

LABOR MILITANCY CAN'T BE STOPPED: PALESTINE AND LABOR NOTES 2024

At Labor Notes 2024, the labor movement showed it won't abandon militancy, Palestine, or each other—as some cops who tried to arrest pro-Palestine protesters learned.

BY **MAXIMILLIAN ALVAREZ** AND **MEL BUER**

JULY 24, 2024



LaborNotes attendees at the Labor4Palestine Rally outside the convention refused to let police leave after arresting one rally-goer on April 19, 2024. The arrestee was eventually released. Photo by Mel Buer

Labor militancy can't be stopped: Palestine and Labor Notes 2024 | Working People

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Two months ago, from April 17-21, workers and labor organizers of all stripes convened in Chicago for the bi-annual Labor Notes conference, which overlapped with the Railroad Workers United convention. As the registration website rightly noted, “Labor Notes Conferences are the biggest gatherings of grassroots labor activists, union reformers, and all-around troublemakers out there.” This is not a buttoned up convention of union officials; this is a real grassroots gathering of people on the frontlines of struggle, talking openly, honestly, and strategically about their struggles, victories, and defeats, about what we can all learn from one another as fellow workers and fighters, and about how we can all contribute to growing the labor movement as fellow members of that movement. In this on-the-ground episode, cohosted by Max and Mel Buer, we speak with attendees at the RWU convention, Labor Notes, and participants in the Labor for Palestine protest that took place outside of Labor Notes on April 19.

Speakers include: Johnny Walker, a railroad worker and member of the Sheet Metal, Air, Rail, and Transportation Workers—Transportation Division (SMART-TD) Local 610 in Baltimore; Matt Weaver, who has worked on the railroad since 1994, is a member of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWED-IBT) Local 2624, where he also serves as legislative director for his state; Marcie Pedraza, an electrician at Ford Chicago Assembly Plant and member of United Auto Workers (UAW) Local 551; Jacob Morrison, a member of the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), president of the North Alabama Labor Council, and cohost of *The Valley Labor Report*; Leticia Zavala, legendary farm labor organizer working with farm workers in Mexico and the United States, and a member of El Futuro Es Nuestro (It’s Our Future), a farmworker caucus within the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC, AFL-CIO); Colin Smalley, president of the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) Local 777 in Chicago; Berenice Navarrete-Perez, vice president of the Association of Legislative Employees (ALE); Annie Shields, former journalist and union organizer with the NewsGuild of New York; and Axel Persson, a locomotive engineer in France and general secretary of the Confédération Générale du Travail (CGT) Railway Workers Union in Trappes.

Additional links/info below...

- Labor Notes [website](#), [Facebook](#) page, and [Twitter/X](#) page
- Railroad Workers United [website](#), [Facebook](#) page, and [Twitter](#) page
- El Futuro Es Nuestro – It’s Our Future [website](#) and [Facebook](#) page
- Labor for Palestine [website](#)
- *The Valley Labor Report* [YouTube](#) channel, [Facebook](#) page, [Twitter/X](#) page, and [Patreon](#)
- Duncan Freeman, *The Chief Leader*: “[At Labor Notes conference, a sense of mission and solidarity](#)“
- Axel Persson, ML Today, “[CGT leader speaks to Labor Notes conference](#)“

- Martha Grevatt, *Workers World*, “**Militant pro-Palestine demonstration during Labor Notes conference takes the street**“

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Featured Music...

- Jules Taylor, “*Working People*” Theme Song

Studio Production: Maximillian Alvarez

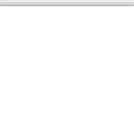
Post-Production: Alina Nehlich

TRANSCRIPT

The following is a rushed transcript and may contain errors. A proofread version will be made available as soon as possible.

Maximillian Alvarez:

All right. Welcome everyone to another episode of Working People, a podcast about the lives, jobs, dreams, and struggles of the working class today. Brought to you in partnership with In These Times magazine and The Real News Network, produced by Jules Taylor, and made possible by the support of listeners like you. Working People is a proud member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network. If you're hungry for more worker and labor focus shows like ours, follow the link in the show notes and go check out all the other great shows in our network. And please support the work that we're doing here at Working People because we cannot keep going without you.



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My name is Maximillian Alvarez and we've got a great episode for y'all today. Two months ago in Chicago, workers and labor organizers of all stripes convened for the biannual Labor Notes Conference, which actually overlapped with the Railroad Workers United convention. So we had quite a lot of workers and organizers and labor advocates all in Chicago at one time, and it was really an incredible moment. As the registration website rightly noted, "Labor Notes conferences are the biggest gatherings of grassroots labor activists, union reformers, and all around troublemakers out there."

And you know what? They're not wrong. This was actually my second time attending Labor Notes. And for the second time, I was running around like a headless chicken presenting on panels, attending other panels, hosting events, doing interviews. I mean, it's such a jam packed couple of days, but man, it really is an incredible experience getting to share space with and talk to and learn from so many working folks from so many industries and unions and labor groups around the US and around the world. This is not a buttoned up convention of union officials. This is a real grassroots gathering of people on the front lines of struggle, talking openly, honestly, and strategically about their struggles, victories, and defeats, about what we can all learn from one another as fellow workers and fighters, and about how we can all contribute to growing the labor movement as fellow members of that movement.

As I overheard a number of attendees saying during the conference, it's impossible to feel hopeless at Labor Notes. And you know what? I have to agree. And I want to explicitly shout out all the Labor Notes staff and volunteers who worked their asses off to make this experience possible for the rest of us. And I want to also ask everyone out there to please support the work that Labor Notes does, support Railroad Workers United. The work that they do is so important and we desperately need it. And I know many of you feel the same way yourselves about Labor Notes because Labor Notes is one of the very rare places where I actually get to meet a lot of listeners to this show and a lot of folks that I've interviewed on the show who I've never gotten to meet in person.

And if I'm being 100% honest, that's actually one of the many reasons I love Labor Notes so much. I mean, it really is a gift, a privilege, and an honor to get to meet you guys in person. And it genuinely means the world to me to have folks come up to me and tell me about how they found the show, what their favorite episodes

are, what the podcast has meant to them, but also to hear more about you and about the work that you are doing. That is the magic of Labor Notes.

As someone who's been hosting this show for many years, never knowing how many people out there were listening and how much of an impact the show is actually having, it's just truly an incredible experience to get to hear firsthand from you guys in a place like Labor Notes that the show does matter and these conversations do matter, and it is having an impact. And so to all of you who have ever shared those stories with me, reached out to me to share them, like seriously, thank you. We're all fighting so hard for better lives, better workplaces, better communities, and ultimately, a better world. But that work is punishing, to say the least. It's exhausting. And it can be really isolating. And in our day-to-day lives, it can feel like it just doesn't matter, like we're failing or we're not doing enough. Like we're the only ones doing anything and the only ones who care.

But being at Labor Notes is a vital reminder that we are not alone, that we are all in this together. And when you can see so many kindred spirits and fellow fighters together and you can feel the potential that we all have as a movement, it is indeed impossible to feel hopeless. So while it's impossible to totally communicate that feeling and that experience of Labor Notes in a podcast, we're going to do our best to take you there today. For this special on-the-ground compilation episode, I spoke to a number of incredible folks at both the Railroad Workers United convention, so you'll hear updates on the railroad workers struggle, but I also talked to folks throughout the Labor Notes Conference in Chicago. And this was all between the span of Wednesday, April 17th, and Sunday, April 21st of this year.

Also, I was there in Chicago with my Real News colleague, Mel Buer. And while I was talking to folks inside the conference, Mel was hustling around doing important coverage and interviewing folks outside the conference at a Palestine Solidarity protest held right outside the hotel by the group Labor for Palestine. As Martha Gravatt wrote at the time for *The Militant*, "Support for Palestine was strong among the thousands of union activists who attended the Labor Notes Conference in the Chicago area from April 18th to the 21st. Although not an official conference event, a rally organized by the Labor for Palestine National Network on April 19th drew hundreds of people. The crowd blocked traffic for over an hour surrounding a cop car and refusing to leave the street after two people were arrested, chanting from the river to the sea, Palestine will be free and let them go. The demonstrators eventually de-arrested the two activists who were released without charges."

