

## RALPH NADER RADIO HOUR EPISODE 487 TRANSCRIPT

**Steve Skrovan:** Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. My name is Steve Skrovan along with my co-host, David Feldman. Hello, David.

**David Feldman:** Good morning.

**Steve Skrovan:** And the man of the hour, Ralph Nader. Hello, Ralph.

**Ralph Nader:** Hello, everybody.

**Steve Skrovan:** On today's program, we're going to talk about storytelling and power. One of the most resilient myths in America is that the rich and powerful are rich and powerful because they earned it, that we too can earn wealth and power, and that if we have no wealth and no power, we have nobody to blame but ourselves. The narrative that we can all pick ourselves up by our bootstraps is a pernicious delusion. It ignores the reality that every rich and powerful person owes their success to the systems that created and maintained favorable conditions, and in particular, the people who supported them along the way.

Disney is a company known for fantastical storytelling on the screen, but there is a darker reality in the story of how they treat their workers. Our first guest today will be social activist and documentary filmmaker, Abigail Disney. In her latest film, *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*, she turns a critical eye on her own family business and tries to separate fact from fiction, and the facts are not pretty. That's just the first half of the show. In the second half, Ralph once wrote a fable entitled, *Only the Super-Rich Can Save Us!*, which is its own fantastical tale of a group of rich people deciding to band together and use their resources to attain justice for all. Regular listeners of this program may know of a real group of rich people who decided to band together and use their resources to attain justice for all, which brings us to our second guest.

We welcome back Erica Payne, co-founder of the Patriotic Millionaires, who of all things, horror of horrors, are fighting for their right to be taxed more! Miss Payne is the co-author with Morris Pearl of *Tax the Rich: How Lies, Loopholes and Lobbyists Make the Rich Even Richer*. Today we're going to talk with her about their latest strategy – organizing and teaching working-class voters how to fight for their own interests, raise the minimum wage, and tax the rich. As always, somewhere in the middle we'll check in with our corporate crime reporter, Russell Mokhiber. But first, let's talk to a Disney who found out that no matter how much you wish upon a star or email Bob Iger, not all dreams come true. David?

**David Feldman:** Abigail Disney is a social activist, philanthropist, and an Emmy-winning documentary filmmaker. She's also Chair and Co-Founder of Level Forward, an ecosystem of storytellers, entrepreneurs, and social change-makers dedicated to balancing artistic vision, social impact, and stakeholder return. She also created the non-profit Peace is Loud, which uses storytelling to advance social movements, and the Daphne Foundation, which supports organizations working for a more equitable, fair, and peaceful New York City. She is Co-Founder of Fork Films, a non-fiction media production company, which produces original

documentaries and the podcast All Ears. Her latest film which she co-directed with Kathleen Hughes, is *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*. Welcome to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Abigail Disney.

**Abigail Disney:** Thanks so much.

**Ralph Nader:** Welcome indeed, Abigail. Before we get into the nitty-gritty here, and there are, as always, some skeptics for things that heirs and heiresses do when they see the light and want to change things. What is it that you're trying to communicate in all these different forms of media? And number two, what would you want the viewers and listeners of your media to do by way of action once they see the clear road ahead for change?

**Abigail Disney:** Well,-first of all, heirs and heiresses have gotten into a lot of trouble through the years trying to impose their will on the world. I think that my job, if I have one, is to impose the will of the world on the wealthy people, instead of the other way around. So, I'm trying to model what it looks like to not simply be loyal to the class or the position we're born into, but to be true to a wider world that we're a member of and, and to be that we're no better than anyone else. I'm trying to model what it looks like to step into your responsibilities for the things you have without earning them. And what I want people to do is listen to working people and recognize the very important social movement of the 20th and 21st centuries that involved workers standing up, and people standing up for expanding civil rights, and the dignity of regular people as opposed to prioritizing the will and the wants of the wealthy few.

**Ralph Nader:** And what would you like people to do? I hope you'll extend urging them to act all the way to Congress because a lot of things you want changed or repealed can only be done through Congress. So the laser beam focus of all this public education has got to be the focus on 535 men and women who put their shoes on every morning like we do.

