, this is fundamental to how a state is run.

This is where we get our resources. And so these seem like very valuable points.

Can you speak a little bit, Lauren, to the climate, crisis and how you see this as being influenced by this, shift in power towards corporations and billionaires?

LAUREN: In the simplest terms, corporations make a profit by trashing the planet.

So it's not just like a byproduct of how corporations function. They profit from trashing the planet.

So by polluting water streams, by polluting the land, by extracting mineral resources, by having carbon emissions that are totally out of control.

It's not just that these two things are happening at the same time. Wealth is accumulated by using natural resources and in polluting our planet, increasing carbon emissions.

You know, we talk about a tax on pollution, but the reality is that companies need to be paying for the impact that they're having on our planet because they make a profit off it.

And if that was taxed, they would have an incentive to be gentler on our natural resources. So I think we need to understand that there's a price tag to this. But it's a positive price tag for companies. That it is to their advantage to have the capacity to increase emissions, drive climate change.

And then also, just if you look at the emissions at an individual level, so the richest people in this world have huge levels of emissions. If you think of things like private jets, private yachts, the level of emissions there. But this is also at a global level, countries.

So a country like Canada has so much more emissions than a country like Malawi, for example. And so we need to be looking at the climate inequality and how climate and economic inequality it's a self-fulfilling prophecy. The more you have economic inequality, the more worse off our planet is.

BEN: Yeah, that's, very telling. Pivoting back to, the Brian Mulroney with whom you're not familiar, Jared.Mulroney helped usher in the North American Free Trade

Agreement, but Harper with whom you will be more familiar was sort of the LeBron James of free trade agreements, ushering in hundreds of them.

And those free trade agreements, along with the current and impending climate crisis, have been and will continue to lead to mass migration.

Canada, as the Workers Action Centre has pointed out, has a two-tiered system, a dehumanizing two-tiered system that unequally serves its workers. Can you talk about how migrant workers are being treated in the current, labour economy and how climate migration might impact this going forward? Or how, the impending turn toward, climate migration will be interacting with these current temporary farm work policies.

JARED: So I 100% agree. I think there is a lot of climate migration. There's a lot of migration caused by other foreign policies that Canada may be part of. But I want to talk about what are the impacts for the migrant workers being forced out of the countries because of climate change, because of wars, because of all these, corporate exploitation in the countries.

I feel like Canada has a two-tiered, immigration system, has a two-tiered employment system. And it treats migrant workers and international students so much worse, and yet is so much dependent on international students and on migrant workers. Are there a lot of international students in George Brown College?

How much do international students pay right now in international student fees?

BEN: Several times what ...

JARED: Several times what it is, right? So a lot of our colleges, our education system is kind of subsidized by international students.

And yet, when they are working on whether it's a closed work permit, whether it's an international, permit, international student permit, or whether it's through the temporary foreign worker program, it is a very tricky thing. Because for a lot of migrant workers that come to Canada to make a better life, your employment status is tied to your immigration status. And because of that precarity, a lot of bad bosses would tell you, Hey Jared, I know you are here on a closed work permit. You better accept that I am paying you less than minimum wage. Because if you complain, I will cancel your work permit. I will deport you, and you have no chance to complain back, right?

If you're an international student, you just need to make ends meet. You pay twice, three times the cost, of a domestic student, and you just need to make a job.

After you graduate from a lot of the colleges, you would get something called a PGWP, a postgraduate work permit, and within those three years, you are forced to find a high skilled, full time job if you hope to stay in Canada. And because of such a

short timeline and such pressure, it also creates a huge power imbalance between bosses and workers.

So, for example, I was speaking to an international student, last week. She's working in a coffee shop by her college. She works six days a week for seven hours a day and she studies full time. She lives in Brampton and travels down to Toronto. So her whole time here is just studying and working for minimum wage.

She's exhausted. She's smart. She's funny. She wants to make a better life, but it's so difficult.

And front line retail workers, service workers that are so essential in our economy, are very oftentimes migrant workers. Migrant workers harvest our food, they build our homes, they clean our spaces, and they provide a lot of the essential work that we did.