So in this episode, you guys are going to hear interviews from me and Mel with folks inside Labor Notes, the Railroad Workers United convention, and outside at the Labor for Palestine protest. Take a listen.

Johnny Walker:

I am Johnny Walker, SMART Transportation Division, Local 610, Baltimore, Maryland.

Matt Weaver:

Matt Weaver, Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employee. Hired in 1994, so I got almost 30 years out here. Currently, I am a carpenter at the railroad. I won't name the railroad because whistleblower retaliation is alive and well in the industry. I am the legislative director for BMWWE members in Ohio. And it's been very exciting to see how the ties of legislation, everything we do in the rail labor industry is tied with the politics of it. So we have to be very involved in that. And it's exciting to be here on the stage with you where we really dig you, appreciate the opportunity to speak with you again.

Johnny Walker:

I think it was just an introduction, not a...

Matt Weaver:

I always go a million miles an hour, man. Yeah, you know me.

Johnny Walker:

[Inaudible 00:09:36] hop on that.

Maximillian Alvarez:

No, that was awesome, you guys. And it's like, yeah, that's what I want folks to hear on this recording, is the voices that they've been hearing on the show or the other coverage that we've been doing. I mean, folks have seen Johnny out there with his flag, like at Capitol Hill. Matt, I mean, we've had you on the show a number of times. You were the first guy I interviewed after the East Palestine derailment. So I think it's just really exciting that we're all here. And folks, if you're listening to this now, just in the background, I mean, we're at the Railroad Workers United conference here in Chicago overlapping with the Labor Notes Conference. And yeah, I'm sitting 10 feet away from a bunch of the railroad workers that y'all have heard from, including Matt

and Johnny over the past few years. And that in and of itself is just really, really cool and exciting. And I wanted to just give listeners a little taste of that.

But also, we were here two years ago. And a lot has happened in those two years. I mean, we were in the midst of the contract fight. This was before Biden and Congress forced the contract down railroad workers' throats, preempting the strike. And then two months after that, East Palestine happened, yada, yada, yada. But since then, we've had developments on two man crews, right? I mean, there was a class action settlement in East Palestine. Not nearly enough, but there's something. So I just wanted to check in with you guys, and for our listeners, who have gotten invested in what's going on in the railroads because of you guys, because of the conversations we've had.

I just wanted to check in and just, yeah, if you could talk to our listeners about how are things going after the last two years? Where are we on the railroads? Where should listeners have their focus as we head into the next contract fight? Or anything that you feel is kind of flying under the radar from your side of the rails?

Johnny Walker:

Oh, thanks, Max. First off, it's not just us, it's our organizations. It's our membership. It's the public community and stuff like that that's really taken the time to come out and really see what's going on. They supported us 100% when we got the contract. Forced or not, they still supported us. It was more than we've ever gotten. And I've been out here for going on 21 years in October. We did pass a two-person crew with the help of our coalition unions and SMART, with Jared Cassidy and Greg Hines, our legislative directors and alternate legislative directors. But it's kind of like we're storming the beaches in Normandy. Everyone's happy the day is over. We're going to be in Berlin in Christmas. Well, there's still a long fight. There's only a regulation. It's not a law. So there's still more to be there. And currently, my understanding is, the carriers are already trying to fight it.

So I mean, it's a win. And it was a hard win, but still, it's just like we landed the beaches of Normandy. It's still not 1945 and we still got a long fight. And then even if we do win the two-person crew eventually in the future, what's going to be our next fight? So I mean, that's the positive side on my side. So I mean, there's other things. One of the companies that we work for has a better CEO that seems to be a little bit more kind and understanding, but still they're fighting with Wall Street to try to big profits and other things like that. There is kind of a change, but still, it is the same railroad, just different ownership, so to speak.

So I, in a lot of ways, try to lie to myself saying I'm out here because I love the job and I can protect the public, but ultimately, this is my trade, this is my profession and stuff like that, and I really want to do this.

This is what I love. And the way that I justify all the stuff that happens to me and other people where I could deal with it is like I'm kind of a wall that I could service the customer and protect the community. But even that gets harder every day.

Matt Weaver:

It drives me to think that it's very frustrating to think that we need things like the disaster in East Palestine to happen to get change made. That was the lead in to two-man crew. We're looking at crossing safety bills. We've got many of the crafts have... I think we might be 90% of rail labor has sick days now. That didn't come from the contract. And so vocal advocacy and cross craft solidarity is the key to making this stuff work. And it concerns me greatly that we are facing a scenario of more cuts. Norfolk Southern is looking to have a hedge fund, buy them out again and have more cuts, PSR 3.0.

And when's the next disaster going to drive us to get better treatment for rail labor? When are we going to see better inspections for our brothers and sisters in the car shops? When are we going to see... The two-man crew bill is a positive step in the right direction. But there's still a lot of loopholes in there. And that's very concerning when you think of the group of rail labor, who are my brothers and sisters, and you have to be involved in politics, and we shouldn't have to need a disaster to help drive things forward for the men and women in rail labor.

Johnny Walker:

I'd also like to say with Matt, it's great that I got to meet Matt through the R struggle, with the contract negotiations and stuff like that. The same thing with my friend Devin out west. We were both interviewed by the BBC. We would've never been brought together without this strife. So I mean, we've been really looking at other things. We're not looking at our seat at the table, we're looking at our table for negotiations. So I mean, we wouldn't have had that without this strife and it's really starting to pay off in a lot of ways.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Well, let's talk about that. This will be the wrap up question, right? Because I think folks out there really want to know, after they got really... They got more up to speed listening to you guys over the past couple of years on what railroad workers are really going through, what it's like to work in this industry under these conditions, under precision scheduled railroading, staff cuts, corner cuts year after year after year, while executive and shareholder payouts are larger than they've ever been? So folks are now paying attention.

And they were worried about what they were hearing from the folks in this room about all that loss of talent and knowledge that comes with people being driven out of the industry, and all the problems that could potentially come when the railroads are trying to fill those losses with hiring people off the street who aren't going to have those relationships with the old timers as much as they did before. So these are the kinds of questions folks are asking me. And so I guess I just wanted to ask, looking back on the contract fight, the last one, what are, you think, takeaway lessons we can all learn and that we can apply to the next contract fight which opens in 2025?

Like, from the railroad side and the public side, what can we learn from that strife to be better prepared this time? And also just have the conditions that we were talking about all these years, like change for your fellow workers. How are folks doing working in the different crafts?

Matt Weaver:

Excellent question. So the best thing that rail labor can do at this point in time is have coordinated bargaining, a rail labor bargaining coalition. We're all on the same team, just like we ended the last round of bargaining under the AFL-CIO-TTD. Our strength is in numbers, our strength is in solidarity. And we all have to realize, I am my brother's keeper. So if we can't come together to start bargaining out at the same position we ended last time, then we might be setting ourselves up for concessions. I've got great hopes for us to do something like the Southwest Airlines pilots who got, what, 47.9% pay increases over five years. Teamsters did well with UPS, UAW did pretty well. Let's build on those wins. And it's time for rail labor to step up, come together and bargain as a group, one team, good solidarity, and we can do better.

Johnny Walker:

I could agree with what Matt says, but I want to go back to, you were talking about with basically hiring people off the street to replace our veteran railroad workers. Unfortunately, that hasn't really changed. I mean, we're getting more people coming into the craft, but because they found out how miserable it was and there's other options, we're not getting as high quality people. And the people that come here, they're not going to put up with it, especially the first few years. I mean, that's got to change. But I feel that the way that change is, like with all of our apprenticeship programs for the building trades or anything like that, they need to be federally recognized.

Let some of these unions and these other crafts come up with these programs that are standard for the industry. Because even though the company says that we're looking out for our employees, they're not always looking out for the employees, we're looking out for our members. They're not employees to us, they're members,

they're our family. So if we get federally recognized apprenticeship programs in the building trades as well as the transportation trades, because right now, we have standardized signals and rules and other things like that, but we don't have a standardized training program for conductors or engineers. We just have guidelines. And each railroad does it a little bit differently. And it doesn't matter if you're working down south or you're working up north. It depends on who you're working for, where you get certain standards and they're met, but they're not exceeded all the time.