**Abigail Disney:** Yeah, exactly. So much of this has to happen through Congress, but I also think that — and you remember this — especially from the day Ronald Reagan took office, the country has been subject to a great deal of public education that has taken it in the opposite direction — away from the union movement, away from respect for labor, and toward this highly individual, self-seeking vision of what it is to be a successful person. A certain amount of public education in the opposite direction has to happen. It's a heavy lift when you're pushing - and you'll forgive the language — bullshit, which is essentially what came out of the Reagan administration and everything since. And I think you don't have such a heavy lift for public education when what you're pushing is actually good for people and the truth. But I do think a certain amount of public education has to happen in order for Congress to be able and have the political wherewithal to do what they need to do. So, I'm trying to add to the chorus of voices out there saying that we need to listen to workers, because that strengthens the folks in Congress. And also, I'm trying to urge at a personal level wherever I can because I have this unfair level of access. I'm trying to use that to reverse the damage wealthy people have done.

**Ralph Nader:** I'm glad you referred to Reagan, because I think liberals and progressives underestimate the gigantic impact that this cruel man with a smile had on the culture with his mark of fundamentalism. You remember his phrase, "the magic of the marketplace"?

**Abigail Disney:** Yes.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, we put out a critique of market fundamentalism showing in over a dozen ways that the big corporations do everything they can to manipulate, destroy, collapse the market through monopolies and set unfair subsidies and tax escapes and deregulation and so on. So you might want to follow up that focus on Reagan with a more granular critique. And it's on our website, [nader.org](http://nader.org). It's a critique of market fundamentalism.

Well, let's go to the next issue here. One of my concerns about progressive groups is they don't connect with each other. They don't read each other's materials. So let me ask you. Have you connected with the increase taxes on the rich and corporations group called Patriotic Millionaires?

**Abigail Disney:** Yeah. I've been a member for years, and I try to speak up whenever they need me to speak up on anything. What Reagan accomplished in his very short eight years was so much. -It's interesting to me how often it dovetailed with the Walt Disney Company, because he made the announcement of his signature tax move at Disney World. It's kind of remarkable. He was there at the opening where he announced this big thing. Of course, Disney loved him. But the change, in not just the way we were taxing people, but the idea of what taxes were for and about and what an individual's responsibility was, especially as a wealthy person in terms of making sure everybody had opportunity. That was a very big piece of what he accomplished in those eight years.

**Ralph Nader:** The reason he accomplished it was the default of the Democratic Party, because they could have gone after him with powerful counter arguments: "You're deregulating protections that negatively impact people's lives – their health, their safety, and their economic well-being. Is that what you want?" But they just fell on the defensive, right when he pushed his tax cut and they never recovered during his eight-year administration.

**Abigail Disney:** There was a dramatic failure of leadership on the part of the Democratic Party, which then offered itself up for the neoliberal agenda into the '90s. Not only was it a failure to counter the market fundamentalist ideology, but it was also pulled it into the Democratic agenda. Under Clinton, an adjustment was made, which caused executive pay to skyrocket. He (Clinton) did not really push an agenda that was progressive at all, actually. He was a believer in the idea that markets fix all things.

**Ralph Nader:** Yeah, he pushed for these corporate-managed trade agreements. In the terrible year of 1996, which was an election year for him, he supported all kinds of bills to concentrate power in the drug industry, the communication industry, and the agribusiness industry. The book is yet to be written about what he (Clinton) allowed in 1996.

Let me ask you, do you make the distinction between charity and justice in your many speeches and communications?

**Abigail Disney:** Yes, I do.

**Ralph Nader:** How do you distinguish?

**Abigail Disney:** Well, charity is reaching out across a separation and an attempt to sprinkle something over the people there on the other side of some kind of Rubicon. It never really digs into the essence of the difference between you, which is only circumstantial; it's not essential. It's a matter of who has more money and was born with more resources. So, if you're not using that advantage you have to question the circumstances that have located you in such a separate place. Then sort of drizzling a little bit of nice — I think of it as like icing — over the top of the situation other people are in, isn't really helping. It's just sort of pouring into this sucking hole and never changes its circumstances. Real justice is asking yourself, "How do I use my money, my resources, my positional power to alter the system that put me in this place to begin with?"

**Ralph Nader:** Now, I know that the phrase “we have to make American capitalism work for everyone” is subject to misinterpretation by many people, but we have to raise it. You're quoted as saying, "We have to make American capitalism work for everyone." And then you add, "But with imagination and courage, it can be changed." First, distinguish for our audience the difference between corporate capitalism big-time and small-time Main Street business capitalism.