And yet, somehow, after "the pandemic is over", all of us have forgot about how essential the work is.

So one of the key things that we're demanding at the Workers Action Center, and we're joining the Migrant Rights Network to demand, is status for all. Full and permanent immigration status for all people.

If you're good enough to come to Canada to study and work, you're good enough to stay.

Permanent residency would allow workers to fight back against bad bosses. Access essential healthcare and not be so exploited at work. Three years and nothing for international students to get and earn enough to live a healthy life.

100% true. It is so difficult for so many international students, and that pressure creates such exploitation in the workplace.

BEN: Yeah, thank you, Jared. So I guess the last thing that we want to touch upon of this big 4 is the privatization of the state. What do we mean by the privatization of the state? And how are we seeing that taking place globally and here in Canada I suppose.

LAUREN: The best way to fight inequality is to invest in public services. This is clear. Whether it's investing in child care, which has a direct impact on gender equality and either increasing or decreasing gender equality, getting women to access the labour market.

Whether it's investing in a range of care services, for example, elder care, Education has an equalizing effect.

So all the public services are critical. In Canada those are the ones that come to mind.

In some countries public services can be investing in water access. So you're not spending your time looking for water. Investing in roads so that you can actually access the nearest school or workplace.

So we know that public services are the biggest equalizer.

And yet there's been this push to privatize public services. Two part.

One, because companies see this as a huge untapped potential market for them. So whether it's the provision of water, electricity provision, privatizing of schools, healthcare, elder care, this is a big market. So companies want in.

And on the flip side, countries have less and less of a taxation base to actually invest in public services. So it kind of goes hand in hand. They don't have the means and so they'll offload it to the private sector. It has huge impacts. You look at a country like the United States where, having a health crisis is one of the leading causes of personal bankruptcy. So you have your kid break a leg, you have a baby and you go bankrupt because if you're not insured, you don't have the capacity to pay.

But we've seen it in many countries, this encroachment. You see it in the nursing sector, for example, privatization. So you have public health care in Canada, but then you have, private companies offering nursing services. It's doubly problematic because it's letting the private sector again, profit from people's essential needs that need to be met by the state. So the human right to health, education, to life.

But then as well you're eroding this tax base at the same time.

So in our work at Oxfam, this is really what we emphasize the most.

You know, people don't love talking about taxes. I think a lot of people's eyes glaze over. Whether you're poor and are not paying taxes to begin with, or you're wealthy and looking to get out of the conversation.

But actually taxes are the basis of a healthier, happier society. And this is really what we need to emphasize.

And, you know, this decade, we think the world will have its first trillionaire. Just the idea of a trillionaire is mind-boggling.

It's not that there isn't wealth out there that can be invested in public services, it's that we're not harnessing it.

And this is not just far away, even in Canada, someone like Galen Weston is taking home more in a week than most Canadians earn in a year. Taxing that kind of super wealth allows us to invest in public systems, health, education and others.

And I think there's this thought that by taxing the super rich to invest in public services, somehow we're going to be harming our economy. These companies won't be creating jobs, won't be reinvesting in their communities, the economy is just not true. This is a system, especially went from monopolies where wealth is being funneled up to the top to their ultra rich owners. It's not being reinvested in the economy. So that is a myth.

Small businesses certainly help the economy roll. You know, small businesses creating employment and value at the community level. That is true. But these megacorporations are really just set up to channel wealth to the ultra rich.

And so again, looking at how we take a percentage of that, and even the wealth tax on the super rich that I was mentioning to you. Getting taxed 5% on wealth over a billion dollars, you're not having a hard time paying your bills at the end of the month. Galen Weston will be doing just fine. And yet it makes a huge difference in public services.

BEN: Yeah, on the subject of, Galen Weston, there was a conversation that we held, on Monday with, JP Hornick talking about, a turn to privatize the LCBO, which is a major money generator for Ontario. And it would put it in the hands of a few profiteers. You also talked about the encroachment on nursing and care work. There is a connection here to the Temporary Foreign Work Program with personal aid workers. Jared, can you talk a little bit about how you see the effects of privatization hitting the workers with whom you're working?

