

RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EPISODE 500 TRANSCRIPT

Going Into Labor

Steve Skrovan: Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan, along with my cohost, David Feldman. David, it is 500 episodes over nine and a half years. This is episode number 500.

David Feldman: That's why I'm wearing a bow tie and nothing else.

Steve Skrovan: Oh, boy. So glad we're on radio. And we have the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph, 500 episodes, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Hello, everybody. Well, the 500th episode is going to deal with workers and unions by a union leader who really speaks his mind.

Steve Skrovan: We've talked a lot about the Writers Guild strike on this program. That strike is over pending the ratification of the deal reached between the guild and the major studios. And we may have the funniest picket signs, but there's a lot of other labor action going on across the country. Auto workers, hotel workers, hospital workers, service workers, and actors are all flexing their labor muscles.

For the first time in a long time, the labor movement seems to be playing offense instead of defense. This doesn't just happen in a vacuum. It takes a lot of organizing.

Our guest today, Chris Townsend, is a veteran trade union organizer. He even runs an organizing school. Organizers like Chris usually work far under the radar, but we've asked him to step up to the mic. So today he'll join us to discuss the details of his work as well as the labor battlegrounds we should keep an eye on.

As always, somewhere in the middle, we'll check in with our relentless Corporate Crime Reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, let's talk about a labor movement on the offensive. David?

David Feldman: Chris Townsend is a 44-year trade union worker and organizer. He is the retired Political Action Director for the United Electrical Workers Union and was the International Union organizing and field director for the Amalgamated Transit Union. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Chris Townsend.

Chris Townsend: Thanks. Thanks for having me.

Ralph Nader: Chris, you know, we've had many discussions over the years in Washington, D.C., about the state of the labor movement. And you were working at the time for the United Electrical Workers, which arguably is the most honest union in America. The head of the union for years never made much more than what an electrician of many years' experience would make. But we would talk about why union membership was declining, why the union leadership, including the

AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial] Organizations, wasn't aggressive enough. They were too obeisant to the Democratic Party, which was turning more corporate year after year, and you were pretty frustrated.

But now you've retired from the United Electrical Workers. You're more optimistic, you're more upbeat because there are all these union organizing efforts, many of them by young people in their 20s, at Starbucks, at Amazon warehouses, and elsewhere, and we all see that as spontaneous. But what you're saying is that there are traditional unions that are putting workers in these stores and warehouses for the clear purpose of galvanizing the rest of the workforce into signing up to form a union. Can you elaborate on that? You told the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, "It was like putting a handful of salt into a pot of water, knowing that by salting the water, it will boil a little bit faster."

Chris Townsend: Yeah. Thank you, and thanks for that introduction. I've been a union man since I got out of high school. I bypassed college or it bypassed me. And I'm one of probably some thousands of union organizers out here that are grinding away. But of course, we're never heard from. We're invisible. The media avoids us. They would rather select other people to speak for us and spin their tales, sometimes correctly, sometimes not.

But it's important to hear from some of the actual organizers on the ground because things are changing, and it's long overdue. It was already mentioned here that significant - not dramatic - but significant uptick in strike struggle is the result of strikes that have been suppressed for so long. And you bargain as best you can, but the laws of the land are weak that protect workers and would enforce the laws, and they're not enforced. So the strike struggle is overdue. I don't think that there has been anything but righteousness associated with the Writers Guild strike, Screen Actors, the railroad strike, which was broken by Biden's foul hand. And we're certainly facing a strike struggle at UPS.

My union, UE, has just ended a two-month strike at the biggest locomotive manufacturing plant in the United States, Wabtec up in Erie, Pennsylvania. And in my time after I retired from the UE, which was hard for me to do, but I returned to a union where I had been first when I was a teenager. That was the Amalgamated Transit Union. I went back as the organizing director and the field director. It was a moment in time that I saw and I grabbed it. The ring only comes around infrequently in life. I became the organizing director and was the most successful new organizing director in the recent history—at least, in the living memory of that union.

I began to sense that there were changes afoot—demographic, political, overdue, piled-up business that workers were finally being forced to respond to. The first 30 years of my time in the labor movement was almost all defensive, fighting one rear guard action after the other, trying to hang on to whatever we could hang on to. But then here we come into the current decade that we begin to see some offensive action. One of the things I explained to the *Corporate Crime Reporter* that we had done in my time at ATU (Amalgamated Transit Union) was when Larry Hanley, president of that union was still alive. He, myself, and long established US organizer, Richard Bensinger, put our heads together and decided we need to experiment with something more bold, more aggressive, and to set an example, and pull some folks along with us. So we began a small organizing school—an informal collective we called the Inside Organizing School. We began it at the very end of 2017. And it was an unusual school in that it was initially sponsored by the

Amalgamated Transit Union. It was a multi-union school. And one of the things we did was to put a very heavy emphasis on designing campaigns where we could send people into these workplaces to help with “salting.” [a union pays someone to apply for work within a targeted campaign to begin union organizing.] It's nothing we invented. It's as old as the trade union movement. I had been a salt in six different workplaces when I was young enough to have the energy to do that kind of thing.