**Abigail Disney:** The Corporate capitalism that currently rules the day in America; it's a fundamentalism. You use the word fundamentalist. It's fundamentalist in the sense that it has reduced the idea of what a corporation's job is to one small task, which is the violence of every fundamentalism. It's a reduction and a narrowing rather than a broadening. So, the understanding that only shareholders matter because they own the company, and therefore what they need is paramount, has translated into any number of violences at the base of what makes a corporation move. If the CEO is unwilling to mop the bathroom but the bathroom must be mopped, then what the bathroom-mopping person is doing is essential. It must happen. And that person needs a fair wage for that freaking job.

Every time I ever spoke up about Disney, especially on Twitter, Disney would send a tweet to all my followers about its education program. That really summed it all up for me because tweeting about an education program for low-wage workers is like saying that you have no obligation whatsoever to pay people fairly unless they do something to make themselves more valuable to the corporation in which case we can have a conversation. It accepts the idea that this corporate version our capitalist system rests on the bones and the blood of the people who work at these low-wage jobs. And no one intends to change their circumstances in any kind of material way. So, if we look at capitalism more broadly as something that matters because it creates livelihoods, not jobs or gigs, but livelihoods for the people who work in them, because in doing so it creates a healthy interacting and relatively equal society. Unless we expand our idea of what capitalism is for and about, we're going to have the same result over and over again because it's always a race to the bottom to see who can squeeze the most lemon juice out of that little lemon.

**Ralph Nader:** Historically, our country has only been able to deal with corporate capitalism by expanding the public sector. That's like the public lands and the public airways and public

pensions, Social Security, Medicare, public drinking water systems and so forth. The other way they've done it is to regulate, put boundaries around corporate greed, which has an infinite capacity for greed. Look at the CEO pay that you point out – sometimes 800 times the average worker. Some of them are making \$50,000 an hour on a 40-hour week. So, do you see that? Or do you go beyond that? And then there's of course the commons. The greatest wealth in our country is owned by the people. It's called the public lands. It's called public research development. The public developed all these industries – Silicon Valley and aerospace and pharmaceutical and all the pension funds and the mutual funds, but they (the people) don't control it. People own it, but they let the corporations control it through their influence in Washington and state government. So, let's have your philosophy here. Would you just expand the public sector, toughen up regulation, law and order against corporate criminals, stopping corporate welfare or what?

**Abigail Disney:** Both have been assaulted so thoroughly that they're really on their last ebb. I've made content for public television and watched the horrible diminishment of the public airwaves over the years. In fact, my family was investing in broadcasting in the 1980s. I saw what happened when the Fairness Doctrine disappeared, and we opened up ownership to people like Rupert Murdoch. We have to take the airwaves back on behalf of the people who could benefit by them but right now are suffering at their hands. We need to take back a lot of the public resources that we have allowed (corporations to take). This is why corporations and the advocates for fundamentalist market capitalism have been very eager to push everything that they can into private hands rather than public hands, because then they don't have to be accountable to anybody for anything.

So, you have to expand the public sector. You have to revitalize the elements that still exist in the public sector, but you also have to have the regulation — we have to reinvigorate that. Look at how quickly the Republicans wanted to kill all the new IRS agents. They know that much of their power rises from the way they've been gaming the tax system. So, the rules are themselves benefiting wealthy people. But on top of it, they are adding to their benefits by escaping taxation in any way that they can. They're (the IRS) not auditing wealthy people because they don't feel equal to the kinds of accountants and lawyers that wealthy people can pay for. So, the first thing they went after the debt reconciliation thing was the IRS agents. So, we need to reinvigorate the IRS. We need to invigorate OSHA (Occupational Safety & Health Administration). We need to reinvigorate NLRB (National Labor Relations Board) and the other referees that have been made anemic by the constant assault of budget cuts.

**Ralph Nader:** We're talking with Abigail Disney, author, filmmaker, advocate, whistleblower on her company Disney, which we'll get to in just a couple of minutes. Do you agree with the phrase that when corporate capitalism gets into trouble by mismanagement, Wall Street collapse, speculation, corruption, criminality, always gets bailed out by American socialism?