JARED: For sure. So I really agree with what Lauren mentioned. That there is wealth out there, but the government is choosing not to effectively harvest it. They're choosing to give subsidies to companies, and they are explicitly chipping away at the public sector and our public infrastructure as a way to pad the pockets of the really rich, basically.

You know, looking back, this is before my time, but I am a student of history, there was the sale of the 407 highway, right? So it was sold for \$3 billion. Today it's worth \$30 billion. But once it's gone, we can't get it back.

A lot of long-term care homes in Toronto, were sold off and became for-profit. And yet, during the pandemic, there were 78% higher COVID deaths in for-profit, long-term care homes, rather than public.

Chipping away at our public goods is not only bad value, it really creates really bad services for public good, right?

So you mentioned the LCBO. The LCBO generates like \$2 billion of revenue that is used to fund, for example, public health care, education. So this is something that we are very aware of that's happening right now.

Will it be the next 407? Will it be the next long term care home fiasco? We are keeping watch.

The other thing that you mentioned as well is issues around our healthcare being chipped away.

We have Shoppers increasingly being able to provide prescriptions. We have private hospitals being allowed to charge OHIP for surgeries.

All of these things are chipping away, at a crisis which the government caused itself by underfunding our public healthcare and education. And then you say, hey, there's a crisis. I guess the solution is to privatize it, right?

There was a CBC article, I think, recently, which they were saying that, pharmacists were pushed to keep calling patients and people that they're prescribed to because every time they call and have a conversation about their prescription, they can charge, \$75 extra.

So it becomes, I don't need to call you, but you have pushed increased sales numbers. So it's like going to the dentist and being like, I guess you need a polish. I guess you need, Invisalign. It's you're upselling our dental care, our healthcare and everything.

LAUREN: Ben, can I just add one thing on kind of the flip side of this really kind of disheartening conversation on ballooning wealth inequality?

There's a lot of work that Oxfam has been doing on talking about the care economy. And the care economy is when we invest in things like child care, elder care, you know, healthcare.

But the care economy is an interesting one, because it's one that creates jobs that could be good jobs if they were well payed. They're low carbon jobs. And so when we think of what the government can invest in, when we talk about a Green Transition, the care economy is a great one. We have an aging population. Care services provide huge value to communities and also just create happier and healthier communities and they're low emissions.

And so one of our alternatives is saying tax windfall profits, tax the super wealthy and invest in the care economy.

This is also a sector that employs mostly women and racialized folks. So you're creating employment opportunities.

They're seen as less desirable jobs, not because they're inherently less interesting jobs than working in mining or mowing someone's lawn. It's because they're not well paid. But we really see investments in the care economy as actually one of, the solutions to the inequality crisis today and the climate crisis.

BEN: Yeah, that's great. I've heard some people argue that if we introduced a universal basic income that you would see an increase in these jobs, which, as you say, have become a feminized labour ghetto where it's not viewed as positively socially, this sort of work. But people want to do this work, if only they have the time to do it. And the work would be more valorized perhaps.

Jared talks about Shoppers. This is another good illustration of, how monopolies work because there is a connection between Shoppers and Loblaws and No Frills and all of these places that we need to go every day, in order to have our basic needs met.

Lauren, you've kind of, pointed towards, a positive direction, and I think what both of you are trying to emphasize is that these things aren't fixed.

It isn't the case of this mystifying and ubiquitous, "it is what it is", idiom.

Things can be done and people are doing it.

There's this great quotation from the anthropologist and anarchist David Graeber, "The ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something that we make and could just as easily make differently."

If each of you wanted to take an opportunity to talk about how things ought to be made differently. we'll then pivot from your concluding sentiments and then we'll get to some student questions.

Lauren, if you want to begin.

LAUREN: Sure. I love that point. And I think that this is something that at Oxfam, we're always stressing that inequality is not inevitable.

There's nothing inevitable about the situation we're in. It's by design and it can be designed differently. So love that point.

