

Vidya Shah: (00:00:10)

Hello, welcome to another podcast in season 3 of the Unleading Project. My name is Dr. Vidya Shah and I'm super excited to dive into today's conversation. But I have to be honest, we are recording this podcast on the day that we woke up to the news that Donald Trump would be the 47th President of the United States, and everything in me wanted to scream and cry and recoil, and just stay in bed for maybe ever. And I was simultaneously shocked, but also not shocked by this news. And it's been a practice over these last couple of hours since waking to really implement what I've what I've learned on this unleading journey. Not to turn away, to stay in, and with the grief that I'm feeling, to trust that that grief is going to metabolize in time, and transform into something more powerful. And to not cover up what feels to me like a devastating moment with toxic positivity or escapism or apathy. Some of the ways in which I have watched liberalism and neoliberalism form us as humans in relation to each other and in relation to the more than human world. So it's actually no coincidence that we are recording this podcast today on leading against neoliberalism and privatization. This podcast explores the ways in which neoliberalism, capitalism and privatization, all very big concepts that we will get into in this podcast, the ways in which they concentrate power and wealth in the hands of a few, and threaten the public good. The sociopolitical, cultural, and economic ideologies operate broadly in most aspects of society: in threats to viable public health care and education systems, in unaffordable housing, in job precarity and labor exploitation, the weakening of unions and labor movements, the positioning of social welfare is evil, and governance systems being overtaken by the wealthiest people in the corporate sector with very few checks and balances. In schooling specifically, neoliberalism and privatization operate through private partnerships, specifically thinking about specialty schools and programs, the reliance on fees and fundraising, this movement to quote unquote school choice, private schooling and homeschooling, curricular and pedagogical changes designed to prepare students for the 21st century economy, fundraising efforts and so much more. And so in today's podcast, we will explore what it means to lead in ways that both strengthen public systems and respond to public systems that have historically resulted in disproportionate and disparate outcomes for people marginalized by poverty, for indigenous populations, for many racialized groups, and more. So we're also going to consider how these systems of oppression influence who we are as leaders, how we relate to one another and possibilities that we see for the future. I am really excited to be in conversation with amazing panelists who are going to name and expose and question and challenge a way of thinking and being that, I think has become just so normal and natural for us in every aspect of our lives. And so if you want to know more about our panelists, you can find their full bios and contact information on the Unleading website www.york.ca/edu/unleading. I first personally learned about neoliberalism and privatization as concepts in graduate school, drawing on critical pedagogies to help me question again what had become so common sense and so status quo in my thinking. And I remember feeling like I had been so deeply fooled and simultaneously feeling so deeply empowered to do something about it. Perhaps that is what is so threatening about critical and political

education: that it changes us, and it invites us to see how powers far beyond us are changing the material, social, and political realities of our lives, and also changing who we are as people. My thinking about neoliberalism and privatization have since deepened and that desire to change systems has grown in my conversations with Dr. Sue Winton, and in reading her scholarship. Sue Winton is York Research Chair in Policy Analysis for Democracy and Professor in the Faculty of Education at York University. Her research examines, policy, advocacy, influences, and enactment. She is the director of the Public Education Exchange, which is a SSHRC funded project designed to create and share knowledge about education, privatization. And you can find more information about that www.pexnetwork.ca. Sue is, and has been a wonderful mentor to me as a junior scholar, starting out in the very neoliberal environment of higher education, and has since become a dear friend, welcome to the podcast sue.

Sue Winton: (00:05:23)

Thank you so much, Vidya, it's really a pleasure to speak to you all today. I'm going to begin by offering some definitions of neoliberalism and privatization, then I'll talk about how these ideas and practices have influenced me in my work and my personal life. So what is neoliberalism? It's really a set of ideas about how the world should be organized. But the popularity of this set of ideas started to grow in Canada in the 1980s. And today, policies and practices reflecting them are widespread around the world. A key neoliberal idea is that economies and societies should be organized like a free market. Put another way, it means that people, organizations, and businesses should be allowed to compete for success with limited government involvement. The role of governments, according to neoliberalism, is to create new markets and help them thrive through policies that help support market conditions, attitudes, and behaviours. Many governments have also cut public spending to encourage economic growth. These policies have helped to create markets that operate internationally, and many governments try to ensure their businesses and citizens can compete successfully in the global economy. Now in this context, the primary task of schools is to prepare young people for this competition, by fostering skills, knowledge, and attitudes that will be useful in the workplace. Indeed, competition and productivity are key values of neoliberalism. Now a related core idea of neoliberalism is that individuals should be able to pursue their interests and make their own choices without government interference. Of course, this idea ignores the reality that choices are always limited and that some people have far fewer choices than others. Related to this idea, neoliberalism positions individuals, not governments, responsible for meeting their needs and ensuring their success. From this perspective then, an individual's failure is a result of their poor choices, rather than unfair policies, structural inequalities, racism, sexism, or other societal factors. This view reinforces the popular idea of meritocracy, that's the belief that people who work hard deserve their success and are entitled to enjoy its benefits. Another main idea of neoliberalism is that the public sector should be more like the private sector, and governments encourage the shift towards becoming more private-like, that is- privatization in different ways. One strategy is

to create markets. In education, markets call upon students and their families to choose between different providers of education, and public dollars follow the students to their selected school in most cases. So for me as a parent in Ontario, my sons faced choices between schools when they were going both to middle school and high school. Two of them chose and qualified for programs that are not available to all students. They have entrance criteria that my kids could afford, but again, not everyone is able to. And this positioned me as a chooser, yes, but not only between schools but also between what I thought was best for all children and what my own kids wanted. And this is something that neoliberal policies like school choice does. It puts individual interests first. Of course, any person can opt not to choose, but that too is an individual choice and it doesn't change the system. Someone else can just choose your spot. So this brings me to another group of policies that encouraged the public sector to be more private-like and these policies that introduce practices that are common in the business world into the public sector. These practices include measurements and rankings for example. So let's talk for a moment about universities. A lot of universities, like the one where I work, find themselves competing to fare well in these annual rankings because higher rankings can attract more students. And these rankings, or changes in rankings are reported on university websites, in email signatures, and as faculty members, we're asked to complete surveys that will help position us well in the ranking, and even to offer the names of colleagues to participate in these surveys. And again, while I don't want to participate in these rankings, I do because I see where my university is now. Like many universities across the country, my university is underfunded by the government and we really do need the money that students, especially international students can bring. So again, I feel pressured to act against my will. Talking about money brings me to another major form of privatization, and that's shifting responsibilities to private actors, to take on roles once that were assumed by governments. So these actors can include parents, businesses, non-government organizations, philanthropists, foundations, and more. And the increased recruitment of international students to our universities, and I might add, to many K to 12 school districts, so that they can bring their tuition dollars to these institutions is a good example of this shift of responsibilities. Now, of course, the shift towards looking to private actors for funding happens locally too. As a parent, I was routinely asked to fundraise for my son's schools and pay for materials and opportunities. And again I felt caught between doing what I could do to enable my sons to have rich school experiences and knowing that in doing so, I was contributing to inequities between schools and neighborhoods. And finally, I remember as a teacher, I turned to Scholastic books to fill my classroom library and purchase teaching materials. At the time it didn't occur to me that, by selling the books, I was helping the bottom line of a private company. Policies based on neoliberal ideas affect how people work, understand themselves, and relate to others. So I'm going to return to the ideas of competition and productivity just to give you some examples. So as a university professor, I feel pressure to work all the time and no matter the circumstances: global pandemic, terrifying election results, no matter what. I also feel a lot of pressure to publish and typically in places that matter for the institutional rankings but

not so much to me. I also feel pressure to apply for grants, even when I already have enough work to do because these grants bring in additional funding not just to me, but to the university as a whole. But of course, in competing for grants, I'm set up against my colleagues. And furthermore, I just don't have time to do everything in my work. In part, this is due to the university's move to hire more and more people on short-term contracts, which means they can do some of the work of permanent workers; work like supervising students and working on committees. And finally, it means I don't have enough time to do teaching, which I love. And I don't have time to read and keep up with concurrent research, which I see as part of my job. And I certainly don't have enough opportunities to talk and learn from others like the people here today. So I'm very grateful to have this opportunity to participate. Thank you.

Vidya Shah: (00:13:44)

My goodness, Sue, thank you so much for really laying out a lot of the challenges that we are experiencing with these set of ideas. And in particular, I'm really sort of sitting with this idea of like having to make choices out of two options or three options, all of which are terrible options, and sort of being forced into this system that only sees these as possible options and and and the ways in which it changes us, and how we are with one another. And folks while you're listening to this, you know, Sue lovingly shared a lot of examples from K to 12, from higher education, but the ideas can span across multiple sectors. And so it's really those ideas that we're interested in thinking about, how, does this sort of impact who we are and how we live in the world. I'm really excited to dive into a panel with people who come from very different locations speaking about neoliberalism and privatization in various ways, and I think that's what will offer a really deep discussion. I'd first like to welcome to the podcast Yvonne Kelly and Yvonne is a dedicated social worker with a bachelor's in social work and a master's in social work, who has spent the last 36 years working primarily in community-based settings. Her career has been focused on supporting diverse and low-income communities, often through projects involving close collaboration with schools across the GTA. And currently Yvonne serves as a community and partnership developer in the Inclusive Schools and Community Services Department in York Region District School Board, where her portfolio emphasizes at the intersections of poverty. Welcome to the podcast Yvonne.