**Abigail Disney:** Yeah, that's exactly right.

**Ralph Nader:** If that's the case, how many times do we have to go through these cycles where they collapse the banks or collapse the economy, as in 2008, have the taxpayers bail them out with no prosecution of the Wall Street crooks? How many times do we have to go through these

cycles — 8 million workers unemployed and the Wall Street collapse — before we want to make more fundamental change in the system, Abigail?

**Abigail Disney:** I wish I knew how many times we have to go through this. I suspect we're heading for another one soon. And I don't know what Joe Biden will do with something like that, but certainly Obama left homeowners high and dry and preferred to bail out the banks. And he was being sold an idea of the market - by market fundamentalists who were saying that if we don't bail the banks out, then we'll all go over the edge. There was a failure to hold accountable the people who brought us to that point. And so they are bringing us back to that point. And they are going to continue to do that until they have to pay some consequences for what they do. We've bailed out the banks enough times, and they've only gotten more powerful.

The fundamental thing that has to change is money in politics because, really, in fact, when Democrats are in charge, their heart is really not entirely in it for working people. Because of the amount of money that has come to them from tech people, from hedge funds, from banks and so forth, they're almost entirely captured, too. The hope for me is in the genuine progressive voices that are rising through the ranks. And there has been some promising emergence of good progressive voices from the grassroots in the last few years.

**Ralph Nader:** Why do you think so many tens of millions of people swallow the propaganda put out by the Republicans and their corporate paymasters, and vote for them – in red states for example?

**Abigail Disney:** Yeah. Our problem is that I think progressives are not good explainers. They don't know how to boil things down to their essences very well because we have complicated answers. And what the right has consistently done is presented us with what seem like a series of simple choices. And nothing simple is going to get us out of the situation that we're currently in. So unfortunately, again, it's easier to sell bullshit than it is to sell the truth, and they've been very effective salesmen.

I come from a very conservative family, as I know you know. And not just on my father's side but on my mother's side as well. I had relatives who worked in the Reagan Administration and who were very right-wing figures. And they believed very fundamentally that democracy wasn't really a very good idea, that people are not generally all that smart, and that really in fact, the government should be run by a handful of people who've demonstrated how smart they are by making money and becoming powerful. That is the essence of where the right-wing has led us. And their economic agenda has always been essential to this road that they've taken us down. So, we need to move money out of politics or we're just going to continue to have a captured Democratic Party.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, again, you know the pathway leads to Congress, Congress, Congress. I think all our efforts have to focus on Congress. So, all the work that you've been doing in recent years and the millions of people you've reached and the truth-saying that you've been engaged in with fact-dissemination, have you been able to point to one vote in Congress that has changed as a result? Members of Congress have pretty set voting patterns. Has anybody reacted to you or to your supporters and said, "I've really got to change my understanding of this political economy and the concentration of power, and I agree with your agenda?"

**Abigail Disney:** I think that the weakness in Congress has a lot to do with a feeling of being unsupported in the popular realm. And so, what I try to do is raise the voices of people to strengthen the progressive voices in Congress. I'm not sure I can point to a single vote, but I do know that what happens in the Inflation Reduction Act was that there was an inclusion of a fair number of fairly progressive ideas, including around the environment, that Congress felt the ability to fight for because they thought the American public was with them. So, I don't think it's as simple as I made this film and then he changed his vote, but I will say that 45,000 workers in Orlando got a 38% raise a couple of months ago. And I also know they're negotiating Anaheim, and it's looking like it's going to be a better story in Anaheim as well. So, I know that at this particular company we've had real progress. And I also know that I've had other CEOs say to me, "I am suddenly starting to understand that we need to be thinking very differently about how to arrange and understand the division of the resources at the company." So slow and steady wins the race, I'm afraid. And I'm just going to keep raising the voices of people who don't have access.

**Ralph Nader:** Well, you don't like to use the word "minimum wage" because you think that becomes a maximum wage for millions of low-income people. You like to use the word "living wage". What do you think, given the overwhelming polls for support for \$15 minimum wage, -which is not enough as you point out, but at least it gets it up from the \$7.25 federal minimum wage - apart from a few states raising their own minimum wage? Why do you think Congress looks at all these polls? There are huge polls to crack down on corporate crime, break up the big banks, family paid sick leave, child care, extension of the child tax credit, increasing taxes on the wealthy, all these are coming in at 70%, 75%, 80%, which means a lot of Conservative voters, it's a left-right opinion and yet they don't change. How do you explain that?