There's a gazillion examples of how we can be investing differently for a different future. But I will give one that is close to home.

if you look, in the province of Quebec, at the investments that were made in the child care system in the 90s and 2000s, way ahead of other Canadian provinces, we saw that Quebec almost night and day went to the province that had the lowest, poverty rates around single women. Just because of that measure.

We also saw that the cost of child care was almost immediately paid back in the tax base because women actually had access to the Labour market, were getting jobs and then paying back into the system. We saw, in those investments in child care, increased unionization in the public daycare system. So you had better working conditions for women and racialized women in particular.

And so that one decision that was made to invest in , at the time, \$5 a day daycare system now, \$8. 2 a day, has immediate returns in terms of an equalizing factor, but also does not cost us more.

So I think we need to stop thinking about, investments in public services as an expense, but as an investment that has a direct return in terms of social well-being. But also making investments that are smart. So looking at sectors of our society that are most suffering from inequality, whether it's migrant workers, also mostly in the care sector, racialized communities, Indigenous communities and women and investing there.

And the problem is that sometimes we think, building towards a green future. A lot of the investments that the government is putting forward, are investments in male dominated sectors, even while trying to create a green economy. And there's other ways to go about it.

But we've seen also countries, in West Africa that have really put a line in the sand around taxation of extractive industry companies, and how that has turned around their tax base and their capacity to invest in primary education, for example.

So there are examples of countries that are standing up and pushing back. But what we need is a concerted global effort between labour movements, social justice movements, organizations like Oxfam. Because if not, you just have this kind of merry-go-round where corporates go from one country to the other, where they get the best deal. And so it definitely needs a concerted effort.

BEN: Thank you. What do you think Jared? If you could orient us in a direction or two that would help un mire us a little bit.

JARED: Yeah, I find the problem with Netflix documentaries and YouTube and all of these kinds of things. It just sometimes results in a lot of doom-scrolling and, being really sad about things and the most you could do is like a post and share a story.

But I think one of the key things that I strongly believe in is that people need to build and we need to collectively really feel that change is possible. That we can make a positive change, but only it is possible if, we organize and we build confidence and we come out and support each other.

And I think one way that we can do that is understanding a bit of our history and physically taking action ourselves, you know?

So at the Workers Action Center, we support workers fighting against bad bosses. So as we talked a lot today about a meta- macro- level about all these policies, but every month we help individual workers fight back against a bad boss because we know our policies and our laws are not strong enough. We need to be there to support each other.

So just last month, we won \$3,800 for a cleaner who was an international student who was working. And was never paid her vacation pay, was never paid her overtime, was never paid her public holiday pay.

So workplace to workplace, we are fighting back. Because we know, the government is pretty bad at enforcing its own laws. You know, as much as we want to push the laws to actually be good.

In 2021, the government told bosses, you need to pay your workers back. They issued tickets, fines, orders to pay for \$9 million. They were not paid. Workers were told \$9 million should be paid to you. None of them were paid back. So, I feel like our laws, as much as we need to change them, are kind of like a gym membership.

I have my gym membership in my pocket, in my wallet. Have I went to the gym since January? No! So, our laws are only as strong as we can enforce them. And we can only enforce them if we are strong. So that's why I'm going to do a little plug. We have an organizing meeting in Toronto on April 9th at the Workers Action Center.

It's a lot of organizing. It's a lot of thinking how to support workers. So last time we had workers from the LCBO. We had workers from Amazon and we had workers from Uber drivers come in and think, Hey, we need to fight back in our workplaces. How can we do it?

So if you know, workers are having issues at your work, please reach out to us. Let's organize and fight back together.

I think the best way to do something is to practice and we got to work our organizing muscles together. Cool beans.

BEN: Cool beans.

So, some takeaways here. Change is possible. Change is inevitable. So you want to be a part of how that change takes place. Investing in care work is an excellent step forward for seeing that change through.

And I think a message that keeps coming up this week is that this cult of individualism of which we are all a part is really at the root of a lot of these issues.

And one obvious way out of this is turning towards the collective, turning towards the betterment of the group. Let's get to some student questions.

How do you think colonial history slash policies have impacted, created the current economic crisis we are in?