Yvonne Kelly: (00:15:31)

Thank you.

Vidya Shah: (00:15:33)

Next, I'd like to welcome to the podcast Kearie Daniel. And Kearie is a visionary leader and dedicated advocate whose work has profoundly reshaped the landscape for black families across Canada. As the creator and executive director of Woke Mommy Chatter, founded in 2016, a social enterprise and nonprofit specializing in black motherhood, storytelling and

legacy building. Kearie amplifies the voices of black mothers through digital storytelling, a blog, and a podcast. In 2019, Kearie co-founded Parents of Black Children, an organization dedicated to combating systemic racism and advocating for the rights of black children and education. And now, as the Executive Director of the Black Women's Institute for Health, Kearie is focused on addressing the stark health disparities faced by black women and girls. Welcome to the podcast, Kearie.

Kearie Daniel: (00:16:25)

Thank you.

Vidya Shah: (00:16:27)

I'd like to introduce Paul Gorski. Paul is a dedicated father, gardener, community builder, and educator, and he's the founder of Equity Literacy Institute, an organization committed to fostering institutional and systemic transformation in schools rooted in the principles of equity and justice. And with a longstanding career as an activist and author, Paul focuses primarily on racial and economic justice within educational institutions. And he resides in Lexington, Kentucky, with his daughter Maddie. Welcome to the podcast, Paul.

Paul Gorski: (00:16:59)

Ah, happy to be here

Vidya Shah: (00:17:01)

And welcome, Erika Shaker. Erika is the Director of the National Office of the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives and Director of the CCPA Education Project. And editor of the popular education magazine, Our Schools, Ourselves. For almost 3 decades she has researched, written about, and spoken on a number of education-related issues, privatization, commercialism, education funding, social justice, education, and democracy. Welcome to the podcast, Erika.

Erika Shaker: (00:17:32)

Thanks, Vidya. Thanks to all of you for being here on a somewhat challenging day.

Vidya Shah: (00:17:39)

Yeah. And last, but certainly, not least, I'd like to introduce Deena Ladd. Deena has been organizing for decent work in sectors of work dominated with low wages, violations, precarious and temporary work, for the past 30 years. She has worked to support and develop grassroots, training, education, and organizing with groups such as the Fight for 15 and Fairness Campaign, Decent Work and Health Network, The Migrant Rights Network as well as The Migrants Workers Alliance for Change. Deena is one of the founders and the executive director of the Toronto Workers Action Centre. The Workers Action Centre organizes to improve wages and working conditions with low-wage workers, migrants,

women, racialized and immigrant workers in precarious jobs that face discrimination, violations of rights, and no benefits in the workplace. Welcome to the podcast Deena.

Deena Ladd: (00:18:30)

Thank you so much. Great to be here.

Vidya Shah: (00:18:32),

So, folks, I am really looking forward to diving into this conversation, and for listeners to get to know a little bit about you, and so I'd love to begin with this question that asks what does this way of leading so leading against neoliberalism and privatization, what does that look like in your everyday practice. Yvonne, I'd love to begin with you.

Yvonne Kelly: (00:18:55)

Thanks, Vidya and thanks for the opportunity to be here today. So I work in education as a community and partnership developer where I interact with systems, students and families facing hardship and our partner organizations that serve them. I also work in community and co-chair of the affordable housing coalition of York region. So I'm in a unique position to witness the many ways in which privatization impacts the everyday lives of students and families. The underfunding of public education has impacted lower income, newcomer, indigenous and racialized students disproportionately. From the arts and boutique programs that lower income students are excluded from, to the cost of transportation to and from school, the bring your own tech device to school programs, and a reliance on fundraising that determines what students will have access to in any given school or neighborhood. It actually costs money to get a public education today. That should not be a thing. In my experience. advocacy for equitable distribution of funding in order to ensure all students have access in spite of their circumstances. This is simply being tuned out, often with the pushback that this is not our core business. Add to this the commodification of housing, lack of rent control, austerity, driven social assistance rates, and lack of access to health care and benefits, all of these factors compound to put an entire segment of society at constant and considerable risk. I spend much of my time supporting students whose families have been run, evicted, and displaced amidst the growing housing crisis, students are forced to live in shelters, hotels, move schools several times over, and, due to the stress, poverty, and cost of transportation, students lose access to their education, which they have every right to. I don't feel like we have any language in education to truly acknowledge or challenge unfettered capitalism, neoliberalism, and privatization. It has been normalized and accepted as just the way things are. Speaking out against these entrenched ways of doing business is unwelcomed at best and leading against it looks like going up against the status quo in education, every damn day. So this is why this podcast is so valuable today.

Vidya Shah: (00:21:08)

I so appreciate that, Yvonne, and for really giving such important examples of what this looks like in schooling and the ways in which so many other sectors influence what happens within and inside of schools. Thank you so much. And Deena, as somebody who's been organizing with a lot of these pieces around precarious work, I'd love to hear from you what does leading against neoliberalism and privatization look like in your everyday practice?

Deena Ladd: (00:21:32)

Well, I mean, I think we're dealing with the impact of neoliberalism and privatization, with every worker that walks in the door or phones as or who we meet on the streets. You know that sort of the harsh impact of of all of the things that Sue talked about in terms of, you know the competitive environments that guide our corporations, I think it just really provides a really brutal landscape that I have to operate in. And in particular, you know, I see the impact of that on workers who have very little power and choice and control in the labor market. So you know, I'm talking about migrant workers on tied work permits, undocumented people, racialized communities, new immigrants, women, people who are new to the labor market. And so what we're trying to do with the Workers Action Center is lead by, you know, transforming those individual impacts of this system, this economic system of what's happening on the job to more of a collective response against it. And that's really hard, because, you know, you have workers coming through the door, who are, you know, who are pitted against each other in the workplace, are working in corporations where you know it's just in time production. And so the kind of, you know, hyper pressure on workers to work faster, who are under incredible surveillance, who are supposed to be flexible for their employer where the jobs have no benefits, there's no paid sick days, where it's precarious, you don't know if you've got work the next day where it's all a race to the bottom right? And so, you know. against that, we are trying to lead our center and myself around providing an alternative narrative, right? An alternative political understanding of the system, and where we're taking in these individual complaints and problems of wage theft, of discrimination, of violations of rights. and saying you know, this is not just because of this is not your fault, this is a systemic approach, a system problem. And so how do we build connections amongst workers? How do we try to support them? To understand the political and economic system that we're in? And how are you know, and how do we in this landscape, where again, a lot of community organizations, you know, are again, you know, in a rut of competing against each other for funding, we are trying to carve out a different pathway as an organization to implement a movement-building model which I can talk more about.

Vidya Shah: (00:24:41)

I just love this Deena, and I think that you know this notion of race to the bottom, and the tremendous amount of unacknowledged labor and the feeling as though, like we have to be grateful for having a job, and that you know all these ways that that it seeps into our systems, and especially what you're naming about the competition between not for profit

groups is such a challenge, especially groups that are trying to build movements, and I'm really excited to dive more into that later into the podcast so thank you for naming that. Kearie would love to hear from you next on this on this question.

Kearie Daniel: (00:25:18)

Thank you. Yeah. I mean, I think it's such an important question and an important reflection, I think. And for me, you know, as someone who is working in community and working to dismantle these systems. That's really what it looks like. That's what leading against neoliberalism means for me. It's about resisting the way in which these systems function as a black woman, as a black mother, that resistance is so draining. And you know, when we talk about, I'll go off a little bit off-topic, but when we talk about how we feel today in of all days it is, I feel drained. I'm not angry. I am sad. I'm so immensely sad because I feel such an indictment against black women quite frankly, and when I think about what that means in terms of the systemic structures that we're we are up against, that we have been up against, and that we will continue to be up against over the next, over the coming years, it just makes me incredibly scared, but also incredibly sad. So you know, I spent a lot of time you've mentioned education. And now, working within our health systems and looking at the social determinants of health pushing back against systems that are just incredibly structured in a way that it is, it's almost impossible to, I think, penetrate them in a way that is tangible for our for our communities. It's the same thing with the child welfare system and the harm that those systems across the board do to our black communities, do to our black children, and especially in the way that they connect and work with each other. So for me, it's really about trying to foster and create space outside of those systems trying to mobilize outside of those systems in order to respond and push back against those systems. But it it feels draining. It's an uphill battle. It is incredibly challenging. And on days like today, as a black woman, as a black mother, it feels incredibly isolating, and also just, I would say, daunting. Yeah.