And if we don't start exceeding some of these standards, 20 years down the way, if some of these people fell through the cracks, we're going to have even worse issues if we save all these safety concerns. So I mean, coordinated bargaining can help do that, but also federal regulation where we can have apprenticeship programs that are nationally and federally recognized as the end all be all. And we can even do that working with the companies, but they're not willing to come to the table with us all the time. We're willing to put out the olive branch, but everyone needs to be able to accept the olive branch on both sides.

Matt Weaver:

Because they answer to the shareholders. So it is driven by shareholder needs. More is never enough when you're talking about hedge funds. And these stock buybacks and that kind of stuff is decimating the railroads. It's absurd how what we're facing as rail labor.

Johnny Walker:

Absolutely. And it's one of those things where railroads used to be a standard stock that had good returns. Now it's massive returns. Eventually the top's going to fall off and everything's going to go ahead and sink.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Yeah. Then again, you end up with East Palestine. Right behind you is Chris Albright who lives there. And I was there three weeks ago. And so I guess, I just wanted to ask that as a final quick question, is like, what's your message to the public about, again, why they should care about this kind of thing? Why they should care that there are two man crews on those trains, that those trains are not as long as they are, that we're putting more investment in track maintenance? This can all feel in the weeds. But as like Chris is living proof of, as you guys are living proof of, this is not a theoretical thing. We're talking real shit that directly impacts working people. So I guess, what's your message to folks out there listening about why they should care about all of this?

Johnny Walker:

Well, quickly, Union Carbide went overseas because there's less regulation. Union Carbide wiped out Bhopal, the Indian town, where everyone went to sleep and they didn't wake up. So think about what you're doing here. You can't go ahead and send railroads overseas. If you keep deregulating, if you keep just squeaking by, that's going to happen in your community. So I mean, this is something that directly you could affect and affects you if you're not paying attention.

Matt Weaver:

And let's not forget, and we've talked about this before, Max, railroads don't go through rich people's backyards. So think about how close you live. The train in East Palestine, what, two miles from my home. So the people need to realize, the public needs to realize that there's dangerous materials going through their backyards. We don't want them on the highways. We want better regulation. We want our public servants to serve the people and control the safety of shipping on rail so that we know that even though there's a train in our backyard, we know there will not be a problem like there was in Ohio. That's very troublesome.

Jacob Morrison:

Yeah. So my name is Jacob Morrison. I am co-host of The Valley Labor Report, Alabama's only union talk radio program and the largest union talk radio program in the South. I've started saying that now. Since we're on four stations in three states, I think we could say that. If anybody else is bigger than us, then somebody should connect us, right?

Maximillian Alvarez:

Yeah. It'll be news to me. Well, fuck you, brother. I mean, as y'all listening, you recognize that sweet southern twang. My man, Jacob Morrison is here. We just bumped into Jacob's amazing cohost Adam Keller. If you guys listen to this show, you know all about The Valley Labor Report. If for some reason you don't, you need to go listen to it. As Jacob said, not only is it the only, but is the largest union talk radio program in the South. And they're doing incredibly good work. And I saw my man Jacob walking over here as I'm posting up in Labor Notes, talking to folks on the street. And just wanted to, yeah, check in and see how you guys over there in Alabama are doing. I feel like we're talking a day after the incredible UAW victory at Volkswagen. Like, shit is going down in the South.

Jacob Morrison:

Yeah, absolutely. So one of the panels that I facilitated was the Organizing the South panel. And we had on Keyshell Liggins, a Hyundai worker, organizing with the UAW obviously, down in Montgomery. And so that was my first question to her. First question to the panel was, how are people feeling down there? Presumably, you've got your finger on the pulse for what's going on in the Hyundai factory. And she said that her phone has been blowing up. People are really getting a lot of energy from this. I think anybody that's on Twitter has seen a lot of the videos and pictures of grown men in Chattanooga crying. And you could really feel a lot of that excitement in solidarity in the room, in the Organizing the South panel.

Because down in the South, we know that folks in the labor movement and folks who want to build the labor movement, who want to build the fighting wing of the labor movement, we know that Organizing the South is really a key. It is the key, as Michael Goldfield said, to changing this country. And so that's, Organize the South, it's been a slogan on the left and in the labor movement for decades, but nobody has done anything about it. Even Operation Dixie, if you actually take a look at how many organizers they had, how much money they spent, Operation Dixie, which was supposedly a cross sector, cross industry, multi-state thing by the Federation of Unions, they didn't even have as many people, as many resources, as the Steelworkers drive, decades before in the South.

So I mean, Operation Dixie, I've really been reading a lot of Goldfield. And he says that it was just a coda and basically the final attempt to even pretend to do anything to Organize the South. And now, the UAW is really putting some real resources in. And not only real resources because you can throw money at shit and money can't solve everything, resources can't solve anything. But they're throwing resources after importantly winning huge at the big three automakers and actually showing what workers can do when we come together. So proving the case to these folks down south and then putting the resources again, putting your money where your mouth is and giving them the opportunity to organize themselves, it's an exciting time to be a Southern Union organizer, a Southern Union member. And you could really feel it in that room.

And I'm really looking forward to seeing folks at Mercedes win their election next month, and then folks at Hyundai after that, and folks at Toyota after that. And it's just going to keep on going. So I'm excited.

Maximillian Alvarez:

We're about to do the Howard Dean, and then we're going to Hyundai.

Jacob Morrison:

Yeah.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Yeah.

Jacob Morrison:

That's right. That's right.

Maximillian Alvarez:

And what a difference compared to when we were here two years ago.

Jacob Morrison:

Yep. Yep. Yep.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Because then, it was like people were talking about Bessemer.

Jacob Morrison:

Yeah.

Maximillian Alvarez:

So there was still hope that what we're seeing happen would happen. But this is a very different moment of a different phase in that movement down there.

Jacob Morrison:

Yeah.



Maximillian Alvarez:

And I could hear it. I mean, I was unfortunate enough to be moderating the panel in the room right next to Jacob's, and I kept hearing people just going nuts in the room next door. They're like, "Yeah." and I'm like, "What the hell? Where's my audience? Why aren't you guys that pumped up?" But people are fired up. We got the Union of Southern Service Workers walking around here.

Jacob Morrison:

Yes.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Like we said, we are here the day after the Volkswagen news. I mean, there's really, do not sleep on the South. And if you want to know what's going on down there, of course we're going to keep trying to cover it at The Real News Network and at Working People. But if you want to put your finger on that pulse, you got to go to The Valley Labor Report and check out the weekly report on Southern Labor, the interviews they do with workers down there, the analysis they provide. It's really invaluable. And I just wanted to ask you, Jacob, by way of rounding out and letting you go, what has it been for you? What has it been like for you being at Labor Notes this time in 2024?

Jacob Morrison:

Oh man, it's great. This is my second Labor Notes, and just like the first time two years ago. As somebody in the fighting wing of the labor movement, even in union halls, it can get lonely sometimes. It can get lonely, it can get frustrating because you feel like everybody's vision has been beaten out of them. And even folks who want to build and who want to do good stuff, just so many people in our unions don't have hope anymore and don't know what they can do differently. And a lot of people are resigned to hiding behind the fortress and protecting what we have.

And Labor Notes is one of the only places in the country, one of the only times every couple of years where you have thousands of people who believe that shit can be better, who are making shit better, and who are going to continue to make shit better. I mean, it's just, there's no other place or event like it. If you've never been, you should go in 2026. And especially-

Maximillian Alvarez:

Register earlier than we did, by the way.

Jacob Morrison:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. It's just been so great. There's so many plans that are hatching. I was on a labor council panel, and we're passing resolutions to encourage our affiliates to align contracts with May 1st, 2028, right? Shawn Fain has called for the unions to do that. That's a very important thing, especially with the inability to strike in a contract. If we align our contracts, it makes it easier to do some mass action like that. So Shawn Fain has put that out.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Well, and if folks want to see what... That's not even a hypothetical. The panel that I was moderating today, one of the people on that panel was the Union Federation leader up in Quebec.