LAUREN: I'm happy to take that one.

From a global level. it's absolutely obvious. If you look at. our global inequality report, we've been talking about wealth concentration in Canada or the impacts on individual workers.

But you also look at wealth concentration on a global level. We're still seeing that the Global North is about 20% of the global population and holds about 80% of wealth, billionaire wealth, and then emissions that are trashing our planet. And so at a global level, there's not even a correlation, it's a causality between kind of the pillaging of resources, whether that's people, but also natural resources that continue today.

I get to travel, quite a bit for my work and it's sad to say, but in most countries, when I mentioned that I'm from Canada, people talk about mining companies. That is the first thing that comes to mind because mining companies are trashing their communities. And this is the realities of colonialism today.

We're not post colonial. This relationship of Canadian mining companies that can go into communities, take their resources, often intimidate or even kill, activists, whether it's Indigenous activists, environmental activists that are looking to protect their lands. Then pay no, fair taxes on the wealth that they're extracting. And then leave once the land has been totally polluted and isn't usable. This is happening in Central American, Latin American, Asia and Africa. It's all over the world. And so Canada's, colonial legacy is alive and kicking in the extractive industries for sure.

And then obviously in the Canadian context, but globally, we're not in a post colonial state by any stretch.

BEN: Yeah. Canada was formed as a backwater for resources for the UK, and it just continues to be a hub for resource extraction premised on the dehumanizing practices that made it possible to clear the land, to romanticize the land as cleared for such extraction.

JARED: I think Canada was a land of resource extraction and labour extraction in the past for the UK. But I think now it's kind of the opposite. Canada is like the hub where a lot of resources and a lot of labour is being sent to and exploiting all these developing countries.

People think , oh, these colonial histories are all in the past. But no, there is institutional racism, basically true to Temporary Foreign Worker Program, international student work permits. Who we decide to let in. Who we decide to say, no, you're not allowed to come here.

And even if you do come here, how are you allowed to work? Where are you allowed to work? And how much you're being paid.

My history is not the best, but I do know that there is still a lot of colonial, racist policies that are being used right now. And it's legal and framed as a good thing, which is a problem.

LAUREN: Also, if you look at Canadian embassies, or even like the Quebec government has its own kind of diplomatic presence in certain countries. And Canada is actively pursuing the recruitment of nurses in countries, for example, in francophone countries. Countries that hardly can keep their own healthcare systems afloat and is actively trying to recruit qualified healthcare workers from those countries to come work in Canada, where we know they'll be facing the gender pay gap, racialized discrimination and all the rest. But they're actively kind of looting.

So we talk about the brain drain. But also the brain drain is not something that just happens. Countries are actually contributing to it.

Sometimes I hear on the news, certain provincial leaders touting the fact that they're able to attract nurses from a country like Ghana or a country like Senegal. I think you are robbing these countries of their own ability of keeping their own populations healthy.

BEN: We have a question for Lauren. Currently there is a price on pollution to some extent, and companies have found the loopholes to sell off their emissions to other countries, take their business to countries with little to no environmental legislation, and still make their money in clothing, coal, labour, etc.

If the Canadian government started devising legislation for corporations' climate impact, do you think it will be a tiresome wild goose chase, making more and more legislation?

LAUREN: This is this race to the bottom. It's on taxation, but it's on labour conditions, it's on environmental protections. And that's why we really need global efforts.

And it's really an uphill battle because we're in a moment in time where multilateralism is increasingly weakened or disregarded; so it's hard to find those spaces where governments can actually come together and push back collectively. But it is the only way.

I mentioned the garment sector around labour rights protections, but it's the same on pollution.

All these jean companies that are in Bangladesh are polluting the waterways of that country. That is also one of the countries that is most at risk from climate change because it's right at sea level. We definitely need global solutions where countries

are actually negotiating together. But there's also kind of a disillusionment with government capacity to actually take action on behalf of people, you know, positive action.

And so it's this kind of negative cycle where governments have less resources to act, people trust it less, rise of populism, even less solutions that are concerted at a global level. So it's certainly challenging. But I don't want to be all doom and gloom because there are positive examples.