It's really, as you said, Ralph, a way to move it along faster. It is not a substitute for a trade union leadership to seriously launch campaigns and organizing. But it is at least something we can do as the left wing in the labor movement, whatever there is of it, to push on the union and to initiate campaigns. So, we ended up having a number of successful campaigns by pulling together seasoned, experienced, aggressive trade union organizers with frankly, some of the younger faces that are emerging by the hundreds of thousands from the workplaces, from the colleges. And we see them throughout society playing their role as new leftists, and by combining some of these folks with an experienced eye and we were able to initiate tremendous amount of trade union activity, Starbucks among it. I was just as surprised as anyone else that it caught on.

We're responding to is a younger workforce that is assessing the future that is bleak for them, unless there's some movement building and trade union struggle conducted to push back against these employers and push back against these degraded and degenerate governmental forces who sponsored these corporate forces. Everyone here knows that none of these situations exist absent support from the government or at worst, total neglect.

Ralph Nader: We're going to talk about the anti-union laws led by the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, which the Democrats made no serious effort since then to repeal when they were controlling Congress. But the tide of public opinion has turned in favor of labor unions now. Majority of the American people have a favorable view of unions, even though not more than one out of ten workers in the US belongs to a union. Another poll showed that the vast majority of the working class, between 70% and 80%, would gladly join a trade union if the opportunity presented itself.

What most people don't realize is you can have a successful union drive in a workplace, a factory or a chain store locations, and the union can be certified by the National Labor Relations Board. But nothing happens unless there's a contract negotiated and signed by the employers and the union. And that's where the hurdle really emerges, because after an exhausting effort to combat union busting efforts by corporate law firms infiltrating workplaces and dividing and ruling, spreading a lot of propaganda and fear, the petition drive succeeds and it gets certified as a union, the employers can start delaying negotiation for months and years. And one of the reasons this is possible is because we have the most anti-union laws in the Western world. So what would you do if you were telling Congress to reform the labor laws? How would you do it?

Chris Townsend: There would be a number of things, and I'll just build out some of the awful truth there about what it is. We have seen in recent decades a dramatic decrease in the number of union elections.

Now, let's get it on the record: You only get a union election when you've already run through the withering fire from the employer. Virtually none of these employers in the United States will

respect your right to organize, yet we continue to run our organizing school. I open the school by declaring what everyone agrees about, which is the workplace in the United States is a dictatorship. And if you're willing to challenge that dictatorship—to create a rebellion against it—you might be able to build a union. If you look at the statistics, the number of elections - most of the small number of campaigns that actually get that far are incinerated, liquidated, poison gassed, fired, terminated out of existence before you ever get that election. But if you get that election, the labor movement is winning about half of those elections, depending on which statistics you want to use.

That may seem encouraging to some, but if you study the size of the units that are voting in those elections—the size of the units has dramatically shrunk in those workplaces compared to 30 and 50 years ago. So, we're bitten from both ends. Fewer elections are being run, and most of those elections, include far fewer people. So, of course, with a very aggressive and pathologically anti-union corporate elite in this country, we've seen what some would call the decline of the labor movement, but the deliberate destruction of the labor movement. And it leaves us in this situation where you come to the politicians—and there are many things they can do, but vast majority of which they won't do. Everyone here is aware that the Democrats have had a majority for at least two years in four recent presidents, but they will not move the kinds of legislation that we need to at least begin to address the labor rights crisis in this country.

We also have a situation where—and I laugh out loud when Joe Biden puts the crown on his head like Napoleon here and declares himself to be the most union president in the history of the United States, which is absurd on its face. This man doesn't do anything. He went up to Michigan because Donald Trump was going to beat him there. He didn't do it. But this man could do many, many things as the president to enforce--

Ralph Nader: For example?

Chris Townsend: Starbucks, Amazon, and I could mention 150 others engaged in systematic repression of the workers' rights—violation of the law on a wholesale basis. Where is the Department of Justice investigating this conspiracy to massively repress people's rights? Maybe some legal scholars would sit around and profess they don't know if that's really against the law. But that's the law that matters to working people and matters to the labor movement. President Biden could put that machinery into motion by becoming incredibly aggressive.

He could summon these CEOs to the White House and read them the Riot Act. Now, let's get it on the record that he crushed, cynically and ruthlessly, the railroad strike, a strike that was 40 years overdue, a strike where workers, in large measure, were voting to be able to take a day off. So we see industrial serfdom in that industry has returned. What did Biden do? He undermined the strike. He could have led that strike. After his trip to Michigan his handlers, maybe realized that had they led that railroad strike from the top, it would have been incredibly popular, incredibly successful, and he would have actually looked like a legitimate leader. But instead, he tried to have it both ways.