**Abigail Disney:** I think that we're getting into the dynamics in Congress, which are in incredibly stultified and stuck in the quagmire of special interests in lobbyists. And any individual congressperson on their own might say - off the record - a lot of things. But when push comes to shove and votes are getting counted, I don't think that they have the courage of their convictions most of the time. So that's why I used the word "courage" when I talked about what needs to change. Because I think this is going to take people who are willing to lose their jobs as congresspeople in order to advocate for things that people really want.

The minimum wage and the fair wage, the one fair wage for people who get the subminimum wage like waiters, those initiatives have passed on every ballot they've ever been on in the United States in the last few elections. Every ballot. In red states and blue states. So, we know people will vote for this stuff. We just need to persuade Congress they need to get it together and get braver.

**Ralph Nader:** Let's talk about Disney. When you started getting feedback from workers in Disney years ago, you were quite astonished. In fact, what led to your documentary, *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*, you say, "It seemed to me that there was a story to tell here, not just about the cognitive dissonance between people at, the happiest place on earth," referring to Disneyland – "sleeping in their cars and not having enough food to put on the table, but it's also a story about what's become of the American worker of the last 50 years. How did

this happen?. How did this become so normal that nobody even comments on it? How does the world change so completely? So it became to me what we needed to explore. Tell me the story of your self-revelatory development here as a trust fund heiress of the Disney fortune.

**Abigail Disney:** I start in the film by talking a little bit about who my grandfather was, who was Roy O., Walt's brother, and it was the Disney Brothers company in the early, early days. Walt testified for Joe McCarthy. He was a big anti-communist. They hated the union so very much, but they built much of the company at a time when they didn't have much of a choice but to work with unions, and so they did. But my grandfather had a way of relating to people that was very personal and warm. There's something that's crept into the CEO in the C-suite (top management) ideology or ethos about people not being as good as them. And part of what I was picking up on was that my grandfather saw himself as a peer of the workers that he encountered when he came to Disneyland. Which is why he wanted them to call him by his first name, which is why he wanted them to see him pick up garbage, because he just really wanted them to understand that he didn't think he was better.

And it is amazing to me that as this far right-wing guy, he would never have treated his workers in a million years the way the CEO at the time, Bob Iger - who was toying with running for president as a Democrat - was treating them on the regular. And that was the thing. It was like the total capture of the entire American political spectrum by an idea about work and working that was the inverse - in a relatively short period of time - the inverse of what my grandfather was doing as a matter of course. That struck me as: somebody has achieved something rather quickly in historical terms that was basically a reversal of what I was raised on as a young person. And I wanted to understand exactly how that happened.

**Ralph Nader:** What do you think your grandfather would have thought of CEO of Disney, Bob Iger's, compensation package?

**Abigail Disney:** I know for a fact he would have been outraged and horrified. I know because like I know how he lived. He had a nice house, and he had nice vacations. It wasn't like he was suffering, but they had two cars and they did their laundry. They didn't have an expectation of being treated like royalty, because he didn't understand the guy at the top of the company as really all that important. And he wasn't in it for the money. I know that sounds a little bit Pollyanna of me, but as I understood my grandfather and Walt too, they had kind of accidentally found out how to do this thing that families really loved. And they saw the way families were really brought together by it. And they thought this is a thing we're good at. Let's just keep doing that. And money came as a result of what they were pursuing. I'm offering them a lot of credit, I understand. And I know about the cynicism, and I know about the racism and the sexism and all the rest of it, but if you just give them some credit for thinking of what they were doing as a good thing, in some ways, it was a little bit of a social enterprise in the terms that now get bandied about. It was a little bit like "We're going to do well by doing good."

**Ralph Nader:** What was Bob Iger's compensation?



**Ralph Nader:** What was Bob Iger's compensation before he left Disney?

**Abigail Disney:** In the year that I decided to start the film, it was \$65 million for a single year of work in the same year, which is \$32,000 an hour for a 40-hour work week. And \$11.25 was what people were being paid to come in and clean the gum off the sidewalks and do all the really hard things that make it sparkle and shine the next day for people to come in the morning. This is an essential piece of how Disneyland sells itself. It is a sparkling place that's pristine. The story of its cleanness is part of what they're selling people who spend so much money to buy those tickets. And so for him to treat so disrespectfully - these people who are doing a thing that he knew perfectly well was central to the thesis of what Disneyland is proposing to people in order to get them to spend money –

**Ralph Nader:** He was making \$32,000 an hour on a 40-hour week. How much were the people who are inside the Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse uniforms making?