In the climate space, we have been fighting and have recently made some inroads into getting what we call Loss and Damages Funds. So ensuring that rich countries are actually paying for the loss and the damages that poor countries are experiencing of the impact of climate change. So recognizing that there is a price to pay and it is countries like Canada that need to be paying that price when a small island state in the Pacific or a country like Bangladesh is seeing its land eroded, people's inability to live in those areas anymore.

So there has been some progress on that kind of technical area of loss and damage. It's because there's been mobilizing across environmental movement in many countries to push government. So this can't happen kind of on a country by country and individual basis.

Some things can be done individually, like smart decisions, around where to invest. I mentioned child care because we see it's one of the most equalizing measures can be made and Canada is on the right track on that. But then other things around taxation and environmental regulations need to be concerted efforts globally.

BEN: So it's not only a question of empowering the state or re empowering the state, but also placing this emphasis on what you're calling multilateralism, or maybe a collectivity between different states.

Let me put another question to you.

Totally agree with taxing the super rich, but they are also very influential politically and have many tools to stop governments from taxing them. What is the way out?

JARED: Yeah, I would say, you know, taxes is a big question. It's a federal thing.

But I think one tricky thing is that I think sometimes we think, hey, when we talk about how do we organize, sometimes people say we have the power to vote. But I would say voting is just one piece that people do every four years or less that actually changes the government. But we can do things in between to actually make changes happen.

So, actually being engaged. I feel a lot of people in this chat are already politically engaged, but it's more about keeping the momentum, keeping the energy going.

Burnout is very real. If you guys are going to become community workers, burnout is very real. If you guys are going to be an activist,

I used to have hair and then I became an activist and look at me. So sometimes I think, you know, all that work and why did I do it?

But people have been winning.

When I first started out, people were like \$15 minimum wage, it's never going to happen. And today, a couple of years later, people are like \$15, hell no, that's not enough, you know. So I do tangibly feel on the street that things are changing.

So it's about getting organized. Coming to the April 9th meeting . Or you know, you can fill that Oxfam inequality letter for taxing the rich for 1%. Just get organized and get something done. No more doom scrolling. I do enjoy a doom scroll though.

BEN: Who among us does not love a doom scroll? But, nothing beats the complex, material engagement. Nothing beats direct action. We do have to talk to people and we do have to get together with them if we want to effect change.

Another question for Lauren. Are boycotts effective?

LAUREN: Boycotts can certainly be effective.

The problem, though, is that we're looking at kind of systemic problems across sectors. And so, I keep mentioning the garment sector because it's one that we do specific work in. And every time I visited sweatshops across the world, women are saying, you know, please do not call on a boycott on this company, because the next company will just move in.

So it's just a transferring of one problem to another. And a lot of people depend on these industries for their survival, because it's employment and we need to respect that as well.

Interestingly all these big Canadian fashion brands market themselves as so unique. So if you think of a Ritzy or Lululemon or Root, but they're all producing in the same factories , the same warehouses. So if you're boycotting one, those same women will be employed, by another fashion company.

So there are specific instances where boycotts can be effective, but I think it's more pushing an entire sector to change its ways.

And it's easier in some sectors than in others. So, for example, I definitely encourage you all to check out our campaign called What She Makes, which is specifically targeted at the Canadian fashion industry.

Publicly known companies are very susceptible to influence because their whole reputation lies on being perceived as a good company, whatever that means.

And so, while at Oxfam, we do work on the extractive industries, I've mentioned our work on mining; you're never going to get a very effective campaign against a company like Barrick Gold or tech industries, because no one knows them, they're not a household name. So they really do not cave to public pressure.

Whereas, the companies that I mentioned, whether it's Joe Fresh or Roots or Herschel, you know, if their name is not looking good on social media, it hurts their sales. And so we can be quite effective, there. And interestingly, a company like, Roots at the beginning of our campaign wouldn't even respond on sourcing, basic transparency around their supply chain. And, you know, when we had 40, 000 people send them a letter, all of a sudden, they're answering our calls. So public pressure can make a difference.