Vidya Shah: (00:27:56)

Kearie, thank you so much for bringing just bringing all these emotions into this space. The feeling of it being overwhelming and daunting and deeply sad on a regular basis, you know, and this sort of pushing uphill on a regular basis is hard, is really hard. And I think about how many people who are in formal, informal leadership roles who are sort of running on empty like this empty tank leadership that we are expected to engage in, especially in particular bodies, where there are intersections of racism and colonialism and and other systems of oppression. It's just, it feels near impossible at times. And so I really want to thank you for for naming that and speaking to this and and also speaking to the limits of systems. And I'm hoping we can get into that some more. You know. What if we're putting way too much faith in what systems can do and like you're sharing more energy needs to be put in adjacent forms of community organizing and movement building that could push back against those

systems. Thank you so much for naming that. Paul, I'd love to hear from you next on this question.

Paul Gorski: (00:29:10)

Well, most of my work involves equity injustice efforts in schools and strengthening equity injustice efforts, working with a lot of leaders and leadership groups around how they can maximize the transformative and social justice potential of their equity and anti-oppression efforts. So the way that it plays out mostly in my work is helping school leaders and other educational organizational leaders understand how equity and justice efforts have been sort of softened or misdirected by neoliberalism, especially, the best example I can think of, at least from the United States point of view, is how the conversation about educational equity and justice has shifted so much from talking about anti-racism, decolonialism, and that sort of thing, to quantitative outcome measures like test scores and graduation rates and that sort of thing. So, a lot of the ways this is playing out in my work is helping leaders not sort of fall prey to that approach and to make sure that we're focusing on people's experiences, we're focusing on institutional equity and justice, and not sort of getting sucked into this other way of undermining that, but sort of in the guise of equity and anti-oppression through focusing on standardization, focusing on quantitative measures, and ignoring institutional and systemic conditions that oppress people.

Vidya Shah: (00:31:18)

You know this is so interesting Paul because so many of the people doing anti-racist work right now assume that the most anti-racist approach is to make sure that you know a greater percentage black and indigenous students graduating at high levels, that academic pathways are open up to all students and what I'm hearing you say is that that's not the, that's definitely not the only measure but that might not even need to be a measure.

Paul Gorski: (00:31:45)

Well I think it could be part of a bigger set of measures for sure. The problem is if I, let's say I open up a pathway to something like advanced course, what we call in the US call tracking, and you all, what do you call it in Canada?

Vidya Shah: (00:32:07)

Streaming

Paul Gorski: (00:32:08)

Streaming, right. So, and I think the idea people think well if we just open it up in a sense that we give more say black students, students experiencing poverty, Indigenous students, whatever it is, more of a pathway into more advance or sort of quote unquote higher level streams, or that more graduate, that somehow we've the work. The problem is, we call this in my organization, we call it the just access principle, and the just access principle is

basically that it's not just about giving people more access to something but making sure that what we're giving them access to is itself just and anti-oppressive. So if I give students more access to say you know, college preparatory, you know that sort of thing, but they're still invisible and marginalized in the context of that, then I would not consider that equity and justice, that's a kind of neoliberal reframing. And the fact we're even distinguishing sort of college track from other tracks and just thinking about what that means in the ways its sort of pigeonholing people into functions, into future functions in society, even that itself is part of the problem.

Vidya Shah: (00:33:35)

Thanks so much, Paul, that's a helpful distinction, and I think really important for listeners as we are engaging in anti-oppressive and anti-racist work, thinking about the damage we do when we approach that work from a neoliberal stance, that even though we think we are breaking down barriers, increasing access, what exactly are we increasing access into? Such a great distinction. I'd like to welcome Erika into the conversation. Erika, I would love to hear from you. What does leading against neoliberalism and privatization look like in your everyday practice?

Erika Shaker: (00:34:13)

Thank you, Vidya, and I just wanted to bookend this by saying I am struggling with what just happened, and I am angry. I'm tired and I'm angry. I've been tired and angry for a long time as it turns out. So we talked about how privatization is, how that you know paradigm of neoliberalism is both internalized and operationalized. And what policies and mindsets are in place and reinforced to facilitate this pre-market approach to what we prioritize, and how we prioritize, how we define success, who counts and who doesn't, and how it reframes the notion of a social contract, I'll just use that term for things like physical and social infrastructure and economic infrastructure that's publicly owned and responds to public needs, and how it reframes that into how it's all about individual choices, which is a narrative of course, where systems don't fail people, people fail themselves and each other. And they have no one to blame but themselves for that. So I wear a few hats at work, but from my perspective as director of the Education Project. How do we push back? It's about putting so much of this into context, because this has been such a long, relentless slide into exactly where we're now. I mean, you know, we say, how did we get here? Well, it was every step along the way. And giving people the tools to understand the extent to which this paradigm has been so deeply internalized by perfectly lost people, and Sue spoke to that extremely well, because so much of what's happened has put parents in the position of having to choose between their political and their philosophical principles, and their commitment to a public education system and public infrastructure that serves everybody that responds to individual needs, that responds to, that meets people, meets kids, meets families and communities where they're at, choosing between that and parenting their children. Whether or not they choose private schools or privatized models within the public

system, because, of course, public schools are now competing with private schools because they want to hold on to that market share right? Whether parents can pay for tutors or whether they do pay for tutors? Or can they pay for tutors, or whether the ongoing need to advocate for their kids is challenged by all those obstacles that Deena, you know Deena deals with at work right? Insufficient, insufficient wages. Not keeping up with inflation. A complete inadequate housing system, affordable housing system, food insecurity. All of those things. That just, you know, creating a life, a livable and sustainable life for your kids in your community, and how that and how that has become a full-time job. in addition to one's full-time job and possibly multiple jobs right in this era of precarity and inequality, and advocating for your kids in a public system, and not just a public system in a broad neoliberal system, that is, you know where inequality as they say it's not, it's not a bug, it's exactly how it's supposed to work. So in, in in public education. So we see this. It's at the root of standardization and the need to measure, right? With the intention to rank best and worst schools, best and worst students, best and worst educators, a system that's less about meeting students where they're at and more about what gives them a leg up on others. And that, again, is how that's been internalized. And in this context of scarcity, right? There's not enough public money. There's money to, you know, in the in the midst of a deficit in Ontario. There's still money that can be handed out in cheques to people, but not enough public money to actually increase capacity, to shore up the damage, and then increase capacity in those public systems that are supposed to be there for all of us. It immediately positions students who are labeled as challenging, by which I mean they just don't easily fit into a very standardized box of meeting milestones right? As requiring more time and more energy than perhaps they're worth. Right? This is the model that that we're we have moved towards. And in that model, exceptions to norms aren't what makes for an education system that has a rich diversity of experiences and perspectives. Exceptions to norms, and of course, norms are very like norms are tiny and constraining, exceptions to those norms are just an additional expense at a time of scarcity. Right? And I, just, you know, came up in the discussion of the election results, last night, too. The role that charter schools and school choice, the school choice movement has played in certain States as what part of what mobilized racialized communities to vote for Trump. And we've seen this in Canada. This, for me, has been a major frustration with, you know, progressive by comparison, provincial governments who are unnecessarily kind to school choice movements. You know they won't cut funding, and or they perhaps will increase funding, thinking that somehow it positions them as moderates who may possibly actually get reelected, when really it just opens the door to more conservative parties who are only going to direct more public funding to more privatized choices. So it's not, it isn't that line in the sand, and that reclaiming of public spaces and not just reclaiming them, reinvesting in them right? renewing them, making sure that they actually address the needs of kids and families and communities and meeting them where they're at as opposed to imposing this standardized structure and then reinforcing it with a whole system of of standardized tests that really are just an indictment

of how we have let kids down, and how we have let communities down. And that's probably why I'm so tired right now as well.

Vidya Shah: (00:40:57)

Thank you for sharing this, Erika. You know I think there's so much here, and what I really appreciate about the work of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives is the ways in which you historicize these moments. That this is not a fluke. We are, you know, there are multiple indicators indicating that this is the direction that we were moving in and being able to connect those dots and being able to historicize present times against a backdrop of historical policies and movements that have been very dangerous. I think it's so important for us to also use that same sort of thinking to reimagine where we are now. And you know, as all of you have shared one of the things that that you know, this really makes me think about is like, what does this actually do to us like? How does how does this way of thinking around competition and scarcity? And you know hyper productivity and precarity. What does that actually, how does that form us as leaders and as humans? And I'd love to hear your take on this. Deena would love to start with you here.

Deena Ladd: (00:42:01)

Yeah, I mean, I think what we see on a daily basis is, you know, the system creates that kind of suspicion and lack of solidarity between us. Right? And it creates scapegoating. It deflects blame from the root causes of the economic system onto individuals. And I think you know, a perfect example of that right now is how you know international students and migrants are being blamed for the housing crisis, the affordability crisis, and for the healthcare crisis. And you know, refugees from Africa being blamed for the fact that we have no room in our shelter system, and the international students are, you know, using the food banks. And so you know, it's about deflection. It's about trying to find a scapegoat. And so that's what we see right? And we we're seeing that in the media. But I think in terms of then as a leader, how do you combat that? I think for us at the Workers Action Center there has been a very deliberate political choice about ensuring that we build a multiracial organization that we are about trying to unpack all the ways in which we're pitted against each other. How do we find ways to unlearn the ways in which we are seeing everyone with suspicion, and we're about to sort of like, throw this person under the bus or that community under the bus, and you know we have all of these sort of you know, a lot of people. We've all had to unlearn this right in terms of, you know, unpacking our own racism and prejudice. But I think, in addition to that, we have to unlearn and unpack the way in which the system points the finger at another individual with less power, or that is more visible. And then how do we concretely build solidarity and unity in the way in which we work? And so in our common struggles, you know, we are actively bringing people together to build relationships, to bridge barriers of language, culture, community in struggling against capitalism and struggling against bad bosses and struggling against discrimination and unfair immigration laws. And so we have to

ensure that our practice is very deliberate as leaders, because that's who's coming in the door with all of that baggage.