He likes to talk a little bit about it, but he doesn't want to actually do anything like putting the machinery into motion to prosecute this wave of corporate crime. Of course, Ralph, your entire

career, you've seen how they let off the gas pedal, so to speak, when it comes to actually enforcing law. Same problem is with the labor rights situation.

Ralph Nader: But one of the abuses that you're talking about is that companies regularly fire the leaders of union organizing efforts in the workplace. And under the weak labor laws, if the fired worker can afford a lawyer and get reinstated, all they do is get back pay, and that may take three, four years. So it's almost never a situation where these fired workers are reinstated. And he hasn't spoken out against that from the White House.

Chris Townsend: Exactly, and adding a little bit to what you brought up, workers are fired in a shockingly high number of union organizing drives. Frequently, that information is never collected because the union drive may never even get out of the crib. It may not even make the statistics. As a 44-year union organizer, as a worker in the shop, and as a staff organizer in several unions, I have personally seen thousands of workers fired. In 2018, I lived in Alexandria, Virginia. I was organizing director at my union, the ATU, where we organized the city-owned private bus company. And it was one whale of a fight in a city completely controlled by Democrats. Let's get that on the record. But once we won that election, after enormous expenditure confronting rank racist union busting and we succeeded in winning just for spite, the employer, the DASH Bus System in Alexandria, fired both of our union NLRB National Labor Relations Board) election observers. Even though they had lost the election, they fired both of them. Only one of those workers went back to work; the other walked away and said the heck with it.

But the piece that I wanted to add, Ralph, to what you had said, even if a worker today, when they're fired, has the stamina to hold their breath long enough to go through the sometimes multi-year NLRB legal process to eventually find that they're being ordered back to work. First of all, many employers appeal that for more years, or even if they are ruled back to work and the employer consents, that worker is only awarded back pay minus their earnings. What is earnings? Unemployment compensation or other jobs that they had. Frequently, workers aren't entitled to any backpay, or any significant backpay.

Ralph Nader: Let's be very realistic here. I don't think there can be a labor union movement in the United States under present federal laws. There are too many hurdles, too many delays, and too many licenses for these corporations to bust up the situation. They have endless money to pay specialized corporate law firms who are skilled at infiltrating, intimidating, and obstructing essentially defenseless workers who have no backing trying to organize a factory or a chain store. I don't think it's possible. And I'm amazed listening to what the AFL puts out, what labor union leaders put out. They almost never mention card check; they never mention repealing Taft-Hartley. They don't force the Democrats— who get elected in no small part because of union support— to put these labor law reforms in place.

I had a meeting with Richard Trumka when he was head of the AFL-CIO, and he told me that during the John Kerry candidacy against George W. Bush in 2004, he said, just give me card check and I'll organize huge numbers of workers. And Kerry said, yes, I will support, if elected, card check. And Obama said, yes, I would support card check, and they never said anything after that. Now, tell the American people what card check is and how it could facilitate union organizing.

Chris Townsend: Card check is an alternative to an election. Everyone says, an election sounds like a fair way to do it, but it's not. The workplace is a dictatorship; it is inherently coercive to have to work for somebody. You have very few rights, even if they were enforced. You don't run things, and you don't challenge the employer. After being hired, you do what they tell you to do. You have no control over that hiring process. So once you're there, you're at their mercy.

So continuing to pretend that these union elections are somehow legitimate, is preposterous. I blame, in many cases, the labor leadership in this country for allowing this farce to play out as long as it has. In order to explode the illegitimacy, the lopsided nature of these so-called union elections, what election can you think of where there are two sides, the pro-union side and the anti-union side. And one side, the employee, doesn't even have the right to participate in the election.

No Democrat, no Republican would ever accept the kind of election conditions for their own election that we as workers are forced to accept, where one side, the employer, can pay people to sit through your speeches, can sit there and be subjected to your threat. That one side in that equation can physically fire people and remove them and punish people, intimidate them, and then at the end of that process claim that somehow this is a fair process. It's nonsense. I don't know who believes that nonsense. I sure don't, and most workers don't believe it either. So card check would mean an expedited process where the very act of signing a union card and joining the union would then be tallied up and legitimate.

Ralph Nader: Is this what they do in Western countries? They don't have these rigged elections; they just have a majority the workers sign up or a supermajority sign up. Isn't that true?

Chris Townsend: In some countries, yes. And even in the United States, the card check process, where if a majority of workers have signed a union card as checked against the payroll sheet i.e., the number of employees, the union is granted recognition. That happens in the U.S. occasionally in certain situations, even a little bit in the public sector. But the promotion of that as a tactic, as a structural change, is not promoted here, as you found out, it is lost.