**Abigail Disney:** Characters, I think they're making something like \$17. I know the janitors were making 11.25 at the time I started it. It's up to \$18 now. The lowest wage now is up to \$18. But I know the hotel maids have gone significantly up to I think \$24 or something. So little by little, the pressure is getting to them. They don't like the damage to their brand. I mean, they're not doing it because they're good. They're worried about their brand.

**Abigail Disney:** Many of them are, but many of them are not. Most of them are not (union affiliated), because it's a right-to-work situation. And we can talk about right-to-work laws. They were another brainchild of the right-wing lobby that brought Reagan to power. And they really have eviscerated the union movement, because they've made it possible for unions to negotiate better wages on behalf of people who are not paying them dues and are constantly under-resourced. And that's a real problem. And it minimizes their leverage with the company. And unions haven't always worked together all that incredibly well. There's a lot of reasons for this, but until I came in the first time in 2018, the unions had never actually talked to each other about what they were being paid and about their independent negotiations. So, they decided to end the divide-and-conquer rule at Disneyland and start comparing notes. And that was when they put a wage initiative on the ballot in Anaheim. And they started working really hard in terms of bringing together the leverage they had together in negotiations.

**Ralph Nader:** We're talking with Abigail Disney, who is the launcher of this documentary, "The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales", and Kathleen Hughes is one of the co-producers. Kathleen worked for us many years ago.

**Abigail Disney:** Yes. I know.

**Ralph Nader:** And she was terrific. This film has been seen at Sundance, the official selection at HotDocs, official selection at Traverse City Film Festival in 2022. It's an 87-minute film. How do people get it?

**Ralph Nader:** And she was terrific. This film has been seen at Sundance, the official selection at HotDocs, official selection at Traverse City Film Festival in 2022. It's an 87-minute film. How do people get it?

**Abigail Disney:** They get it on Amazon and iTunes. I hate saying Amazon in the context of everything I've just said, but all of the streamers have passed on the film for reasons that I'm sure you can imagine. So right now it's pay-per-view on iTunes, Amazon, Voodoo, and all the other places. And we're soon hoping to be able to get it up for free somewhere.

**Ralph Nader:** We've been speaking with Abigail Disney, yes, of the Disney family and Disneyland. And she is out there with her documentary, *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*. This is the golden age of documentaries on just about every subject, from the US military empire to environmental climate change issues to consumer labor protection. We've never had better documentaries; we've never had less effective follow-up and less change as a result. So we hope much better impacts occur from your documentary, *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*. Thank you very much, Abigail.

**Abigail Disney:** Thank you so much.

**Steve Skrovan:** We've been speaking with Abigail Disney. We will link to her film, *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales* at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com). Up next, we continue along the same theme with Erica Payne of the Patriotic Millionaires 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, July 7, 2023. I'm Russell Mokhiber.

An airline ground worker died last week at San Antonio International Airport after getting sucked into the engine of an arriving plane. That's according to a report from NBC Dallas. Delta flight 111 arrived in Texas from Los Angeles around 10:30 p.m. As the Airbus [A13 00:33:12] was taxiing to the gate, a ramp worker was ingested into the plane's engine, according to the National Transportation Safety Board. The employee, whose name has not been released, worked for Unifi, a company Delta contracts for ground handling operations. "Our hearts go out to the family of the deceased and we remain focused on supporting our employees on the ground and ensuring they are being taken care of during this time," Unifi said in a statement.

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 and the rest of the team. And of course Ralph Nader. Let's find out what the Patriotic Millionaires have been up to lately in their quest for economic Justice. David?

**David Feldman:** Erica Payne is the Founder and President of Patriotic Millionaires, an organization of high-net-worth individuals that aims to restructure America's political economy to suit the needs of all Americans. Their work includes advocating for a highly progressive tax

system, a livable minimum wage, and equal political representation for all citizens. She's the co-author, with Morris Pearl, of *Tax the Rich: How Lies, Loopholes and Lobbyists Make the Rich Even Richer*. Welcome back to the *Ralph Nader Radio Hour*, Erica Payne.