Vidya Shah: (00:44:44)

So important. Oh, and this idea of turning on each other, literally turning on each other, and the ways in which that is racialized. Thank you so much for naming that Deena. Kearie, I'd love to hear from you on this question. What do these? What is the set of ideas? How do? How do they form us as leaders and humans?

Kearie Daniel: (00:45:03)

I think so. I mean, we talked about the conformity of of systems, and for our children in particular, what that means, you know, if there's any kind of difference that they don't do well within the system, and it's very much the same thing. With our leaders. As Deena was saying, you know, when we have racialized leaders, particularly when we have leaders who are black, often there's not even often there is an expectation from our black communities that this is wonderful. We have a black leader. Things are going to change now, and it's not just black communities. I think, generally, people expect that. But it doesn't happen that way. And the reason it doesn't happen that way is because they are consumed by the system where they actually cannot be different. They can't move in a direction that's different. And so you know that individuality, that kind of individuality, but that kind of the ideas to kind of reimagine of what this system could look like cannot take root, because the system itself is kind of pushing them out right and not enabling them to do that. And we've seen that across education, if we look across child welfare is a great example, because there has been sustained and systemic work around equity within the child welfare system. In this province. In Ontario there have been many particularly black people in positions of leadership, in a position to kind of control the direction of child welfare. And yet we still see an overrepresentation of black children in Ontario and in some cases what we're hearing is that numbers are actually higher than they were before this work was being done. And it's the same thing in education. We've had a situation in the last 5 years where we've had more directors of education who have identified as black than we've ever had in our history. And yet we're still. It hasn't shifted the pendulum, it hasn't shifted the needle at all, and it's not their fault. It's the way in which they have to conform to the system in order to survive, and when they can't do that, they leave. When they can't take it anymore, they leave. And it's the same thing for our children. The exception is, our children can't just leave. And so they are showing their their discomfort. They're showing the impact of that in other ways. Right? And you know, we're talking about school choice, and you know, for the black community. Oftentimes we we hold on to school choice. It's the first thing when you get together. And you're talking about the education system. And you're talking about the push out of our kids. And we're talking about all of the horrors that our children experience in the education system. First thing we hear is we need our own schools. We need our own schools. And and I don't disagree with that fully. I think I think it's my children have been in spaces that are

black spaces that are run by black teachers. You know, and they're beautiful spaces. They've done wonders for my kids. But I think that fundamentally, that is, it's such a dangerous idea, and we see it in the US, because what that means is, then we can take a select group of children, and we can say, okay, you're performing well. and we don't have to change the system. We're just going to create this little pocket over here. And you're performing okay, and we'll just keep going the way things are, and that is the fundamental issue. And I really think that. So when I think about you know how that manifests for me, that's one of the ways.

Vidya Shah: (00:48:50)

I so appreciate this Kearie. In particular, the naming of the expectation of conformity, and it speaks in many ways to the limits of what a politics of representation can offer, that putting more melanin into positions of power without changing the fundamental structure of the system, will simply cause harm to those people in those positions and create barriers between them and the communities that they are part of. And I also really appreciate you naming this tension between what has come up in many Unleading podcasts around you know reform or abolition? Do you change the system from within? Or do you create outside and to your point, both have potential negative consequences. And so how do we work and positive consequences, and so how do we work with that, and in particular, you know oftentimes the challenge to, or the pushback or the antidote to neoliberalism is to strengthen the public sector, to strengthen, you know, to promote the public good. But what happens when that public good has never served particular publics within that public? What do we do then? What does that look like? And so thank you for naming sort of the ways in this plays the ways in which this plays out. Paul, I'd love to hear from you on this question, how does neoliberalism and privatization form us as leaders and as humans?

Paul Gorski: (00:50:14)

That's, you know, it's almost like there are all these kind of like dangling carrots. This is the way that I see it, that are sort of tempting us towards something. The best example I can think of in education, is that there's all these kinds of programs and initiatives that people are getting wealthy off of, that are very well marketed. And they're marketed in a way that leaders end up identifying so much with them that's almost cult-like. I'm thinking about something like social-emotional learning and thinking about something like trauma-informed practices, restorative practices, things that can actually have important functions in education but are often used as like, they're marketed like these cure-alls, they're marketed as ways of solving problems they can't possibly solve. So that's part of the problem is living in this world that ought to be about, in the education system, ought to be about justice, ought to be about access, ought to be about anti-oppression, but feels like a marketplace in that sense. And again a lot of these things have their place in education, the place is not equity and justice. None of them by themselves create more equity and justice, but it's so interesting when I go into schools or just talk with education people, how tightly

people's identities are associated with whatever the shiny new thing is. And that's very much a kind of, a symptom of neoliberalism or privatization so that this public, what's supposed to be a public system is indistinguishable from anything else and that these pieces that are so well marketed, that people's identity are no longer wrapped into the role of being a just educator, but are wrapped into like I'm the SCL person, or I'm going to defend positive behavior approaches, you know like, no matter what critique is a good critique of it, I'm going to defend that instead of defending you know equity and justice. And learning how to navigate that, you know, has had a profound impact on me and I see it having a profound impact in schools because it just feels like there's so much pressure for people always to be, for schools to always be grabbing on to whatever the new shiny thing is and investing hundreds of thousands of dollars into something that we all know in ten years is going to be gone, is going to be debunked. It's like what happened with learning styles, you know? Everyone invested. Ten years later it's like debunked. And we know learning styles itself is a myth. And it's like well schools put all these resources, not only do they put all these resources but they reconfigure diversity and inclusion efforts around this idea of something that doesn't even exist. And that's the sort of you know, that's sort of impact it has. It sort of forces this constantly going back to the drawing board and looking for the savior program or initiative that doesn't exist. But people are spending their budgets on it. And I would say that again, all those things have their place. SCL has its place. Trauma-informed has its place. But none of those things, again in the context of my work which is about equity and justice, none of those things are abolitionist in nature. None of those things identify and eliminate racism, from school systems. And the problem is that school systems are adopting them as if they do. Or adopting them in place of anti-racism. In fact, I was just at this national conference in the U.S, this national kind of equity and diversity conference, and it was really interesting how few of the sessions were about things like decolonization, or anti-racist, or anti-sexism, or anti-heterosexism, or anti-ablism. And how many of those sessions were about social-emotional learning, trauma-informed practices, these sorts of, again these programs that have their place, but they're not really at their heart about equity and justice. And it just got me thinking again about how these things are marketed in a way for people to grab onto them and think of them as some sort of cure-all. And I would say the biggest mistake I see schools and districts making around these kinds of programs is they end up all being funneled through a deficit lens, so that the best forms of trauma-informed practices, so really about transforming the institutions to be trauma-informed., not to somehow adjust students who have experienced trauma so that they can do better in school. But in the ways it's usually implemented it's sort of the flip of that. It's like how do we help students who have experienced trauma cope with that so they can do better in school, when the first question ought to be, well what are the things that happened in schools that traumatized people? And that question is almost never asked. And that's a good example of how these sorts of things are marketed and put into practice in ways that make them seem like they're going to create a change that they were never ever designed to create.

Vidya Shah: (00:56:19)

Another really important distinction here Paul. Thank you so much for naming this. And you know your work has been so informative for so many of us in really understanding how deficit thinking operates. That whether it be, you know, programs that are intended to sift and sort, or whether they are programs that are intended to help students, you know restorative practices, trauma-informed practices. When the problem and the solution is located in the individual student or individual family, and not the larger system and society, it inevitably leads to deficit thinking in ways that are super problematic. So I want to just say thank you for the years of work that you have engaged in to help us all understand that in much deeper ways. And I'd like to turn it over to Yvonne. Yvonne, how do neoliberalism and privatization form us as leaders and as humans?