Oxfam traditionally does not call for boycotts because of the type of work we do, that's global. It's not to say it's never an appropriate tool.

BEN: I think we have time for one or two more questions. If your nearest supermarket is No Frills, or it's the only one you can afford to shop at, what can you do? And how long do you need to sustain action?

JARED: I can answer some of that and then riff off what Lauren mentioned about boycotts. I think it's a tricky thing about boycotts, I agree, but I always think about it, less boycotts, more about just transitions.

So for example, it's not necessarily like, oh, let's just shut down every single factory that is polluting in Canada. And then what happens? Another company will come in. Or even if we replace oil and gas industries with clean energy, what happens to these workers? Will the new clean energy companies actually treat workers decently? Right? So it's not so much, let's just destroy all these jobs, let's destroy all these companies. Let's make sure the workers are engaged and actively changed into a just transition for them.

As well, I think we didn't mention it much in today's, panel, but respecting, First Nations and Aboriginal peoples when you're doing all these just transitions, especially with all these extraction. Are they benefiting from this kind of thing?

It's the same with No Frills. It's the same with your Walmarts, you know. If it's the only No Frill and Walmart in your area, then boycotting and impacting their jobs, having the store closed down and having another, like a Sears open up or a Loblaws open up actually is effective.

I would say the sneakier thing to do is to find a job there, salt it, unionize the workplace. And then that would be a better impact for people than closing down a No Frills and then a Fresh Co. coming in.

BEN: Okay. let's try one more. And this will be directed at both of you, how would you suggest we can start lobbying for taxing the super rich?

LAUREN: So, something that we do, and that you can organize as students together is engage in the budget process. So, the federal budget process.

Not many people know this, but anyone can submit recommendations as part of the pre budget consultations that happen, annually ahead of the budget.

And this is where we, as Oxfam, try to put pressure on Minister Freeland and others to say, not only what we want the government to spend on, but how we want them to raise the money that they can then spend.

And so organizing, whether it's on that call for tax on the super wealthy windfall taxes, corporate tax rate or any other issue that you're interested, I would encourage you to use the budget process.

Back in 2010, I started tracking, how many times the word women was mentioned in the budget consultation and how many women were actually invited to testify before the Parliamentary Committee on Finance and it was on one hand, less than five times the word women was mentioned, but that could go, for a number of issues.

So, as you will guess, most people who are lobbying the government in pre- budget consultations are corporations. Lobby interests are the ones that influence that. And so getting more people voices heard there is a really useful space. I can't promise that will be the one and done moment, but it is an effective way of getting the governments ear.

BEN: Jared, have you got anything further on that?

JARED: I would say, like, you know, get engaged in your political process. I would just add, it's taxing the super rich, but also figuring out how it's spent. If it's going to be spent on corporate subsidies, it's a whole different thing.

So, I would just add to what Lauren said, just be engaged in the whole budget process. I think it's about taxing, but also spending, and where is it going? Is it going into infrastructure? Is it going into healthcare and education? Or is it going into subsidizing a giant factory in Oshawa?

Questions that political choices that need to be made.

BEN: Well, thank you so much. There's a lot of connections here that you both have, pointed out to us between, how, wealth inequality is working and how this impacts our day to day lives. I know that I'm going to be chewing on it and I expect a number of us will.

I want to begin by, thanking our interpreters and I also, want to thank all of the students and faculty who showed up to engage with this talk. And then thanks to, Lauren and Jared for taking time out of your busy schedules to share a bit about your work and your experiences and insights.

JARED: Yeah, thank you so much. Thanks for inviting us.

LAUREN: Thank you so much for the invitation.

BEN: Thank you kindly

RESH: That was Lauren Ravon, Executive Director of Oxfam Canada, and Jared Ong, Organizer and Case Worker with the Workers Action Centre, in a discussion facilitated by Professor Benjamin McCarthy, faculty with the School of Labour at George Brown College, and organizer with this year's Labour Fair 2024, Corporate Power vs. Labour Power. It's Our Work.

And this is the Courage My Friends podcast.

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

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