Jacob Morrison:

Yeah.

Maximillian Alvarez:

And they had... Effectively, it was called the common front strike, back in November. But it was essentially a general strike in that mode because it was over 500,000 public sector workers across the province of Quebec who were all on strike at the same time because their contracts were expiring at the same time. So that's the kind of shit that Jacob's talking about. If you want a general strike, you got to lay the groundwork. You can't just snap your fingers and it comes out of nowhere. But if you lay that groundwork and sync up those contract expirations, you then have the ability to do what the homies up in Quebec did last year.

Jacob Morrison:

Exactly. And so some labor councils have got together and we're passing these resolutions to endorse that call by Shawn Fain. And we're encouraging our affiliates where possible to set their contract expirations for May 1st. North Alabama was the first central labor council to pass that resolution, I'm proud to say. Also, I think

Alabama is the only state with two labor councils that have passed the resolutions. Bargaintogether.org is where you can find your materials if you're on your central labor council and you want to get the draft resolution. So yeah, it's just exciting. Plans are coming together, plans are being made, folks are executing on them. And I mean, no place like Labor Notes. So it's great to be here.

Marcie Pedraza:

Hi, I am Marcie Pedraza. I'm an electrician at Ford Chicago Assembly Plant and proud member of UAW Local 551. Also a member of UAW-D.

Maximillian Alvarez:

All right. So this is exciting, gang. You guys recognize that name. You guys have heard me talk to Marcie through the UAW big three strike. And yeah, you were one of the first people I interviewed after Nick Livick. And...

Marcie Pedraza:

He's here too.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Oh, I want to meet Nick. But it's so cool. This is what Labor Notes is about, is we connected virtually. Yours was one of the sites called to stand up and strike. You were such a powerful voice throughout all of that. And now, I get to meet you in person and hear at Labor Notes. So yeah, I just wanted to ask if you could refresh our listeners' memories a bit about your involvement with the UAW strike, and what it's like being here at Labor Notes now after that, especially a day after the big UAW victory down in Volkswagen?

Marcie Pedraza:

Oh, yeah. I mean, it's been so inspiring. And I never would've thought that our strike would have this much of an impact, not just with people stopping me seeing my UAW gear, like, "All right, awesome." One time, I was in the airport, I had a eat the rich hoodie on, and I had a worker in the restroom, was like, "Good job." She was a CWA worker and followed the whole strike campaign and the strategy as in many people. And just

being here at Labor Notes, running into folks like you or other people that I've known online or in meetings, virtual meetings for the past couple of years, I'm like, "Oh, that's you in real life." It's been really great.

And then just hearing other folk stories. Like yesterday, I heard a panel. And this was before the announcement of Volkswagen winning their union. A worker was on a panel talking about how. Because UAW tried to organize there before. It was not victorious for production side anyway. But still trades, they were. So he was talking about watching our strike and the gains we got and how that was so inspiring and lit a fire in all of them. And I was like, hell yes. That was inspiring me. And I was like, "We did that?" I don't know. It's just so humbling and awesome.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Yeah. It is awesome. Because it shows... It's like, the fight matters. Right? Standing up for what's right matters. Yeah. You and your fellow members were showing us what it looks like to fight for what's right. And that's inspiring, not only because it motivates us and gets us ready to fight, but you're reminding us that we are the change we've been waiting for. And if we're organized, if we have solidarity, if we are working together strategically, we can move mountains. And UAW, your local, and everyone fighting that fight showed us that last year. And now, just like Starbucks workers have showed us that, just like Amazon workers, Home Depot workers. Everyone here who's fighting that fight is contributing to that.

But yeah. I mean, is it wild to you, just like Ford electrician, mom, community activist? But now, you're here and everyone's like, "Oh, shit. You're the guy. You are out there."

Marcie Pedraza:

Yeah. And people have recognized me just from my name or maybe seeing me on some interview. And I'm just like, "I'm sorry, I don't remember." But it's definitely been a great experience, humbling, like I said. But yesterday, the first day, I was sitting a few rows behind a couple workers who had their future UAW shirts on. I was like, "Oh yeah, I got to go talk to them." They're walking around like a couple of rockstars. I thought they were Volkswagen, but they're Mercedes. But they're next. Their vote, I believe, is in May 13th. So we're going to be on the lookout for that one too. And I was like, "I want one of those shirts." But I can't wear it because a current UAW worker.

But anyway, it's just... Yeah, it's been really, really inspiring just to hear everybody's stories. And today, I was on a panel about steering green transition. So we know the fight isn't over. We have still a lot of work to do, and hopefully more people to join us in the fight.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Well say a little more about that and then I promise I'll let you go, because that was aside when we were talking about UAW and the Stand Up Strike. I know we touched on it a bit, but this is something that is as much a part of you and what your struggle as the UAW and that fight. So yeah, could you just tell us a little more about how you are bringing those two things together here at Labor Notes?

Marcie Pedraza:

Right. I mean, it's like, all my dreams come true. I'm an environmental activist in my community. So I work on fighting toxic polluters. But I also work in a factory. And these things are all related and intersectional. And as we're fighting for climate justice, we have to realize that it also means workers' justice. So this panel, and there was one yesterday too that I was unfortunately unable to attend, but just bringing all these issues together like, when people hear about this green transition, what does that mean? And I don't really know about that or they might not care about it, but it does matter to workers because workers are worried about losing their jobs.

And as these companies try to make these new products and not necessarily have them be union labor, that's where they're trying to cut corners and make more profits. So that's when I try to tell my co-workers like, "This is our livelihood. If we want to be in the auto industry or just making anything and being union and having these great benefits, we have to make sure we are in these decisions that are being made with our tax dollars that the companies are getting to make these brand new facilities for all electric vehicles and battery plants."

Maximillian Alvarez:

Oh, Yeah.

Marcie Pedraza:

Yeah.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Well, sister, again, it is so great to finally meet you in person.

Marcie Pedraza:

Likewise.

Maximillian Alvarez:

And I guess I just wanted to ask, again, less than 24 hours after the huge victory down south with Volkswagen, and like you said, now this train is moving, any final messages out there to folks who got invested in the UAW and this struggle through the Stand Up Strike and are seeing what we're seeing? Any kind of final messages you got for folks out there listening?

Marcie Pedraza:

Yeah. Anyone that feels like they don't like their conditions at work, it's time to organize and form a union and just look out because UAW is coming and it's not just going to be the big three anymore. I don't know what we're going to call it. Maybe big three in the dirty south, or big four, big five, big six. So it's just truly inspiring.

Colin Smalley:

So I'm Colin Smalley. I am from Chicago. I am president of the IFPTE, which is the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers, Local 777. And so I represent, here in Chicago, workers at the United States Army Corps of Engineers. This is a mixed unit of everything from tugboat crew, to crane operators, lock and dam operators, but we've also got engineers and scientists and accountants and economists, the admin workers that keep us all straight. I mean, we've got a little bit of everybody in our union.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Yeah, man. What is it like to represent a unit that's that diverse and doing that many essential jobs across your unit?

Colin Smalley:



So you might think that it would be tenuous than it is. We work together really well. We actually, through bureaucracy, we were split into two separate unions when I took over, and we combined them. Because it's like, why are we letting ourselves be split up like that? And the law uses these gross terms of professional and non-professional. Which basically is just like, does the job require a college degree or not? It's totally demeaning and weird. So we just did away with it. And we're all one union.

And so right out of the gate, we negotiated new agreements about the schedules of our lock and dam operators. They are 24/7 facilities, and they work 12-hour shifts, swing shifts. So they're rotating through. We nailed down everything that was important to those guys. We really got it hammered out. So right out of the gate, our blue collar guys could see the power of the union. And then when it came time to bargain about telework, for example, they had the back of the white collar workers in the office, even though they're not teleworking. So the office guys aren't working swing shift and the operators aren't teleworking.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Oh man, that's so cool.

Colin Smalley:

Yeah.