Yvonne Kelly: (00:57:19)

Thanks, Vidya. So I guess what I wanted to say is pretty similar to what others are saying, but neoliberalism and privatization is coached in a false language of austerity, and it convinces us somehow there's not enough to go around to make things equitable or even fair, and that we really don't have a choice. So that's really a profound destabilizing force that takes place on all of us, and especially on our leaders as Kearie's alluded to. And so, whatever's happening vis-a-vis the market is a foregone conclusion. What can we do about it? And so it breeds that kind of disillusionment. And it takes a special, really special kind of denial to ignore the enormous and unprecedented wealth accumulation that is taking place right now in Canada and across the world, alongside enormous poverty, homelessness, and hopelessness. We have higher numbers of people going to food banks in Canada than we've ever had. And also, when we think about what just happened last night south of the border, 3 billionaires bought that election and convinced people that this was the choice that they needed to make, but more importantly, coerced and bought an election that allowed this result to take hold. Here we are. We don't talk about unchecked capitalism, neoliberalism, and the movement towards privatization of everything, including education. And honestly, as human beings just trying to live a life and do and do good, it is often easier to go along with the dominant narrative, but at what cost? So the false consciousness that abounds, and I think much of it is due to the fact that neoliberalism separates us from one another, and I heard very strongly what Sue was sharing about how it actually divides us against ourselves. So I think it has that powerful impact to really divide us and divide us even within our own lives. As individuals working in education, we talk about solidarity, but we often lose sight of what it means to be part of the collective, the broader community, and to be able to recognize and challenge injustice, in spite of what we're told is possible. So, as we see neoliberalism normalizing the survival of the fittest, this gives us permission to ignore the struggling of those around us and just stay focused on our own. There's been a pushback, and yet there has been pushback. We've seen it. We've seen it in the Fight for Fifteen and Fairness, and all the struggles that have happened with the unions in pushing back against cuts to education. And yet the majority of us are truly not aware of the extent to which

private capital in education has been embedded and normalized. So we're at a point where most educators today don't even remember a time and parents either, when fundraising was not part of the fabric of the school. So I guess what I think in my final comment is, it's impossible to understand, to critique, and then fight back against something we don't recognize or know, and neoliberalism and privatization in these forms are attempting to make us as humans and leaders, completely disconnected from one another, from our values. Unaware and incapable of fighting back. And so I think that's probably one of the most dangerous things is that it has this numbing effect, or this effect of making everything changing things seem out of reach.

Vidya Shah: (01:00:37)

Thank you, Yvonne, and thank you for like, really the, I mean this whole conversation, folks like literally pulling the Band-aid off like we are, we're exposing something that has been covered up with, you know, Band-aids that simply are not working for far too long. And to just name how this is informing us, I think, is so powerful. Erika would love to hear from you on this question.

Erika Shaker: (01:02:09)

Thanks, folks, and thank you. I mean, I've been frantically taking notes to sort of inform what I had planned to say. I'm gonna if it's okay, I'm gonna sort of personalize this bit because as someone who's fairly recently taken on a more sort of traditional leadership role, right? I've been with the CCPA for a long time, and I've directed my own project, and I, you know, sort of played a part in the education community and in these discussions, and of course, as an editor of *Our Schools, Ourselves*, but right before literally right before the pandemic, and then, I became interim director and then director of the National Office. So I've you know, fairly recently taken on sort of a more traditional leadership role. And I was, I've been struck by how I mean, people who have worked with me know how I operate and I'm struck by how a more sort of collaborative and supportive and multi-directional model of leadership can be constructed as poor leadership in ways that strike me as deeply misogynistic and frankly capitalistic and neoliberal in the ways in which we've been talking about it today. They're, you know, their qualities we sort of seek out in job postings. But then they're frustrating and hard to control once the hiring process has been completed. So that's something that I've been thinking through how to do leadership differently and in a way that's fundamentally anti-neoliberal. And I just also, I've sort of been thinking about this in the context of last night. So much has struck me in the context of last night and in the lead up to it right? Neoliberalism is a scourge. It's a scourge. It won't be resuscitated by white pantsuits. And certainly won't be renewed by white pantsuits and neoliberalism represented and championed by even racialized leadership, doesn't make it more appealing or somehow less fundamentally unjust, it just makes the betrayal felt by marginalized or racialized communities even more profound. And I also just want to add to what was also said it replicates that deeply unjust notion. That is the, it is the role of black and racialized

leaders as individuals to fix the structures that are inherently based on injustice and inequality. It's the system that's sick. That needs to be changed. And we can't, you know it can't, we're past the point of camouflaging it. And we're certainly well past, or we should be well past the notion that it is the responsibility of those who have been hurt the most by it, to fix it for all of us. And that's something that I've been really struggling with frankly in the midst of rage and grief and and frustration, because, of course, here we are. Where we said we would be.

Vidya Shah: (01:04:37)

Yeah. Erika, thank you for naming what happens when we actually do try to lead in ways that are against neoliberalism, that in so many ways, it's not trusted. It's actually not a trusted form of leadership to be collaborative to, you know, push back against, you know, hierarchy and and standardization and and metric like, it's actually not trusted. And it's seen as you're sharing as poor leadership. And so what do we do? That's a really, that's a, thank you for naming that. And this sort of moves into our next question around, you know, like, what are some of the challenges that you face in doing this work, and what you know, we've shared quite a bit around like, what ideas are you trying to disrupt? But what are some of the challenges that you face in this work. So Erika just shared this one this one challenge about, you know it being seen as poor leadership. But I'd love to hear other challenges that you're facing in leading in this way. And, Kearie, I'd love to begin with you on this question.

Kearie Daniel: (01:05:34)

I think that you know one of the biggest challenges for me, if I think about my work with Parents of Black Children in particular. It's the lack of, it's the lack of imagination around what change can look like. We do need, you know, Erika, is a hundred percent correct. The system is so, it's like poisoned. And I don't know that there's rehabilitation there. What we need is a complete reframing and reimagining of what the system, whether it's education, healthcare, our child welfare system, what those systems can look like. I always think about education as the one system that has had no evolution since its inception. It has stood still in the way in which we educate and we teach children. And so for me, I think that's been one of the greatest challenges is just, I feel sometimes when we are, and oftentimes even within education, I find that people don't move around a lot, so they don't have experience outside of the education system, to kind of draw on, to build their ideas about how our system can be improved and what it can look like. So for me, that's been one of the biggest challenges. It's almost like speaking, we're speaking different languages. We're not at the same table at all, and so far apart. So it makes it very difficult to really get the systemic changes that we need. It's near impossible, you know, when I think about my experience in the education system, you know, 30 years ago, and then I compare it with what's happening for my children, it's not very different. And and that is so disturbing. So for me, when I think about the challenges that's one of them. I also feel, you know, we've touched on this. And it's it's this idea of, we think of education as a great equalizer. And I in there, in communities

across, in marginalized communities and racialized communities, this is how we perceive education. Right? Go to school, get a good education. You're going to get a good job. We buy into that myth. But one of the things that has been profoundly challenging even for me to learn, and I say that as someone who grew up in a marginalized community. I grew up in Jane and Finch. Education was my way out, right? That was instilled in me, and I kind of followed that path, and it worked for me. And I made the assumption that that would work for everyone. And I think that one of the things we have to remember as well is that for many people, many children, many families, this is not it. It does not work for them. And this idea that we just need to get through. You're going to go to elementary school. You're going to go high school, and then you can go to post-secondary, and you'll get that is not. They can't even see. There is no vision. They can't even see post-secondary. And I think sometimes, when we have these conversations, we forget that there are people who for whom they are so disenfranchised, and the system is truly just, not even working for them in the minuscule way that they cannot see, and a way out, and there there is no way out for them. And so it's I think that's one of the biggest challenges. That's one of the challenges I've certainly had to confront. And it's one of the things that I think about a lot. Because how do you? How do you support individuals? How do you support children? How do you support families in situations like that? And certainly, how do you get the system to move to support communities in situations like that? And we talked about the barriers around, it costs money. Someone said it really nicely. It actually costs money to send your child to school. Sue, I think that might have been you who said that? Let me put a number. So my son started high school this year, and before he set foot in the door, it was just about \$800, and that included a school trip for the grade nines to do orientation, which is wonderful. It wasn't mandatory, but they all went. So it was mandatory, right? And it also included an \$80 athletic fee. So to set foot in the gym in his school to play sports, which for some kids is the one thing that they look forward to, there was an \$80 fee. And I was registering him, and I sat there, and I thought for me like this is a shock. We can pay for it. But I wasn't expecting it, and I was kind of annoyed. And I said to my husband, who works with young people. I was telling him about it, and he said, You know what for some kids, I said, how are families going to afford this? This is so unfair. And he's like some kids are going to go out, and they're going to get that money any way they can. And our system is setting, they're setting this this up right. And there there is this. And I think we're going to talk about it a little bit later. But even within the specialized programs, how that works and some of those programs have fees attached to them. So for me, like those are all the the challenges and the things that keep me up, that I think about in terms of how our system is failing, how our system is just not working for communities. And I think even within black communities, and I'm I'm speaking about black communities, because that's what I know. But within black communities there are subsets of that are just so disenfranchised that it is, it's immensely disturbing.

Vidya Shah: (01:18:15)

It really is, Kearie. Thank you so much for naming this. As you were speaking at the beginning, about speaking different languages, I literally remember much of my graduate school being learning how to code switch between what felt like two different languages. And I honestly think that's actually a skill that we need to develop in, in leaders really. Like to actually acknowledge what is the language that we are speaking, and how do we speak back to a different language and for personalizing it with actual dollars. That is, I can't even that's close to a thousand dollars, just to be able to step foot in into a grade 9 space. That is unbelievable, unbelievable. And, Yvonne, I know that you have a lot of experience with this, and thoughts to share would love to invite you to share challenges in leading in this way.