Again, I hold the labor leadership responsible at all levels, what's left of this movement of ours, for not keeping this issue in front of the politicians that they fund and help get elected. But this is forgotten. Card check is not even talked about anymore. And you had mentioned a few minutes ago, Ralph, the Taft-Hartley Act, which would not be the only problem we face, but it contains as a package, some of the very disruptive facets.

Ralph Nader: Let's talk about Taft-Hartley in the context of the current UAW strike, the auto workers' strikes that's starting against the auto companies. Let's talk about the ban on secondary boycotts in Taft-Hartley, which prevents other unions from helping beleaguered unions, trying to get a better contract for a decent livelihood. Tell us about the now illegal, secondary boycott.

Chris Townsend: It's where picketers from the struck plant travel to other corporations' workplaces that were doing business with their company and then picketing them and asking for support from their workers, perhaps staging a strike in sympathy [a solidarity strike]. This was a common and very effective tactic that was banned as part of the reaction against the 1946 strike

wave that came together by 1948 as what became known as the Taft-Hartley Act. And that's one of many destructive, insidious aspects.

The whole phenomenon of what's known as "right to work." The fact that a union is unable to compel the workers in— that's about 26 or seven states now on the private side— to contribute anything financially towards the cost of representing them even though those workers have the complete freedom to demand representation. They receive everything that is negotiated, but there's no financial obligation. Anyway, that right to work phenomenon is another dastardly component of the right to work package of really destructive legislative attacks on labor.

But again, I don't recall the last time, other than my union UE, I was also a 25-year staff with the United Electrical, they remember Taft-Hartley. They think about it. It has meaning to them. I don't know how many other unions or union leaderships even think about this anymore.

Ralph Nader: What's wrong with the leadership of the AFL-CIO ensconced in that big building on 16th Street in Washington, D.C., a block from the White House? We don't see a recognition of the conflict that they're in. They represent union workers who don't have to worry about the minimum wage of \$7.25 an hour, federal. They represent union workers who usually have pretty good health insurance plans. So how do you expect them to represent the 90% of the workers who are not unionized and are being driven into the ground, many of them in so many ways with minimal benefits, non-livable wages and so on? How do you expect the AFL-CIO to turn around if they're not surrounded by pickets of workers saying, you're not representing us, you're not fighting for us, you're following the corporate Democrats. You don't talk about \$15 minimum wage except for SEIU, which started the effort and showed what could be done. What's wrong with these people in this big building on 16th Street? Give us your forthright reaction to that, Chris. You know a lot about what's going on there.

Chris Townsend: Well, I would submit that the vast majority of working people in the United States have no idea what the AFL-CIO is. The small percentage that do, might have an opinion about it. The labor leadership in this country is invisible. And that was somewhat of an annoyance for them up until the last decade or two. The leadership of the AFL-CIO is the sum of its 60 [national and international] affiliate unions that comprise the AFL-CIO federation of unions. And there are several officers and leaders now led by Liz Shuler from the Brotherhood of Electrical Workers; these folks conduct the business and act as de facto spokespersons for the labor movement. They've been submerged into invisibility, and I think they're very comfortable with it.

We know that the Democratic Party has a hotline to the AFL-CIO building. And we know that an unknown but significant number— unknown because it's never released or made public—but a significant number of the executive council of the AFL are members of the Democratic National Committee. I've never been able to find out who sits on that Democratic National Committee or how many labor leaders are on it. But the organizational tentacles of the Democratic Party reach deeply into a growing number of unions, which leads to the farcical record-early endorsement of Joe Biden 17 months out from the election on a voice vote with no debate and no announcement that it was going to come up. And then it was a rush job to not even talk about.

Ralph Nader: And didn't ask anything in return. It was unconditional support for Joe Biden without anything in return.

Chris Townsend: That's right. Which says something about the bargaining skills of these so-called union leaders. My understanding was there was possibly one or two dissenting voice votes and then it was immediately put to bed. Almost no trace of it could be found. This is just another visual reminder of how subordinated the general trend of the labor leadership is to the Democratic Party. If you corner and talk to any of these folks, most of them will confess readily that we're in a bind, that the Democrats are unreliable and that they won't produce or don't produce, or maybe they bailed out my union once, or they passed this or that, which we want to recognize and it's helpful. Those things are worthy of note. But the general trend is complete neglect or even joining in on the beating. And the fact that the AFL-CIO sat still as Biden crushed the railroad strike, is one of the most shameful chapters in recent years, and some of them even tried to rationalize it, and that strike was righteous, and long overdue. Those four corporations, some monopoly industry of epic proportions, that industry is so overdue for a convulsion like a labor strike.

Ralph Nader: And they're endangering the public. As the crash in Ohio showed, they want to reduce the number of people running a train to one. It's now two or three, these freight trains, and what's at stake here is the existence of American labor. The global corporations want to replace all of them with robots, artificial intelligence, whatever you want to call it. They don't make any bones about it. Jeff Bezos would like to have the whole warehouse run by robots. They don't like workers. Robots don't make any demands. And that's part of what the United Auto Workers are fighting against, that they're going to lose their jobs, never mind not get adequate pay.