**Erica Payne:** Thank you so much. Happy to be here.

**Ralph Nader:** Thank you very much, Erica. This is an update, listeners. We had Erica on almost two years ago and we're very intrigued to see how the Patriotic Millionaires are doing with their new grassroots effort to try to build pressure on Congress where the action has to conclude to develop progressive taxation of the rich and the corporate. Before we get into that Erica, tell our listeners what the Patriotic Millionaires are, how you define millionaires, and how many members you have, and how many staff in Washington and elsewhere.

**Erica Payne:** Yeah, absolutely. So, the Patriotic Millionaires first came together in 2010. It was during the lame-duck session of Congress when it became quite clear to everyone that President Obama was going to cave to Republican demands to extend the Bush tax cuts. We got about 56 millionaires to sign a letter that basically said, "For the good of the country, raise my taxes." And for whatever reason, it absolutely exploded in the media. We've been working together ever since to try to fix this country of ours and the political economy before it rips us apart. Right now, we're at 100-year levels of inequality. It's destabilized the entire nation and our members believe that it'll be better for everybody, including them, if we can get this democratic capitalist system of ours back in working order. So, we've got about 200 or so members in 38 states around the country and we consider a millionaire people with either incomes of \$1 million a year or assets of \$5 million a year. We have no interest in taxing anyone with less than that amount of money.

**Ralph Nader:** Okay. So that lays the scene. Now, it's sad to say that with all your efforts on Capitol Hill - and you go up and down the corridors, you don't just deal with email - you haven't gotten through to Republicans and Democrats, even the chief Democratic culprit, Congressman Neal from Western Massachusetts who is head of the House Ways and Means Committee. And when he took over in January 2019, one of the first things he said was he wasn't going to revisit the Trump tax cuts which were heavily skewed, favoring the super-rich and the large corporations. Tell us - before we talk about how you're going to the grassroots down to Whiteville, North Carolina, for example - tell us - how frustrating was it? Of course, you were opposed by a lot of the Republicans, but a lot of the Democrats weren't all that great either, including Richard Neal.

**Erica Payne:** Well, let me tell you something. I've been working in this space for thirteen years, and as far as I can tell, the billionaire class bought off the entire Republican Party and a sufficient number of Democrats that they've got a lock-hold, a stranglehold on this economy. And as I said earlier, what they basically created is a system that guarantees we become more unequal more quickly over time. They've destabilized the entire country. They've threatened democratic capitalism around the world and Democrats, for all that they want to spout out a bunch of nonsense about how they want to support working people, we still have eight Democrats who are not on an inadequate minimum wage bill who seem to have no intention of getting on it. And we also have a number of Democrats, as you referenced, including the chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee who have absolutely no intention of raising

taxes on their donors. And so we're in a situation where our tax code values every dollar that an investor makes over every dollar that a working person makes. So mathematically, there's absolutely no direction this country can go in other than more unequal. And we're looking at a game of economic Jenga where we're basically pulling money out of the bottom, in the middle, and putting it on the top and the whole thing's in the process of collapsing.

**Ralph Nader:** As you said recently on NPR - I'm amazed NPR gave you an opportunity to talk to their audience – you said, "We hit a wall. We've hammered them on both sides of the aisle for 12 years. Okay, it's time to go to the people who hand them their power." You were talking about hitting a wall in Congress and you point out that low-wage workers make up more than 40% of the labor force. You say, "They are the most powerful people in the United States if only they realized it." And you quote a poll that says, "71% of Americans think the economy is rigged against them. We've got news for them. They're right."

All right let's shift the scene to Whiteville, North Carolina. North Carolina is not quite a swing state, but it has possibilities in the 2024 elections. Whiteville has a population less than 5000. The minimum wage in North Carolina is still \$7.25 an hour, same as the federal rate which hasn't been raised since 2009. You note that some states like Texas have even barred cities from passing ordinances increasing their own minimum wage at the city level, known as preemption. So, give us a description. You're down there at Whiteville, North Carolina, you've offered people a free dinner, a little bit of a remuneration to come. Tell us what your experience was. Did it astonish you? And where did you leave these people in terms of zeroing in on their senators and representatives in Congress and at the state capitol?

**Erica Payne:** Let me just back up a little bit and give you some more context for the decision to go to Whiteville in the first place. It was a couple of years ago and as I said, we endlessly hammered eight Democrats to get them on a minimum wage bill. And they patently refused. Even when Democrats controlled the entire thing, the very best Congress could do on the tax bill was to increase some funding for the IRS, which was a drop in the bucket. Certainly, enforcement is important, but we have got a tax code that's going to destroy the country. We really hit a wall with people. Democrats seemed to refuse to hear us so we decided "You know what, let's go talk to the most powerful people in the country (the working class)."