Yvonne Kelly: (01:12:09)

Sure I just wanted to really speak to Kearie's point. I think I'm so glad you brought up that very concrete and real example. A lot of folks don't believe that still happens, and it very, very much does. A really good friend of mine, a parent in our system, I'd say probably ten years ago, had that experience of families coming to her. She was a strong anti-poverty advocate, and saying, what am I going to do? I can't afford these fees, and they were never. they were not anywhere close to that ten years ago, but they were still outside of what families could afford. And she did her advocacy, as she always did, and she approached the superintendent of that area, and they said, that's not allowed. They they're not. They cannot insist on having those fees charged, or holding back either your timetable or anything else until the fees are charged. He says, I will speak to the school. And that happened. And the school was told to stand down. Here's the thing. It continues to happen. It's how embedded and how normalized this has become. It's what everybody does. No one questions it, and if they do, it's it's a one short lived, one off example of someone who is that okay, that's fine. We don't need to charge you that fee. But schools are relying on that in a way that is not okay because of other cuts that are happening. But it's actually not within the Education Act for students to have to pay, to participate in school and/or to get their timetable or anything else. So thank you for bringing that forward. So you know I I'm listening to this all, and it is so absolutely devastating to hear. That's why I had to speak to what Kearie has shared. I mean, it's the most basic argument anyone can make, that public education is a collective good, that it benefits us all, has the capacity to nurture future leaders and needs to be seriously invested in. And yet these notions of school choice that we've talked about quite quite a bit, competition and opportunities being only offered to those who can afford them within the sphere of public education, have become so completely normalized that leading against it causes many of us to be seen as naive and dismissed. So this was a perfect example. So as leaders disrupting the normalization of privatization, we are going clearly against this huge tide. We're challenging the right wing neoliberal direction in society, which is rapidly moving forward. And we're survival of the fittest or the richest, with the biggest platforms, with the opportunities to call on the media or do anything else to bring attention if they're not getting what they need. So those that are not in that position are very much exploited and taken for granted. So needing to point out how providing different qualities of education to

students based on where they live, poverty by postal code, how much their parents earn. This is absurd. We're still trying to point this out, pointing out that when one school fund raises \$200,000 in one year in a neighborhood with relatively little need, and another school in a lower income neighborhood can barely raise \$2,000 in the same year, and has needs that they'll never be able to meet. This isn't taken seriously. It needs to be, but it's not. These blamed inequities have become so entrenched over the past 30 years that it's difficult to challenge and propose any solutions. For example, several of us across different boards in Ontario the last 10 years have been talking about equitable redistribution of fundraising dollars. This is met with complete and total resistance, political resistance, and also bureaucratic resistance. And yet we must continue to disrupt this very ideology in education spaces. Where else is the unlearning going to happen? Having said that and listening to everyone tonight, though, I feel like leading from the outside in the ways that Deena talked about bringing broad grassroots, coalitions of people together, to fight against something that is in their best interest to fight against, getting to know each other building solidarity, parent groups. We had a broader collective in York region, called York Region Communities for Public Education and did some good work, but really didn't get to the naming, and the root causes, naming the root causes of neoliberalism that really kind of ties it all together and helps us to make sense of what's happening in every sector. So I feel like we need to do this in education, we have to, we have to bring forward this unlearning. But I think we have to go to the community and work with community to help bring them together, because that's where actually change really happens.

Vidya Shah: (01:16:38)

I really appreciate you naming this Yvonne, and think just thinking about the importance of breaking the false silos between schools and communities and non-for-profit and higher education, like really challenging the false but very real boundaries between these institutions and thinking about reimagining what is possible when we do that. Thank you for naming that. Paul, I'd love to hear from you on this question.

Paul Gorski: (01:17:07)

I think the big thing is imagining, reimagining schools as being sort of with humans at the centre of them instead of kind of doing the bidding of some bigger sort of power source or power function, but remembering that there are humans at the centre of education. So, you it's, I think about sort of wiggling free of these notions that are sold about the functions of schools, like I couldn't remember the first time I heard of the idea that the purpose of school is to prepare students to be able to compete in the global marketplace, and I thought that is the worst purpose of schools I have ever heard. But even leaders who wouldn't sort of philosophically buy into that, if you look at schools and how they function, it's still kind looks like that. So giving people kind of the tools and the ways of looking at things, to wiggle free of this notion that my function is, that the function of schools is the function of everything else in society which is to kind of maintain this power structure, and this hierarchy, and that

sort of thing. And you know, in the work that I do in schools, you know I, it's interesting because I don't think I've ever talked to a school leader who would say, if I said what is the purpose of school? Who would give a purpose that was explicitly, that was explicitly supportive of privatisation or neoliberalism. But if I look at the sorts of things I do, especially the things I do in the name of equity and justice, which tend to be things that, I mean the biggest thing I'm fighting in schools is the tendency for equity and justice stuff that is really high on optics and, so things that can sort of be marketed as positive, but very low on impact on real equity and justice impact, and that's clear effect of the sort of taking something like equity and justice and then putting a blanket of neoliberalism and privatisation over it. So, I think helping, in the work that I do, helping leaders see how that is happening in ways that, there so busy and caught up in the system that it can be hard for them to see, and then to think about how to kind of wiggle out of it. And I would say, in the context of the work that I'm doing, the biggest challenge I think is just getting people to see the impact of the kind of neoliberal or the privatisation as the impact that those notions are pushes for those have had on policies, on practices. Cause again I think for some people who are in the system and are really busy in the system, it can be hard to step back and see, oh, okay, that's kind of where we're going. So you know, being able to help people do that has been, has been challenging. And I would say on my on personal practice, the thing that has been challenging in the US is that there's some ways that that stuff has also, the people and institutions that are supportive of privatisation and neoliberalism, they've been really strategic about connecting that to a kind of nationalism, so that almost if you speak out against it, you're considered unpatriotic, or unamerican, or you know, or whatever. So there's a lot of like unlearning that needs to happen, and you know, that's challenging because I want to go just straight to anti-racism, decolonialism. I want to go straight to that, and it's like there's extra step that has to happen for people to understand the context in which we're moving in that direction.

Vidya Shah: (01:21:48)

Thank you so much, Paul. You know I think that this idea of neoliberalism making us so busy that we don't actually have the time to stand back and think about what it's doing to us, what it's doing to the systems, what it's doing to the policies, as you named. I think it's such an important point. And that's why in part, I think that partnerships between communities and schools and universities are so important to help to engage in the collective thinking and unlearning that you speak about that is so that is so necessary here. And that nationalism piece, yes that is alive and well here in Canada as well. Thank you for naming that. And Erika, over to you. What are some of the challenges you face in leading against neoliberalism and privatisation?

Erika Shaker:

For me the real challenge has been in fighting the despair and fear that the far right is capitalizing on to increase privatization in public education through, you know, so-called

school choice and and parental rights movement, and when I say privatization, I'm not, I'm not. I know we have talked about, you know, user fees. And I'm talking about that internalized privatization. Don't get me wrong, of course, I mean, of course, there's a significant element that is absolutely about racism and anti-queer and anti-trans discrimination, but there's more to it. And to address it takes time and communication and listening. And it comes at a moment when trust and compassion, even facts or belief in facts, is, in short, supply. And it comes at a time when people feel so disenfranchised and so betrayed that the instinct is to retreat to what you know, or who they know what's familiar. And to do what they feel or what they know, or feel they know is best for their kids, often who have been brutalized by the systems that are supposed to be there to support all of us and to meet our needs when we are at our most vulnerable. So that's what I'm struggling with, because, of course, there is full on racism behind a lot of this and the the attacks on the 2SLGBTQI communities are are right there in it, too. But there is a lot of real. And Kearie, I think, talked about this like this, really, this feeling like you, you see, out of concern for your kids out of fear for your kids, out of recognition that you know that that what your kids are dealing with is what you dealt with, and it hasn't changed. And you know the impact because you feel it, right? You've internalized that. You see it. You feel it. That's what we have to overcome. And it's not just a mandate, and it's not it's not more of the same that's going to overcome it. And it's not going to appeal to people that they need to just get behind public education, and that that's the problem, you know? The problem is that people are losing faith in the system. So that to me is really where my challenge is, you know, finding opportunities to actually build that compassion, that common, and that said, I mean, there's evidence there. There's beautiful evidence of how this can happen. You know, I just, we saw this actually in Ottawa this summer, when capital pride put out a statement in in support with Palestine. But what happened was this remarkable moment of solidarity between the queer community and the Palestinian community, where there were folks in the Palestinian community who were saying to me, I've never been to pride. I'm going to go every year now. You know? So I mean, there are these moments where we can build solidarity. We have to seek them out. And we have to protect them and celebrate them and find more. Because there are there are opportunities. And and so me like that, that's that's what, that's what makes the challenges worth it. Because we do have these opportunities as well. All evidence to the contrary, and often and often, when the evidence indicts those institutions that are supposed to be there to support.