I like the speeches that are being made by Shawn Fain, head of the United Auto Workers (UAW). He's bringing in the executive salaries. Mary Barra makes \$29 million a year, the highest ever paid auto executive, which comes up to maybe 14, \$15,000 an hour. And they're paying low-tiered auto workers 20-22 bucks an hour. And veteran auto workers maybe up to 33 bucks an hour compared to Barra's over \$14,000 an hour, not including benefits and perks. There's a long history; the UAW had weak leadership; they had some corruption. There was the taxpayer bailout of General Motor's bankruptcy, under Obama in 2012. And the UAW had to agree to two tiers, where the younger workers started out doing the same work as the older workers, but getting much less pay, not to mention other concessions the union had to make. So this is makeup time for the UAW, which is why they have so much support around the country for what they're doing, and they're not just fighting for themselves. But the view ahead is very worrisome in the sense that once you get away from home health workers, plumbers and electricians, they're trying to automate everything, including white collar jobs—no longer just blue collar jobs, if they can't export the jobs under these corporate-managed trade agreements to fascist and communist dictatorships overseas who know how to put their workers in their place. So it all comes down to whether this is going to become not just a labor movement, Chris, but a political movement that enlists all Americans who have a stake here in having decent livelihoods and de-concentrating a corporate-dominated economy into local economies where they're not controlled by absentee rulers in London, Tokyo, Chicago, New York and what have you. What do you see there in terms of turning the labor movement into a political movement at election time?

Chris Townsend: I could not be more proud of relatively new President Shawn Fain from the Auto Worker. Any of you who followed the twists and turns that played out in that union, which led to his election, would have to be elated. And what we're seeing with this strike is finally the unleashing of the righteous anger of the huge swath of the membership in that union for what has been done to them over the last 40 years. Biden and his handlers discover that this big slice of the workforce that has been ignored at best, or that Democrats even participated in abusing over the decades at work, will suddenly find out that their probable opponent Trump is going to go out and get there a day ahead, so they had to run and catch up.

And we all saw how long Biden spent on the picket line—mere minutes. But that he went is worthy of note. But the issue here is what is he going to do to compel these corporations to concede to these workers' just, reasonable demands. Beyond that, Ralph, as you point out, the history of auto negotiations is not complicated. It's the history of all manufacturing negotiations. The employers have already decided they are leaving. It's just a matter of how quickly they do it. It should get on the record. There's more auto workers in Mexico today than in the United States unionized or unorganized. And this is the political neglect or willing conspiracy with these big companies to deindustrialize the United States. It's a process that's been very successful in my lifetime, and it has a way to go, but it seems to be doing so.

One of the things that the Biden administration needs to do is put tremendous pressure on the unorganized corporations to allow their workforces to organize if they want to, and most of them would, and again, to insert into that situation and prevent the union busting and whatnot that all of the unorganized auto companies use. I'll remind everyone that just a few months ago in Buffalo, New York, the Tesla Corporation fired 40 workers in one of their plants. Boom—crushed the union drive in five minutes. That'll never be adjudicated to any great effect.

Instead that corporation is fed the mother's milk of subsidies that are difficult to comprehend. So the bad behavior is actually rewarded in many cases by these political leaders. And this auto strike is really the creation of the Biden administration in some part, because of their virtually unlimited subsidy of the electrical vehicle industry, which the United Auto Workers is not opposed to. But it realizes is what good is it to bargain for a contract with the Big Three, settle it, have the first paycheck come with the improvements, and then see another third of UAW members laid off with plant closings and transfers to unorganized plants?

It's a much more comprehensive crime being committed against working people. And as long as we get meaningless platitudes, such as the ridiculous "you should have a fair contract" when what we need is a real serious presidential effort to rein in this wave of corporate crime.

Ralph Nader: Let's talk about the workers themselves. About 40% of union workers voted for Trump in 2020, after they knew that his promises in 2016 were as phony as a \$3 bill. And his whole business career was anti-worker and anti-union to begin with. And let's say he sold him a bill of goods with his bloviated rhetoric in 2016, what's the excuse for 40% of the unions voting for Trump in 2020? Is it because the union leaders are not educating the rank-and-file? They don't meet with him, they don't have like they used to in the old days, book clubs. The union newspapers are extinct. It used to go out weekly. How do you explain—you certainly don't exonerate that kind of political masochism, do you, on the behalf of 40% of the union workers?

Chris Townsend: In certain unions it's more than 40%. And listeners may not know that most unions conduct extensive polling of their members That calls into question what kind of a union leader would have to poll their members to get connected to them or find out what they're thinking. But the modern large union will do this. I suppose it has its merits. And when these polls come back—this is something that's gone on for several decades at least—that's very worrisome for many of the union leaders, because they *see* large sections of their membership who are supporting overtly anti-union politicians like Trump's, for instance.