Maximillian Alvarez:

And I want to have you back on so we can really stretch our legs and get a sense of all the different kind of members you're representing, the jobs you guys are doing, the job specific struggles that your members are facing and all that good stuff.

Colin Smalley:

Yeah.

Maximillian Alvarez:

So I don't want to put you on the spot and make you give that rundown here while we're standing-

Colin Smalley:

No worries.

Maximillian Alvarez:

... in the Hyatt lobby.

Colin Smalley:

Yeah.

Maximillian Alvarez:

But yeah. I'm curious just how it's been for you coming to Labor Notes as a Chicagoan doing this, and is this your first time here? Have you been into one before?

Colin Smalley:

It is my first time here.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Okay.

Colin Smalley:

And so, one of the things that I've been really thinking about is, I've been sitting in these classes and panels and conversations. As federal workers, I think we've been indoctrinated that we can't have a political opinion at work and we can't have any kind of activism as part of our job, that we have to be this neutral arbiter. But in our union capacity, in our collective capacity, we all are passionate about the things that we do. And whether that's addressing how changing climate is affecting our people and our neighbors, and especially the most vulnerable neighbors. Because of course, every climate disaster hits the most vulnerable people first. And it's just the way it always is.

In California, the Army Corps had a failed levee a year or two ago. That, of course, was in a poor neighborhood, because they fixed the levy on the rich side. And we can talk about all that kind of stuff. But yeah. I think that our members are really interested in how can we embrace our expertise and our experience as Army Corps workers and bring that to bear on some of these big issues that affect us. Because we also live in these communities. We also pay taxes. We also are involved in every one of these struggles. And so we're not this neutral robot.

And another thing, somebody was talking about AI this morning at the keynote. And our headquarters wants to replace our lock and dam operators with automated systems that are controlled from a control center somewhere. And so we're constantly defending against this corporatist mindset, even in the government, where they're trying to take over everything. And so we're trying to... It is just another front in how we're proving to people that we're not autonomous robots. And so we're here at Labor Notes and we're learning about how is it that we exercise our voice? How do we work out those muscles of bringing everything we can to these struggles?

Maximillian Alvarez:

That was great, man. Anything else you wanted to throw on at the end? Like, where people can find you? What they can do to get involved?

Colin Smalley:

Yeah. So I mean, we've got a website at IFPTE777.org. So the other thing is that, I'll just say that I am running for office for our national executive board with IFPTE. So this is outside of my local capacity, but I'm really pushing for democracy, for a rank and file strategy, a bottom up strategy where we're going to bring what the workers are interested in and what they want to fight for. And we're going to bring that to everywhere it needs to be. And so we're not going to be as worried about, are we stepping on somebody's toes? But let's talk to people. Right? Let's fight the fights that we need to fight.

We're in this perilous place as federal employees where we've got the project 2025 that's out there. The Heritage Foundation is gunning for our jobs, for our livelihoods. And we've got to be ready to fight. And so that's what me and my colleague, Chris, we're starting a campaign to really push for that. And I'll be happy to get you a link for that too, for your show notes.

Leticia Zavala:



My name is Leticia Zavala. I'm an organizer with It's Our Future. It's a farm worker caucus of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee. And basically, I work for farm workers. They are organizing to improve their working and living conditions in the fields.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Hell yeah. Well, Leti, it's so great to be standing with you here at Labor Notes. It's such an honor to meet you because you're... She's being modest folks. I mean, this woman's been in the fight for a long time. Can you just tell us a little bit about yourself and your history fighting for farm workers?

Leticia Zavala:

Oh, well, I started working in the fields when I was six years old. I migrated between Florida, Ohio, and Michigan following the different crops. And I saw my first collective action when I was 13 years old. My dad threw himself in front of a tractor in order to stop a supervisor who was harassing and molesting young girls on the farm. And that action really impacted me. We were fired because he took that action. But that's the reality of a fight, right? From there, I started organizing. I came back to the fields after college, and I've been organizing farm workers since.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Oh, yeah. And I guess, just for folks listening, because as you know better than anyone else, like sadly, when we talk about the labor movement, we often don't talk about farm workers, domestic workers. I mean, there's so many folks who are let out, which is why it's so amazing that you all have been fighting to organize workers and to help workers who are the most exploited, most vulnerable. But now, you're here in Labor Notes, part of the union discussions that we're having. I think that's so important. But I guess I just wanted to ask for folks listening who maybe don't know a lot about FLOC, who don't know about the organizing going on in the farm fields. Could you just say a little bit about what's going on there? What you're fighting for? Who you're working with? And what you see on a week-to-week basis?

Leticia Zavala:

Yes. Well, we're definitely living a fight. A lot of the workers that we work with are either undocumented or H-2A workers. They're here on H-2A visas, which means they're dependent on their employer for housing, transportation, immigration status, and a job. So you can imagine the type of working environment that is

there. We haven't had a harvest without a death since 2020. We are having to work in the fields eight hour, 10 hour, 12 hour days when news are being announced that people should put their pets inside for safety because of the heat. These are the types of the conditions that we're living day by day.

There's workers still making \$4, \$5 an hour on a daily basis. There's workers that are consistently fired. There's workers that are afraid to speak up and afraid to go to the doctor because they might not get called back next year. And those are the kinds of things that we're fighting against. We're organizing though. We're educating workers. Workers are taking action. They're walking out of the fields. They're signing petitions. They're creating minor changes at a time with hopes of creating a bigger change that will impact the state and maybe the country.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Hell yeah. And I mean, it's so incredible, so important. And what can folks listening to this do to help, to be part of that?

Leticia Zavala:

We are always in need of support. The hardest time is the summer, right? And people can help translating documents, translating petitions that workers write so that they can turn it into their grower. They can help with transportation. We drive a lot trying to visit workers, and we depend on a lot of people to go pick up workers, to bring them to union meetings when we have meetings and when we have part of the democratic process that seeks us to call actions and to do things. So we need gas cards. We need people to show up and drive. We need people to help translate. We need people to send donations and to sometimes call growers and say, "Yo, what's up? Why did you retaliate against that worker?" Because that's the type of union that we need. Everybody eats. Everybody has to support our costs.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Yeah. Well, and again, while one dipshit presidential candidate is out there saying that we are poisoning the blood of this country, what are we actually doing? We're filling potholes at night on bridges like our brothers who died in Baltimore. We're picking the tomatoes that go on your cheeseburgers or in your fridge. Our children are working, cleaning in The Bone Sauce and meatpacking plants. And obviously this is very personal for me and for you all. And I'm just like... I think it's, again, a real testament to Labor Notes that you guys are here along with the other unions that we hear about. But I wanted to ask, how has your experience been here at Labor Notes? Good and bad. I'm just curious.

Leticia Zavala:

I think it's been mainly positive. It's always important. There's some tough conversations that have to happen. We are a caucus of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee. The Farm Labor Organizing Committee is a member of the AFL-CIO. Right? And unfortunately, sometimes we get too comfortable in a space where we tend to protect the leaders and the institutions rather than the movement, which is why the institution was created. And so we've had some tough conversations with some folks, but we've also had some very productive educational conversations. We're learning from unions in Mexico. We're forming alliances on how they can help us organize our members while they're in Mexico, and how we can help them educate their members when they're trying to get across the border or promise visas that sometimes don't get met.

And so, we are talking to service workers whose parents worked in the fields and want to know the history and want to connect to that part of their heritage. And they want to learn that cause and they want to support our cause. So I think, overall, it's been positive. It's been a great experience. It's always good to learn in exchange. And we're very thankful for that.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Just any final messages you have for folks? Anything about where they can find y'all, or any messages about why they should care as much about what y'all are doing as they do about Starbucks or something?

Leticia Zavala:

Definitely. We are on Facebook. We're on TikTok. It's Our Future. El Futuro Es Nuestro. There's always actions for people to take. There's always a lot of fun stuff that members post about how specific crops are harvested. So please learn more. Support when you can. There's always calls to action. So if you're connected, you're going to... And you can. We hope you can come out and support.

Berenice Navarrete-Perez:

So, hi everyone. My name is Berenice Navarrete-Perez. I am a currently budget director for council member Christopher Marte. I've been a budget director for two years, but I've been with City Council since I've been 21. I am currently 28. Oh. And I'm also the Vice President of ALE, which is the Association of Legislative Employees.