Vidya Shah: (01:26:38)

Erika, you're, you know, especially today, when it's so easy to fall into apathy and deep, deep grief, and just giving up, and we can go there for a bit. And I'm also thinking about, you know, when people say rest is resistance, and joy is resistance and solidarity, it is real like, though they are antidotes to systems that are trying to tear us apart and tear us down, and that are you know, weaponizing or banking on those emotions too as a form of control. So

thank you for naming this. Deena, I'd love to hear from you on this question challenges that you face in leading from the stance.

Deena Ladd: (01:27:24)

Yeah, I mean to be honest, I think the Workers Action Center itself is a disruption in the labor movement on what struggling against capitalism and economic injustice looks like. I mean, because we've just been trying to do things very differently from the foundation of how we began. I think you know, similar to what Yvonne has been talking about, like trying to expose this notion of scarcity, and the fact that there is enough for everyone, right? But who has the profit? And then, once we name that, then what does that mean in terms of our struggle? I think you know, we've been, you know, trying to show by example how you can build an alternative organization that is rooted in the leadership of basically racialized women. I think we have been trying to show by example and by disrupting ideas of what solidarity means, and to sort of you know, riff off what Erika was talking about, I mean, you know, our membership is non-unionized workers. They're not in a union. They're migrant workers. They're undocumented. They're part-time. They're in casual. They're in precarious work. Yet who are the ones out there on the picket lines during the the recent LCBO strike? Who were there on the picket lines when the Metro grocery store workers were on strike? Who were the ones that were mobilizing when the public education workers were fighting back against Ford? It was our campaign that was painting the province purple by mobilizing so many people to, you know, wrap purple ribbons around trees, and to say that we support our public education workers. We've been out on the picket lines with nurses, who have been fighting against you know, the health care crisis. So what we're trying to do is model by example, to say, this is what solidarity looks like. Because every time workers are taking their employers on and combating privatization and neoliberalism, if they fail, we all collectively fail, right? And so, if we understand those points of connection and solidarity, then we understand that when there is a struggle, we have to be out there, and we have to be making those picket lines and those demonstrations stronger because we collectively fail. Right? And so, you know, it's not happening on the basis of oh, fingers crossed, you know, maybe union members will actually see the light and actually then support our struggles around employment standards. That historically, has not not happened, right? But we are trying to say there's a better way of organizing, and there's a better way of doing this work. And so you know, it's about solidarity and not competition. For us, it's also about movement building. So it's not just about building the effectiveness and strength of the Workers Action Centre, but it's about building other organizations. And so part of what we've been doing is we've been nurturing many different organizations to come out of organizing low wage workers. Whether it's care workers, migrant workers, whether it's health care workers. So there's many more organizations that now populate our landscape because we've taken this approach, right? And I think that that's really a critical part of this is understanding that, you know, we've, that there's a different way of doing this work, and that, we're also showing that, you know, leadership can come from the bottom up, not top down. That doesn't

matter what bloody position you're in, it matters about how you're exercising your leadership and challenging the system. And then for us, it's about showing and disrupting this notion that you know of how do you effectively challenge the system? And so for us, it's about saying, you know what? We may not be a union, but we're an organization that supports non-unionized workers. We see the Employment Standards Act as the collective agreement for 6 million workers in the province. Therefore, our fight is about raising those standards. And look at the workers who rely on those standards for their basic rights in the workplace. It's black workers. It's undocumented workers. It's about racialized women. And our belief is that if you raise the floor, you will raise those working conditions for those workers, and that in turn will raise everybody's standards. And that is true. We've seen it with our campaign over the last 10 years. We've raised the minimum wage in Ontario by 61%. Who are those workers? They are racialized workers, right? It is those workers out of the entire labor force that have had the largest wage increase. And that is because they have been organizing, and they have fought back, right? Now the challenge is do people see that work? Absolutely not. It's it's invisible, right? In the union movement we have to prove ourselves over and over again, who am I? I'm a racialized woman. I have to say the same shit over and over and over again, and nobody listens. How many times do I have to prove it? So really, I don't give a damn, like we're just going to do this work regardless. And we're going to show by example, because they're never going to listen anyways, right? There are people who are rooted and and doing well because of the current system, right? And those are a lot of our leaders in many of our institutions. They may come to do good, but they stay to do well for themselves. Unfortunately, right? I call it golden handcuffs, right?

Vidya Shah: (01:33:46)

Yeah.

Deena Ladd: (01:33:47)

That is not, that is not what we're doing, right? And so we have to just do the work, and we have to show how you can do it differently, and that is about disrupting over and over again, and not expecting that you'll be recognized for the work, because it doesn't happen. Been doing this work for 30 years, right? And people say, they bring the same old white boys to the table all over all the time to talk about strategy, but we never get invited. Right? Yeah. Because what do we know? Right?

Vidya Shah:

Deena, I want to just take a moment to publicly say to you and all of the people who, especially racialized women, black women, indigenous women, two-spirited people, all, all of the people who are engaged in the unacknowledged, unpaid movement work that is behind so much of the changes that benefit us all, way a huge, we owe you a huge debt of gratitude. So I just want to take a moment to really say that and to acknowledge the ways in which you know Workers Action Center is leading by example and is engaging in true

solidarity work the kind that is, you know, unnamed, unacknowledged, often unpaid, often all of that. And so I just want to say that. Thank you. And folks as we get ready to close our our, podcast you know, I'm hoping, we can leave, not to throw the toxic positivity blanket on this conversation, but wondering if we can any thoughts that you want to leave folks with possibilities for the kinds of worlds that we can create when we are acknowledging and pushing back and challenging how neoliberalism affects every part of our lives. And, Erika, I'd love to start with you on this question.

Erika Shaker: (01:35:44)

Do I have only a minute?

Vidya Shah: (01:35:45)

Only a minute, haha.

Erika Shaker: (01:35:48)

The too long didn't read version is, I'd like to start by focusing on class analysis rather than market research, and focus groups, which you know, it's for me, it's the difference between a working class analysis versus a middle class analysis which really doesn't seem to be an analysis at all. It's it's much more based on what you can afford to consume, and that is, that's an illusion. And it reinforces neoliberalism in a way that can be very seductive, and unfortunately, some political parties have actually turned it to their advantage temporarily, because I think what we just saw last night, and I fear we'll see within a year something very similar here in Canada. It's not, it is, the the illusion is is cracking. CCPA has an education based mandate. But where I think we can push back against these regressive movements is by addressing the underlying issues and their history. So, for example, what I find fascinating is the parental rights movement has its roots in the pushback against child labor legislation. Right? That's what's behind these so-called grassroots campaigns. It's not about looking after our kids. It's not about looking after ordinary people. It's an orchestrated corporate driven narrative that positions rights-based legislation and public institutions as government overreach, and it capitalizes on parental anxiety as a vehicle, right? So this is what we need to push back, we need to. The history is important. So is class analysis, regardless of how this is dressed up in populist language of ordinary people versus the elites. It's about attacking those public institutions, vilifying public sector workers, in this case, teachers, which, of course, is a largely feminized workforce, so there's gender equity issues there at play. And it treats some of the most vulnerable communities as collateral damage, because they are easily othered. And that brings up a whole host of racis, queer phobic and just, you know, anti-indigenous, just all sorts of narratives that we're all very aware of, and that permeate that have permeated and continue to permeate so much of the narrative we're seeing now, politically. As for strategies, what I found use, what I found makes headway is address those underlying issues, the loss of control exacerbated by affordability, or unaffordability and

general economic precarity. And I think we have to again, just to go back to what we need to acknowledge that conflating class with consumption makes this worse, not better.

Vidya Shah: (01:38:23)

Hmm. Yes, thank you, Erika. Paul would love to hear from you on this question what possibilities emerge when we think about leading against neoliberalism and privatization.

Paul Gorski: (01:38:34)

Well I think the biggest possibility, I mean, I think it's going to be a tough road getting back there, especially as we see wats unfolding here in the US and elsewhere. I think the big possibility is kind of, well I can see it almost reinvigorating, I think a lot of people that have been doing the kind of work that I do around equity and justice are starting to get a clearer sense now of where we're starting from in the context of that work. So there's almost like reinvigorating. I mean there's a lot of despair, too. But there's some reinvigorating there. I think it creates the possibility of returning an approach to equity and justice that's just a little bit more pure, that's a little bit more grounded in the institutional. I mean the interesting thing is that, if I see the inroads that people and institutions who support neoliberalism and privatisation, if i see the kind of inroads they've had in the education system, and I think about, okay well what is the response to this? The best responses to this we have are the very frameworks that are being demonized by the forces that want this neoliberal and privatisation change: critical race theory, you know decolonial theories, all of those sorts of frameworks. And the hope that I have for that is, even in the world of people who do equity and justice work, there's a fairly small percentage that have embraced the most transformative, most justice oriented, most institutional level, structural level frameworks for doing that work. So the hope that I have is that this helps people develop an understanding that we have to move toward you know, toward that, and away from these sort of fluffy DEI, you know, let's all join hands and sing kumbaya, the idea that if we all just get together and learn how to appreciate each other's cultures better, that all the other stuff is going to take care of itself. It's not. This is another reminder that we're up against something bigger than individual people's biases, And so we need a response that's bigger than let's learn about each other's cultures, you know let me pour the content of my privilege knapsack on the floor and riffle through it. That we need some sort of bigger response. We need some sort of stronger, more institutional, more structural response, you know than that. And so, that's my hope, is that we can sort of galvanize people who are fighting for a more just future around an understanding of that need for a deeper more transformative response than a lot of the sort of DEI stuff that's happening, that I see happening.