But I'll tell the my own personal story. On January 5th, 2021, the day before the fascist hordes stormed the Capitol, I called the president of the Amalgamated Transit Union, [John Costa]. And I said we have to do something to educate our members. We knew that there was a large section of our members in the ATU that were sympathetic or supportive of Trump, so were we doing? Are we going to run an educational campaign? Are we going to make a systematic effort to go out and engage in conversation about the political realities? But nothing was done. And in most of the unions, nothing was done and nothing will be done.

They leave the members up for grabs. They don't make any effort to connect with them. They cancel their magazines. They cancel their newspapers. They post a website and just say, go online and you'll learn everything you need to know. It's woeful neglect that has led to this situation where we cannot—there may only be eight and a half/9% of the workforce that's unionized, but we can't count all of those folks as active, conscious union leaders and supporters. We see this erosion when our leadership so systematically neglects the education [of rank and file members].

And we have to oppose and struggle against this two-party trap that we're in. But first of all, we have to recognize it. It won't ever be challenged if it's not recognized. And this is a perversion of democracy; it's certainly nothing that has ever served working people, and it needs to be challenged. But if you never engage in conversation with rank and file members and their extended families about how this system is structured to work against them, it only becomes an every two or four year personality contest or beauty contest, which leads to this debased situation.

Ralph, a few minutes ago you mentioned the public relations polls that indicate that trade unions are held in much higher regard than they have been in recent decades. That same polling will reveal the lowest status that the presidential world has ever had of either party. People no longer look to the political leadership for very much authenticity or legitimacy. The standing of the actual union leadership amongst their own members, by those same polls, reveals that union leadership has also eroded and become debased, because there's no bold, imaginative, and certainly no progressive leadership to address these issues.

As we see with Shawn Fain in the Auto Workers, if you provide sensible leadership that deals with workers' realities, they will follow. We saw that in Rail up to the point until it was busted. Sean O'Brien at Teamsters put an immense machine into operation, told Joe Biden, and settled a very improved contract over what they would have had. But when labor leadership is lazy, unimaginative, rarely challenged, has a very timid view and a very limited worldview, and sees their role more as administrators as opposed to leaders—this is the modern situation we face. We don't have much of a leadership, sadly. And the administrative group has administered the decline.

Ralph Nader: When the Democrats started taking money from Wall Street, they took the great economic issues off the table. That created a vacuum for the cultural issues, which the Republicans were delighted in exploiting, including Trump, who, by the way, was heard to say during a 2016 campaign, "American workers are overpaid." And he wrecked the National Labor Relations Board, when selected by the Electoral College, he became president, and he continued to freeze the minimum wage and opposed any efforts on Capitol Hill to raise it. Still 40% of the workers are voting for him, even according to 2023 polls. So there's a lot of work to be done, a lot of interpersonal meetings in union halls, what's left of them, a lot of connection in the neighborhoods. It's got to become a political electoral movement if we're going to have anything that we call a labor movement.

We're out of time. We've been talking with outstanding labor organizer Chris Townsend. And we want to continue on these themes in the coming months, Chris. Can you tell our listeners how they can contact you if you have a website?

Chris Townsend: Our Inside Organizing School, does not have a website. We've grown the thing by word of mouth only, and it has sustained over six years, bigger than ever.

Ralph Nader: In other words, you do person-to-person organizing and not remote type of organizing, if there's such a thing. And you make Russell Mokhiber, the editor of the *Capitol Hill Citizen*, very happy because he believes in print and getting it to people so they can hold it in their own hands, talk to one another, and not be sucked into all the mismatch and distraction and nastiness of the internet. Thank you, Chris Townsend. We want to have you on again later to elaborate on more dimensions of the kind of agitation organization that's going on at various large corporate workplaces. Thank you, Chris.

Chris Townsend: Thank you.

Steve Skrovan: We've been speaking with Chris Townsend. We will link to his work at ralphnaderradiohour.com. Up next, we're going to have a little free form conversation with Ralph about various topics. But first, let's check in with our Corporate Crime Reporter, Russell Mokhiber.

Russell Mokhiber: From the National Press Building in Washington, D.C., this is your *Corporate Crime Reporter Morning Minute* for Friday, October 6, 2023. I'm Russell Mokhiber.

The UK Education Secretary, Gillian Keegan, is ordering all mobile phones banned from schools. Gillian Keegan will order schools to outlaw smartphones during lessons, and also on breaks, in a bid to end disruption and make it easier for pupils to focus.

"Keegan believes that mobile phones pose a serious challenge in terms of distraction, disruptive behavior, and bullying," a government source told the *Daily Mail* newspaper. "It is one of the biggest issues that children and teachers have to grapple with, so she will set out a way forward to empower teachers to ban mobiles from classrooms."

For the *Corporate Crime Reporter*, I'm Russell Mokhiber.