Matthew Malloy:

Hey everybody. My name is Matthew Malloy. I also work at the New York City Council. I work for council member Shahana Hanif. And we are with the Association of Legislative Employees who have just secured our first contract agreement for New York City Council staff. And we're really excited to be here today at Labor Notes.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Oh, yeah. Well, it's so great to connect with you guys and to learn about this struggle, which I myself hadn't heard about. But I'm so grateful to learn about it now. Tell me more about the Association of Legislative Employees and how this struggle got started. I feel like a lot of folks don't know. They're like, "Oh, wow." People representing city council members are unionizing or working with city council members. That's wild. A, what is that job like? And how did this union effort get going?

Matthew Malloy:

So, at the New York City Council, there has been a long history of organizing efforts, really probably going back to 2019. But I think what really sparked the wave that got it over the finish line was when New York City Council member, Andy King, who had sexually harassed, sexually abused some council staffers, was essentially given a slap on the wrist. And I think that dynamic of staff feeling that they needed more leverage really was what kicked off the organizing effort, which was a card campaign. And then Covid hit. So then we had to do a second card campaign during Covid. And then we achieved voluntary recognition. That was in '21.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Hell yeah.

Matthew Malloy:

And then for the last two years, we've been bargaining our contract, which, in mid-April, we ratified. And there are so many great things with this contract. But I think what you would think about it, it sets standard minimum wages at the council. Our lowest paid full-time person used to be at \$30,000 a year. Now they're at

55,000 a year. Paid over time, grievance rights. And most of our council staffers... When you think of a political staffer, you might think of a slick executive type person in a suit.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Lanyard wearing motherfucker.

Matthew Malloy:

Yeah, lanyard. And most of these people are working class people, working in district offices, getting people connected with essential benefits like food stamps or helping them with immigration paperwork. So that's a little bit of the broad background of why we organized, what we won, and the kind of work people are performing at the city council.

Berenice Navarrete-Perez:

I would definitely say that the side of the job people don't see is the hours we put into our work. Our day could really start from 9:00 or 10:00 and end at 9:00 at night or 11:00, depending on the meeting that you're attending. A community board, they run pretty long. They could run from 6:00 until literally 10:00. So there's something you don't see or hear about that is happening at city council. There are folks who are working on weekends. I used to work to a point where I had to request a weekend off because that's how excessively we were working weekends.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Wow.

Berenice Navarrete-Perez:

That's put on the counter. Unfortunately, I can't work this Saturday or Sunday because I have other things to do.

Maximillian Alvarez:



And you guys are an independent union, correct?

Berenice Navarrete-Perez:

Yes, we are an independent union.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Hell yeah. And so being here at Labor Notes, meeting other folks who are going the independent route, ALU, Home Depot workers, I guess, could you say a little more about why y'all went the independent route and how that's worked for folks on the outside who are listening to this and maybe are thinking about getting something started like that?

Berenice Navarrete-Perez:

Well, because no one thought it was possible. And we've been able to accomplish something that a lot of folks thought it was impossible, including some of the unions that are here that originally weren't supportive of our union.

Matthew Malloy:

Yeah. It was not our dream to create a brand new union from scratch. It was a necessity. Just essentially, we went to various big New York City unions. They didn't see a blueprint. They didn't see a path forward. They weren't quite sure if it was legal. And so that's really why we built our union. And we're the Association of Legislative Employees. And another effort we took was we started collecting dues pre-contract because we didn't have that war chest developed from an international to support us. So we asked our members to commit to paying 1% dues in the period during the contract campaign. And I think that was really essential.

And I think, more than anything, I think what we want people to know, people listening to this who are trying to form their own independent union, is just that it is possible. People will tell you that it isn't, but it's a grind. But it's possible. And there are some benefits to it too. Because I think if we had paymasters above us with maybe connections to certain New York City Council members, they may have steered us away from taking some of the more direct actions we took to get this contract. We were picketing the sessions of the city council every two weeks, essentially, which is that's how often they meet, for three or four months, being very aggressive, really, and trying to point out some of the hypocrisies of a New York City Council member getting

on the picket line for Writers Guild and Actors Guild and UAW, and then when it comes time to their own staff union, just essentially being a little removed from that process.

So I think those are some of the benefits of being an independent union and a little bit of history on why we had to go that route.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Hell yeah. Well, I want to have you guys back on for a longer discussion because there's a story here that I want to hear more about. But I want to be respectful of your time. I want to let you go. You got a lot of other panels to see, people to meet. I just wanted to ask what your experience here at Labor Notes has been like.

Berenice Navarrete-Perez:

Definitely my experience here at Labor Notes has been fantastic. It's been good to understand and learn from other unions here who are attending. And our struggle is a struggle amongst other workers. It's not only in city council, it's in every sector, the private sector and the public sector. But it's been wonderful. It's exciting. And I can't wait to come back in two years with some new staff members at every level from city council.

Matthew Malloy:

And one thing we're really excited about is we just had a great conversation with someone who's very involved in organizing the Congressional Workers Union. We are tonight going to be meeting up with some staff from the Illinois state legislature who are unionizing. We have met folks here at these sessions who are unionizing, the Chicago City Council, the Boston City Council. This is a movement that is really in most states if you look for it, but it's not a story that's being told. And I think it's really primarily about confronting power in the United States, and how labor, and new labor too, not always existing unions, can organize to really deliver for working people, even when they're up against a really powerful entity like local politicians or Congress members and things like that.

So I think that's one of the best parts about being here at Labor Notes, is just getting to connect with other people who are trying to organize their state legislature or city legislature or Congress.

Annie Shields:



My first name is Annie, A-N-N-I-E. Last name's Shields, S-H-I-E-L-D-S. I am a union organizer and I work for the NewsGuild of New York. And I work with The New York Times tech workers on their first contract campaign. So I've been there for about two years. Previously, I was a member of the NewsGuild for 10 years and I got into the union through running for office. So I ran on a slate with our current president and on a reform ticket, trying to bring in more militancy and make our union more member led. And she won in a landslide. And then I just got so deep into our local. I had the opportunity for the first time to really see what other shops were doing and what the new organizing looked like. And so it made me want to become an organizer.

So I joined our member organizer program, which is... Member organizer program is a really cool way that we have at the NewsGuild to help members develop organizing skills and actually help the staff out with campaigns. So I was able to take some trainings and then started working side by side with the staffer on some underground organizing campaigns. And then that experience helped me to get the job I have now.

Mel Buer:

That's great. So we are here outside of Labor Notes. There's quite a few people outside because we were on a break between workshops. Last night, there was a pretty sizable demonstration outside of Labor Notes where the Labor for Palestine coalition held a rally and some demonstrators were arrested, put into cop cars. And as a result, individuals stopped cars and had a bit of a standoff for an hour until they were like... Now, you had tweeted this morning about what it was like to be a part of and to witness that last night. And I believe you said it was very instructive, almost like its own Labor Notes workshop.

Annie Shields:

Yeah.

Mel Buer:

Can you tell me more about that?

Annie Shields:

Yeah, definitely. So I went into it. I had gone to a panel discussion in the morning with some folks talking about Know Your Rights, free speech for all workers, but especially media workers in Palestine. So there's

lots of stories of journalists or other media workers being censored for speaking out about the war on Gaza. And there's been a lot of concerns about our members' rights being infringed upon. So we've got a lot of really great stuff going on in the NewsGuild to try to push back on that and set a new standard for journalists that really respects their freedom of speech.

So during that panel, somebody told us that there was going to be a rally at 6:30 in solidarity with Palestinian workers and struggle for a free Palestine. And I was definitely interested in going. I thought, okay, great. This is something that's really important to me. It's something that I feel very upset about on a daily basis. I know that so many of us do. And often feels like there's not much we can do about it. And I don't know what difference the rally will make in terms of the war, but it feels very important to make this a centerpiece of the Labor Notes Conference this year because we're at a time that feels like a turning point in terms of what Americans are aware of. And I think that's really important and it's long overdue.