Vidya Shah: (01:42:07)

Thanks so much Paul. I really appreciate you naming this particular possibility. That in recognizing the limits of a neoliberal approach to anti-racism and anti-oppression, which in and of itself seems like such a funny thing to say, but what that might offer is a push towards this galvanizing of even more transformational truly just approaches to the kinds of, you know creating the kinds of worlds we are looking to create. Super helpful framing, thank you. And Kearie over to you. What are some of the possibilities that you see in this work, in leading against neoliberalism and privatisation?

Kearie Daniel: (01:42:48)

I think that when I when I think about our systems, regardless of which system it is, I fundamentally believe that people who go into education, who go into child welfare or health care, they do so because they want to serve. They want to do well. They want to, you know, bring forward the next generation. They want to serve in some way. And I think in order to do that fully, my challenge back to them would be really to strive to eliminate the limits that they that they feel the system has placed on them, and often that they place on themselves. I'm always really intrigued by people who are working within a system and doing some great work. So there are educators, for example, in the TDSB, who are working within a system, but are teaching math in a different way. There's a teacher, his name escapes me, but he's teaching math to young people in a completely different way. It's not, he hasn't gotten, you know, he hasn't gone through and gotten approval wherever. But he's just he's doing it. And I really feel that we need more leaders, more individuals to just do it. It's really can be that simple. Just do it. I think sometimes there is this kind of angst about looking at the system as a whole, and trying to change the whole thing, which is near impossible. But if we can all just do it and just do the things that we feel we need to do. Listen to community who are telling you what to do. It's it's right there in front of you. Listen to community organizations. Listen to our young people. Listen to individuals. If you do that, I think that we will push forward. We will push the movement and the momentum forward.

Vidya Shah: (01:44:46)

Thank you, Kearie. Thank you. That's making me think about, you know, blurring the lines between individuals and systems, that as individuals we are the system and systems live in and through us, and and blurring those lines with, you know, and also cautious of blurring those lines because of the ways in which it could, it could harm particular people. But really thanking you for just sharing like, let's let's do it, and let's listen to community. I would love to hear from Yvonne on this question. Possibilities in this work.

Yvonne Kelly: (01:45:18)

So I will try to be concise. I think, I really just hope that folks who are listening and who understand what is happening also understand that it doesn't have to be this way. So it is momentous. It is overwhelming at times, but more than ever now we need, we need all

leaders, and that staff, students, parents, and community to speak up and to come together to challenge status quo. If we say nothing, privatization will just prevail, and public services will suffer, and many will disappear. That's a very real possibility. So we, and the other thing, I think, is this whole notion of solidarity. What does that actually look like? And, what I, one thing I want to say is, I think we have to fight for well funded public services institutions because they have the best chance of achieving balance and equity. But we can't only advocate for education when we're in the education sector. Advocating only for public education, without advocating for living wages, without advocating for status, for all, for adequate social assistance and disability, benefits for affordable housing, well-funded healthcare. All of that is not, we have to do it in tandem. They're all intrinsically connected and unequivocally under assault. And the time now is to address the root causes and ideology of neoliberalism that is responsible for getting us to this place. And I think, taking what we've done here today and converting it into something else that has more reach, and maybe creating some type of a course or something that can also invite more people into this conversation, I think, would be really interesting to discuss.

Vidya Shah: (01:46:50)

Thank you so much, Yvonne. And you're making me think about the importance of you know this not just being cross community work, or, but it's this is cross sectoral work. This is cross systems of oppression work. Like, you know, in so many spaces that I'm in that speak about, you know, anti-racism in schooling in particular, but also beyond. Speaking about neoliberalism is not a common conversation there, and it needs to become common and vice versa. Speaking about anti-racism and spaces that are talking about challenging, that needs to be common conversation where we are seeing intersections between opportunities for liberation, cross sectorally, cross cross power cross community. Thank you so much for naming these examples. And I'd love to end on this question with Deena. Deena, what are you hoping folks will take away from this conversation?

Deena Ladd: (01:47:44)

I mean, I think ultimately, we can't just talk to ourselves. We have to talk to people in our communities that we don't talk to. We have to have the difficult conversations. We've got to talk about trans issues. We've got to talk about anti-black racism. We've got to talk about status. We got to talk about housing. We got to break out. We got to tear apart all of the the misconceptions and the myths and the ways in which, you know people believe the sort of neoliberal and privatization ideology. And I think, you know, I think you can only do that by getting out there in the communities and doing the hard work, right? Apartment building by apartment, building street by street, you know, school by school, workplace, by workplace community by community. And so I think that we can't be scared to have those conversations, right? We've got to have them, because otherwise we're gonna, you know we are going to be where you know the U.S. is at. I mean, I think it's really important that, you know, working people are, they know neoliberalism isn't working for them. The system is

broken for them. Which is why, when you see right wing populism messages of the system is broken, it's not working. It's failing. People relate to that because it's not working. They keep voting, and nothing happens. Nothing materially happens to change their lives for the better. It's getting worse. So either we allow right wing populism to dominate the airwaves and to get out in the community and spread their message. Or we do, right? And we can't rely on just then talking to ourselves and using the same mechanisms to think that we're reaching people. But we're not. And so that is our challenge. We have a year.

Vidya Shah: (01:49:49)

I love it. I love it, Deena.

Deena Ladd: (01:49:51)

We have to get out there and do the work. That's that's what, there's no, there's no magic bullet. There's no, there's no secret, easy recipe. It's just hard work, labor intensive, organizing on the ground in the communities that we work with. And that's the only way that we're going to change this, because there ain't going to be no pithy infographic that's going to change people, right? It's actually tearing and unlearning all of the ways in which we are pitted against each other. And the only way to do that is through that hard work of organizing.

Vidya Shah: (01:50:28)

Thank you so much. What a what a great, a great place to end. I would love to invite Sue back into the conversation, to share some of the pieces that she's taking away and inviting you as listeners to take away as well.

Sue Winton: (01:50:44)

Okay, thank you. And thank you so much to everybody. I mean, I literally have pages and pages of notes. So whatever I offer now is probably only going to be a fraction of what I'm going to take away from this amazing conversation. But I think some of the big ideas about leading against privatization and neoliberalism are the ones that I just want to reiterate. You've already said them all, but I want to restate them. People talking about offering alternative narratives to individual responsibility and individual blame. And instead showing people how these are system problems, showing people how the system operates as intended, not by accident. They're set up this way. Offering alternative narrative to individual responsibility also through showing solidarity as an option as well. Building solidarity. Creating opportunities and seeking the opportunities where they already exist, to build and to promote compassion and solidarity. I heard people say that we need to talk across our differences and have difficult conversations and community to find new ways, to talk to some of the same people, and also some different people as well as another way. I think that I heard people say that we need to consider the limits of systems, both the neoliberal systems, but also the limits of the public systems, and some of the challenges in looking to

public as the only solution in the sense that public as it has been, but thinking about imagining new and different public that takes into, that does a way better job in reaching everybody's needs. or I heard someone say, meeting them where they are, and keeping that vision of a public, a forward facing new public in mind. I heard the importance of showing people that alternative ways are possible. I think, for me, when I was preparing for this conversation I was thinking, what does leading neoliberalism mean? And that for me, I really feel like it's that pushing back against that idea that there is no other way, that this has to be this way. But no, we need to show that other ways are possible, and by doing that by example. I heard also that leading against neoliberalism involves listening to voices that we don't always listen to. So community students, other marginalized people in our communities. I heard that it's difficult work, that it's it can be isolating, that, it's someone said, it's an uphill battle. But I also picked up that everybody in this call has been doing it for a long time that they're committed, and it didn't happen overnight, it's not going to be fixed overnight, but we have to believe that we can lead against neoliberalism for a different kind of future. So thank you all.

Vidya Shah:

Thank you, Sue. And I wanna extend that, thank you to this panel. I often find in these spaces that the conversations literally undo and change me. And on a day where I was already feeling quite undone, this has been a really special conversation for me personally, and I'm hoping for listeners as well. And I am thinking about the importance of all kinds of solidarities. And I'm thinking about the importance of rest. And I'm thinking about the importance of joy. And I'm thinking about the importance of interconnectedness. And I'm thinking about the importance of speaking across difference, doing the work and organizing every day, and the possibilities of that, to create the kind of world that I want to live in, to create the kinds of worlds that many of us want to live in. And so much of that is because of the brilliance and the experience and the willingness to speak out from the people on this panel. And so a deep bow of gratitude to all of you for the work that you're doing well beyond this conversation for many, many years. And the work that that I know that you'll continue doing. And I hope that we can do that work together. Thank you so much. Everyone.