Steve Skrovan: Thank you, Russell. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. I'm Steve Skrovan, along with David Feldman, Hannah Feldman, and Ralph.

Okay, Ralph, we want to talk about a few things before we go. First up, David?

David Feldman: Ralph, there was an interview with you in the *Washington Post* that some people misconstrued. You were quoted as saying, "We are stuck with Biden now." And then you said, "I know the difference between fascism and autocracy. I'll take autocracy anytime."

What did you mean by that?

Ralph Nader: I meant that the Trumpster GOP is a fascist party. They believe in the corporate state, repression of the vote, censoring curriculum, censoring books, and violent talk. They want to distort elections even beyond what they're distorted already. They have positions openly restricting the child safety net, like the child tax credit that cut child poverty in half until the Republicans blocked its extension in January 2022. They've come out against women's issues, and are clearly against a significant minimum wage. Some of them don't even believe in a minimum wage at all. They're against worker health and safety regulations. They want to protect the massive tax cuts so the super-rich and the big corporations pay less—a lower rate on the tax schedule than a working plumber or electrician or even a teacher; they are all for a bloated military budget. They say Wall Street can do no wrong, and they amplify Wall Street in a variety of restrictions on civil liberties and civil rights.

And while the Democrats are bad, and I said in the article that Biden was terrible on Wall Street and Empire, they don't go that far. So there's always a little wiggle room under autocracy to start the process of reversing. But the repression under fascism is pretty total and becomes extremely dictatorial.

The one thing I said was that the Democrats don't suppress speech, and a couple of your emailers took me up on that. What I meant was the Democratic Party. They don't suppress curriculums in schools, ban books and suppress the vote. But to give the listeners credit, they do suppress candidates of third parties, and that is suppression of freedom. And I should have qualified that. But sometimes you do all these qualifications being interviewed by a reporter, but they never appear in print because of space, and they want space for photographs and all that.

But on this one, I should have qualified it. The Republicans are very adamant and determined in repressing the vote in all kinds of ways. We know them; they've been published. But the Democrats haven't gotten enough blame for repressing candidates that might give them a minor challenge from a Green Party or some other party and make our democracy more competitive at election time, and they should be denounced for that.

David Feldman: Has the majoritarian strain always been there in this country, but are now amplified through social media and podcasts?

Ralph Nader: Yeah, because the Constitution is written to support minority rights. That's what the First Amendment is all about, to protect dissent. But it went overboard with the Electoral College, where you can get a minority of votes nationally and still get elected president, as the Republicans did in 2016, for Donald Trump for George W. Bush in 2000. In 2016 Trump lost the national popular vote, but won the Electoral College vote. That is a very pronounced bias in favor of minority rule right at the top of the political ladder. But as some listeners suggested, wrongfully, I never said vote for Biden. I believe that people should vote their conscience regardless. I don't believe in tactical voting, because that gets down to subordinating yourself to the least worst of the two-party duopoly.

But when we're talking about the 2024 election, it's not just the presidency that's up. It's the House of Representatives, the Senate, governors of states, state legislators, local elected officials in cities and towns, villages around the country. And you got to decide as a voter, where you want to put your modest pressure or send your modest signal? And it's best to vote your conscience.

Hannah Feldman: Ralph, could you clarify what autocracy is, in case to the casual reader, autocracy and fascism might seem synonymous. Could you clarify what the distinction is?

Ralph Nader: Autocracy has many faces, and one of them is to restrict electoral candidates. So one aspect of Democratic Party autocracy is they work overtime to keep parties like the Green Party off the ballot, which is a violation of their First Amendment rights, among other things, to speak freely, petition and assemble as candidates. And the Democrats have helped to mature the corporate state in Washington. They've allowed Washington to be taken over when they're in charge more and more by Wall Street. They put in nominees coming from corporate firms into positions of regulatory and cabinet power. Look who they put in as head of the Federal Reserve, Secretary of the Treasury, and the current Secretary of Defense is from Raytheon Corporation, as executive of that, manufacturer of weapons of mass destruction in Massachusetts. And they have opposed agendas in their party plank to go after corporate crime, fraud and abuse. They don't take a stand against the takeover of Medicare and Medicaid by corporate contractors, especially under the Medicare (Dis)Advantage program; the examples can go on and on, Hannah. They have been shoulder to shoulder—not entirely because they have a good Federal Trade Commission now and a good head of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau—but on the really big issues of Empire and Wall Street, they're really shoulder to shoulder with the GOP in maturing an ever deeper corporate state.

As I said previously, when President Franklin Roosevelt sent a message to Congress in 1938 to establish a commission to investigate concentration of corporate power in our country, he added the phrase warning Congress that - and I'm paraphrasing him - *when private power controls public government, that is fascism*. He used that word.