So I was excited to come to this rally. And I showed up and met a couple of friends. And really it was quite calm. And people were in the street, but this is a dead-end street. There's really not traffic that comes. Anyone who's back towards the end of the street would be here to park in a parking garage for this premises. So it wasn't a big interruption until major traffic. And I was there for probably a half hour. The speakers had been speaking. And I thought, "Okay, I'm going to actually go and grab my suitcase from my car and then come back and bring that up to the room." And so on my way back, I happened to just walk into this arrest as it was happening. And I saw one person who was being held by the police and then another person get thrown to the ground and really roughed up. It was very disturbing.

Not the first time I've seen cops behave that way, but it's never a good thing to see. So my instinct was to just start recording. So I stayed very close and I recorded the whole thing. And I was in the middle though, and I had this big rolling suitcase, so I thought I better go back inside and get rid of this. So I came back out. And when I came back out, I realized that the crowd had actually gotten bigger and the police car where the... I wouldn't even call them a protester necessarily, just a rally goer, an attendee was being held. And it became clear to me that we had an opportunity to make it very difficult for the police to leave.

And so it was very spontaneous. I didn't have really any friends or people that I knew in the crowd. And I think there was a lot of people just coming together, seeing what was happening and deciding, okay, we're just going to stay here until something... See if we can just make it impossible for them to leave. And so I think there were a lot of other things. But from what I saw, there were some people that were going inside. And I wasn't involved in that and I can't speak to it. But outside, it was quite intense. There were people negotiating with one cop. And he was very clear that he didn't have the power to let them go and it wasn't going to happen.

But people just kept chanting for an hour. Maybe a half hour. And it was not clear to me what was going to happen. We saw that there were more police coming and then there were some cars that were blocked that wanted to leave. And I think, honestly, there was moments where we in the crowd weren't necessarily on the same page about what we should do. There weren't any marshals around. This was not something that was... I'm sure it was planned, but I wasn't involved in the planning and I hadn't received any instruction about how are we going to operate. So it's kind of just like a spontaneous ad hoc self-organization with people in cars who are getting angry and they want to go.

And we've seen that people have been emboldened to drive into protesters and things. So there was definitely tension. And it came to the point where there was a car that was trying to go, and we were like... It seemed that if we let the car go, we would lose the leverage to have the person in the police car released. And so it was this interesting... There was a lot of parallels to how you win a contract campaign. Like we're making it more painful for them to not do what we want than to do what we want. It's going to be a lot harder for them to get out of here with that person in that car than it is if they let them go. And we really had them surrounded.

And that's not something that happens every day, and it's not something that was just naturally going to happen. It was probably the quick thinking and collective action of a handful of people in that crowd to just say, actually no, we're not going to just let this person be taken away. And actually there were two people, but one of them, I think, was taken inside of a building or something.

Mel Buer:

She was released. Yeah.

Annie Shields:

Yeah, that's great.

Mel Buer:

Yeah.

Annie Shields:



But yeah, it was sort of like the manifestation of the thing that we try to do all the time in our labor organizing, which is, the more of us that come out here and stand together, the sooner they're going to let this person go, the more certain that outcome becomes because they can't mow down hundreds of people in the streets, or probably aren't going to in this situation anyway.

Mel Buer:

Especially with the mayor speaking.

Annie Shields:

With the mayor inside.

Mel Buer:

Yeah.

Annie Shields:

Exactly. Yeah. So yeah, it was kind of like one of those impromptu activities where sometimes you'll get a scenario in a Labor Notes training and you have to jump into it and imagine, "Okay, you've got this thing happening and these things are happening too. How do you proceed as an organizer?" And I love those trainings. I've learned a lot from them. And this was a real life version of that, a situation that we hadn't all necessarily planned for. And I'm not entirely sure how to evaluate the success or relative success of the action because it wasn't really... Mistakes became much higher once they made the arrest.

And I think that's a good example of, when you try to repress people, it just makes them more upset. I've seen that with the workers I work with when I ask them what was the thing in their union campaign that made them decide that they were actually supportive of the union, they were going to vote yes. And so many people tell me, "It was the way that management responded to our campaign. I was actually on the fence. I didn't even think we needed a union. But then I saw these emails from management and I was like, they're lying. Why are they lying? And that's what helped me see things in a different way." So yeah, we see that act.

I'm not really inclined to be... I'm not a major direct action person. I don't really go out in the streets that often. But after I saw these people being violently thrown on the ground, it makes anybody want to stay near,

especially when you have this community of Labor Notes people where you walk around Labor Notes and it's like there's no strangers here. Even if I've never met these people, if I'm in line for a coffee, everyone around is making connections and talking about their campaigns and congratulating each other on things they've heard about. And it's a really beautiful space.

And so even though it was a tense and uncomfortable experience and one of pretty serious conflict with what I hear are notoriously rough police in Rosemont, it was also very beautiful. It was a jubilation at the end once they let the person out of the cop car. We opened up the lane and the traffic started flowing and people were running around. And I heard someone say, that's the first time that's ever worked, in a really funny moment. And yeah, it was kind of like, holy shit, it worked. Yeah. And it was really cool. It was a really cool experience.

Mel Buer:

How does it feel watching the police car door open and took the handcuffs off [inaudible 01:12:46]? What did that feel like as you were standing there?

Annie Shields:

Yeah. On the one hand, it felt exciting, empowering like, "Of course, you couldn't get away with this, of course we stopped you. This is what union power looks like." And at the same time, it occurred to me that, okay, now we've come back to a baseline of this person is not arrested, which they weren't arrested when this started. So the action actually became about something else. And so of course it's important that these people were not forced to go down to a police station and be processed. That would've been completely unnecessary. But at the same time...

Mel Buer:

[inaudible 01:13:31].

Annie Shields:

But it is. There's still this deep pain, to be honest, that I feel knowing that a really successful and amazing action like this is possible and also would need to be replicated on such a large scale to really make a dent in most of the things we try to change about the world. And so on the one hand, I'm always really pleased by it.

On the other hand, I was just reminded we've got a lot of work to do to help more people in the working class develop the kind of instincts and assessment of power and analysis and desire to participate in these things and confidence to do so in a collective way. And that's part of what we try to do all the time in our labor organizing.

So yeah, it was a really cool experience. It was also sad that it had to happen, but also thrilling. And still we have so much work to do to bring justice, some kind of justice, the beginnings of some kind of justice for people in Palestine.

Mel Buer:

Yeah. Is there anything else you would like to say that I haven't touched on or asked about that you think is important for our listeners to know about the organizing happening here with Labor for Palestine or last night's action?

Annie Shields:

I guess I would say that I really had a radicalization in 2014 when the war on Gaza happened and I was in a position working at The Nation magazine to work with people who were actually covering it on the ground. And I was truly blown away when I came to understand how little I understood. And I feel like that experience was something that I could never go back after I had that awakening. And I see people in my life having that same experience now. And I'm encouraged by that. And I think we're in a real big turning point in so many ways. And it's a little scary, but I'm hopeful that we start changing the tide on this issue in particular.

Axel Persson:

My name is Axel Persson. I'm a locomotive engineer, they say in the US. And I work for the French national state railway, the SNCF. And I'm also, of course, a proud member of the CGT Trade Union. And I'm also honored to have been elected as a general secretary of the CGT Railway Workers Union in the city of Trappes, which is a big railway city located at the southwestern suburbs of Paris.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Hell yeah. Well, Axel, it is so great to have you on the show, brother, and to be sitting across the way from you because, as listeners know, we got nothing but love for the CGT. We've had our brother Matthew [inaudible]

01:16:36] on the show a number of times. You guys know and love Matthew. And it was so cool to hear that Axel was going to be here too. Even if Matthew can't, we love you, Matthew. Don't worry, we'll catch you next time. But yeah. I mean, because of those interviews we were doing with Matthew and other French strikers, the pension strikes last year, the general strike in 2020, 2019, our listeners have really gotten invested in what's going on over there and they're learning a lot from what you guys are doing.

So I guess I just wanted to start by asking that. Since the pension strikes last year, or maybe refresh our memory real quick about what you guys were doing last year with the strikes and where things stand now with the CGT with rail workers in France.