Hannah Feldman: Just to follow up, would it be wrong to say that about the Democrats and autocracy, that they're promoting their own selfish interests, whereas the Republicans, the fascists are more actively out to get us, is what I'm taking from this. Are the Republicans selfish or are they actually malicious?

Ralph Nader: They are malicious, obviously. You can see that in how they treat minorities, how they try to block people from voting in certain districts and precincts. Their language is in accordance with that prejudice. The bias against immigrants goes way beyond abusing the asylum right by immigrants. There's no doubt about the difference on that score.

But on the ownership of the commons by the American people, the public lands, public airways, the Democrats are just like the Republicans. They shove it over to control by corporations, radio, TV stations, timber, gas, oil, coal companies, and public lands. There's a whole list of examples where the Democrats have disgraced their earlier heritage decades ago as being somewhat in favor of working families and their rights.

Hannah Feldman: Democrats will eat me if they catch me, but Republicans are actively hunting me?

Ralph Nader: Yeah, you can put it that way. The Democrats let the corporations take over, and so do the Republicans. But the Republicans are harassing more and more of the people by intimidating and blocking them from voting, and making clear that they want them out of the arena of power, except those that rubber-stamp the Trumpster Party line.

Steve Skrovan: Speaking of Republicans, Ralph, yesterday you tweeted out "The eight renegade GOP members who voted against Kevin McCarthy are consummate hypocrites. They say it's to stop excessive spending, mostly on the social safety net, yet didn't challenge massive corporate tax cuts, corporate welfare bonanzas and fraud against the government."

Ralph Nader: All of which expands the deficit, which is supposed to be their concern. And that was clearly stated on C-Span recently in an interview of Congressman Bob Good from Virginia, the area of Thomas Jefferson, ironically. And all he could do is talk about excessive federal spending, and the moderator never asked him these question.

If you're worried about deficits, what about all these tax cuts on the super-rich big corporations? What about hundreds of billions of dollars a year shoveled out to corporate welfare in the form of bailouts, handouts, giveaways, and subsidies? What about the \$60 billion a year fraud on Medicare, and the fraud on the military contracting process, et cetera? He didn't mention it. And C-Span never asked these kinds of questions. They just let these politicians bloviate without asking fair and critical questions and following up.

Steve Skrovan: Ralph, talk specifically what's going on in the House of Representatives with former Speaker McCarthy.

Ralph Nader: Eight defiant Republican members of the House, amazing energy. Imagine if we had eight progressive members of the House with that kind of energy. They pulled the rug out from Kevin's majority, and so he ended up with a slight minority, and he could not defeat them, so they ousted him. Here's what people need to know. A speaker under our Constitution can be selected from anybody in the country.

They don't have to be members of the House of Representatives. They could phone up Newt Gingrich, heaven forbid, and say, we want to vote for you to become speaker. Come on down. Or they could call former Governor Christine Todd Whitman, a liberal Republican of New Jersey, and say we want to have you as a speaker. They could call up Steve Skrovan, Hannah Feldman, David Feldman and say, do you want to be speaker.

Steve Skrovan: Now you're talking, Ralph. Now you're talking.

Ralph Nader: See? So a lot of people don't know that. The second thing is, in Article 1, Section 5 of the Constitution, a two thirds majority of the House can expel Matt Gaetz and Bob Good and the other renegades. They could just expel them from the House with a two-thirds vote. And, they could get two-thirds because Republican supporters are outraged about Speaker McCarthy, and they're the vast majority of Republicans in the House. And the Democrats would like to get rid of the renegade Republicans. So we'll see how that plays out in the coming struggle. But I have to believe that this is going to damage the Republicans in the election next year.

Steve Skrovan: I want to thank our guest again, Chris Townsend. For those of you listening on the radio, that's our show. For you podcast listeners, stay tuned for some bonus material we call "The Wrap Up", featuring Francesco DeSantis and "In Case You Haven't Heard". A transcript of this program will appear on the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* Substack site soon after the episode is posted.

David Feldman: Subscribe to us on our *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* YouTube channel. And for Ralph's weekly column, you can get it for free by going to nader.org. For more from Russell Mokhiber, go to corporatecrimereporter.com.

Steve Skrovan: The American Museum of Tort Law has gone virtual. Go to tortmuseum.org to explore the exhibits, take a virtual tour and learn about iconic tort cases from history.

David Feldman: The producers of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour* are Jimmy Lee Wirt and Matthew Marran. Our executive producer is Alan Minsky.

Steve Skrovan: Our theme music, "Stand Up, Rise Up", was written and performed by Kemp Harris. Our proofreader is Elisabeth Solomon. Our associate producer is Hannah Feldman. Our social media manager is Steven Wendt.

David Feldman: Join us next week on the 501st episode of the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. Thank you, Ralph.

Ralph Nader: Thank you, everybody. Keep reading, keep thinking, keep buying books. The online progressive bookstore in our country that I would recommend so you don't have to go to Amazon, is at *CounterPunch*. Look it up.