Axel Persson:

So last year, during early 2023, we went out on unlimited strike, but not only railway workers, it was workers from both the private and the public sector in order to try to defeat the government and the employers plan to try to raise the retirement age from 62 to 64, knowing that the government had tried previously already in 2019 to smash our pension system but had been defeated during a strike there where they had been forced to scrap their pension reform due to a strike that lasted for almost one and a half months. And that was eventually succeeded by Covid and the government decided just to scrap everything and now try to basically have its revenge.

And so what we did was to organize a massive strike, not only in the public sector, but in the private sector. And by the means of strikes because we do think that in these matters, there is no other option but a strike that is as massive as possible for two reasons. Well, the first reason, the most obvious one, of course, is because of the economical impact it has in order basically to force the employers and the government that served that interest to force them to back down because basically the price, the stakes get too high for them. But there's also another aspect to it is that when you go on strike paradoxically enough, as you manage to halt the wheels of society, as you manage to put society to your standstill, paradoxically enough, society starts to move forwards politically very, very fast.

Sometimes, you can see it in strikes, the consciousness, the political awareness evolves very rapidly. Sometimes, things that would've taken decades literally happen in a week. And you see people who change because the entire society is focused as a standstill on what the workers on strike have put on their agenda. Everybody is debating in whether they agree with it or not, but everybody's debating in the media, everybody's talking about it in society. And it also is an opportunity there for us to put forth not only our defensive demands, but also to set the groundwork for a future in which we can hope.

Because that is also something we need. We need to be able to take the counteroffensive, to launch a counteroffensive in order to not only reclaim the ground we have lost the past years, but also to set forth a future which we can all envision and have hope in. Because if you don't manage to do that, those who will reap the benefits of the anger that is rising today will be the far right. It will be politicians with solutions like explaining that it's the fault of immigrants, it's the fault of minorities, ethnic minorities, who will use these categories as scapegoats, and they will lay the groundwork for a future in which there is nothing to hope in. So it's also responsibility not only for economical reasons, it's also a political duty for us to organize these fight-backs.

Maximillian Alvarez:

This is why I love our French brothers and sisters, man. I mean, I think that's so beautifully and powerfully put. And I'm curious, having gone through that. Because I mean, unlike 2019, Macron and his cronies weren't backing down this time. But still, we in the states were watching what you guys were doing with envy and with a kind of like... I don't know. In some ways, we felt so close to you and your fellow workers on this general strike taken to the streets, the images we were seeing, guys like you and Matthew with the-

Axel Persson:

The flares.

Maximillian Alvarez:

The flares. Just looking badass. But yeah, the joy, the rage, the hope, all of that on the streets. But it felt like we were watching it from the Moon. It did feel like something that just isn't possible here. And now, you and I are sitting in this room full of railroad workers in the US who, as you saw, as we all saw, were gearing up to go on strike. And then the government said, "Fuck you. Get back to work." So I guess, what is it like for you, being here talking to US railroad workers? But also what are your thoughts? What would you say to American workers now who feel that way?

Axel Persson:

I would say the feelings of love you have expressed are reciprocated. And I can assure you that every time we see American workers, whatever their industry, taking action, be it strike or other type of action, we feel that because our hearts are attuned to one another and then they beat at the same rate. And this is not only nice

words, because we have concrete examples of what internationalist solidarity mean, and that is what we are here to build in a concrete manner, in a very down-to-earth manner. For example, during our strike in 2023, one of the factors, not the only one of course, but one of the factors that led that we could hold out for so long was the internationalist solidarity. Not only statements, of course, which is important, because every time, every day when we hold a general assembly of strikers where we decide whether we pursue the strike or not, of course we start by reading out the international statements of support we receive from all over the world.

But even further than that, for example, we have a network now that we have built through the World Federation of Trade Unions, of which my union is a member. And we have managed, for example, to build an international campaign all across Europe, but also in some other countries where we had, for example, Swedish railway workers, British railway workers who campaigned in their rail yards and gathered money for our local strike funds. And it wasn't symbolic sums. It was like several tens of thousand of euros. So it means literally to several tens of thousand of dollars.

Maximillian Alvarez:

While the RMT was going on strike itself.

Axel Persson:

Exactly. And the Swedish Railway Union was the same. And that money was sent to us and was immediately distributed to striking workers who therefore could pay the rent and put food on the table for the dependents and so forth. And it also showed in a very concrete manner that internationalism is not only an abstract slogan. It showed that workers who are sometimes separated by thousands of miles of each other, they know instinctively that their interests are the same, their hearts are attuned to another, they beat at the same rate. And we can feel that even though we are separated by thousands of miles, at the same time, we are also no further separated than the five fingers of a clenched fist fighting.

And that is also what we are here to do, is to embody that solidarity and build those links with the American railway workers. And that is the sense of my presence here.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Hell yeah. Well, let's round out on that. Because I don't want to keep you too long, and I know we got other folks who want to talk to you and all. And we got to build. You got to go around and build that solidarity by

talking to folks. So I don't want to keep you too long. But I guess I just wanted to ask... Yeah. Let's talk about what concrete international solidarity can look like and why it is such an essential ingredient for all of our struggles.

Axel Persson:

Well, it is essential for many reasons. The first one, of course, the most obvious one is that our enemies, they are organized internationally. Be it economically, they have these international institutions like the International Monetary Fund. In Europe, they have what they call the European Commission where they coordinate their attacks. But they also organize military in order to maintain their power and their dominance over the world. They have military alliances. They have political alliances, and for a good reason. That's how they maintain the control over the world. And that's why we need to be at least as good as them, even if it's a difficult task to ahead, because we don't necessarily have the same material means. But that is why we need to build the front at the same level as they are fighting their war, which is an international war. So that's the most obvious reason.

But the other reason also is that, because the struggles of one another, we can learn from them. Even as French workers, we learn from what happens in the US sometimes. I've noticed that when I say that to some US worker, they're surprised because they think that, for some reason, we would be like some kind of elite, which we're not. We're really not. We're just like workers in a country with a specific history. But we learn also from the struggles across the world. And for example, over issues like, in the US, for example, when the murder of George Floyd happened a few years ago, the methods that were used by the movement. For example, Black Lives Matter. But not only them because that was much, much broader than that, inspired activists in France who organized along the same lines using the same methods, and it worked.

So we practically learn from each other. And as we can manage to learn and grow from each other, we will be able to beat our common foes because we realize very often, and especially railway workers, given how capitalism globalize, we actually work for the same companies. I've met people here who work for a subsidiary of my company here in France, back in France. So we literally work for the same enemies.

Maximillian Alvarez:

Any final messages for American workers or workers anywhere who are listening to this?

Axel Persson:



I would say the most obvious is that, even though we might not always speak the same languages, we of course have our... Each working class has its own history, its own peculiarities, its own culture, which is fine, which is actually part of what makes it a very interesting word despite the violence of this word and the fact that it's very harsh. At the end of the day, we share the same interests. And it may sound something obvious, but united we stand, divided we fall. And in order to make that a reality, it only depends upon us. And we cannot expect anybody else to do it for us. It's up to us. Because the emancipation of the workers will be the work of the workers themselves, as a famous German philosopher said. Karl Marx.

Maximillian Alvarez:

All right, gang. That's going to wrap things up for us this week. I want to thank all of our amazing guests for taking time out of their crazy conference schedules to talk with us for this episode. And I want to thank the great Mel Buer for co-reporting with me. And of course, I want to give another special shout out and a thank you to the great folks at Labor Notes and Railroad Workers United for the vital work that they do. And I want to encourage everyone out there to follow the links in the show notes, learn more about Labor Notes and RWU, and support them however you can.

And as always, I want to thank you all for listening and I want to thank you for caring. We'll see you all back here next week for another episode of Working People. And if you can't wait that long, then go subscribe to our Patreon and check out the awesome bonus episodes we've got there for our patrons. We've got more coming this summer. So please stay tuned for more there. And go explore all the great work that we're doing at The Real News Network where we do grassroots to journalism that lifts up the voices and stories from the front lines of struggle.

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