Forty-five percent of people in the United States of America make less than \$18 an hour. A lot of them live in states that are determinative to the future of this country. So, I thought, let's go talk to working-class conservatives alongside working-class Democrats, and help them see exactly how the economy is rigged against them – what's happening in labor policy and what's happening in tax policy; those are the two bookends that hold an economy together. And tell them specifically exactly how the tax code rigs the economy against them and how the wage system rigs the economy against them and why if they don't change these two things, they and their families and their communities are going to continue to suffer in the way that they currently are.

But rather than talking to everybody — and we have an online version of this program so people are also welcome to go to [americanagenda.com](http://americanagenda.com) to sign up for the online program. What we wanted to see is if we go talk to these folks across party lines, multi-racial groups of people and

talk to them about the one thing that matters most in a capitalist democracy, which is money, could we get them to momentarily set aside some of the social issues that people use to divide everybody else in North Carolina — I wanted to pick North Carolina, because I'm from there. I figured if I wanted to pick North Carolina because I'm from there and I kind of figured if I have the experience that I have in Washington, if I could go talk to the people that I grew up with about what is actually happening in the nation's capital, maybe I could get through them.

We picked Whiteville, North Carolina. As you said, it's a tiny little town. It's about half white, half black. It's one of the poorest towns in North Carolina and one of the poorest counties in North Carolina. And you may remember back, Ralph, when the transgender bathroom bill was going through North Carolina, what people don't know about the transgender bathroom bill was that it was actually a minimum wage bill. Charlotte tried to raise the minimum wage. The North Carolina Republican-controlled legislature didn't want them to. So, they introduced a preemption bill to prevent cities and towns from raising the minimum wage. They couldn't get that through, and so they wrapped a preemption minimum wage bill with a transgender bathroom bill in an effort to get religious, so-called leader, Franklin Graham on board with their plans. They shoved the transgender community — I mean, they basically sacrificed a group of individuals who were struggling as hard as anybody else in the world. And the entire effort was to keep people in Charlotte from making a minimum wage.

That's the exact same thing that plays out on a federal level. As we tell the people in Whiteville, if they are talking to you about something other than money, they are stealing your money. So the next time somebody's talking to you about abortion or transgender or critical race theory or any of these other things, you can rest assured those politicians on the back end are stealing your money. And what folks in this country who cannot support their families need to care about isn't whether a transgender athlete can compete in their local schools. What they need to care about is whether they have enough money in their pocket to feed their families. We want to make it explicit that this is about money. In a capitalist democracy, not much is about anything other than money. S **Ralph Nader:** Well, let me suggest something to advance your cause. And that is once you get them informed in a specific way, and they want to do something about it on their senators and representatives, why don't you formalize it with a summons. You have a formal summons that you give them that they can sign demanding that their member comes to a town meeting that they, the people, organize with an advanced agenda in a deliberative public forum where they make their demands, substantiate them, show how the polls are left-right behind, say a higher minimum wage, \$15 minimum wage, and ask the members with no flacks, no intermediaries, where they stand. They've had plenty of time to think about it, but I think if you do it in a more formal way — and we've drafted the summons and it exists on our website in my little book, *Breaking Through Power: It's Easier Than We Think*. It attracts more media because it shows that it's much more organized, much more formal, and much more knowledgeable about the failures of Congress that the people want to correct beyond raising the minimum wage.

And the second recommendation I'm going to make, Erica — we're talking with Erica Payne, the stalwart, irrepressible author of "Tax the Rich" and also runs the group Patriotic Millionaires — I don't think it's effective to use the word "raise" the taxes on the rich as to *restore* the taxes on the rich. If their taxes were what they were in the prosperous 1960s, they would be much, much higher than the pre-Trump tax cuts and there'd be much more money for public works and social

safety nets and rebuilding our country here at home in so many ways. What do you think of those two ideas?

**Erica Payne:** So first, Ralph, I think both of them are great ideas. Let me tell you what we've done. There's an element of this that is just purely public education – how has public policy affected the economy and what does the public need to understand about how the economy is structured and how problematic it is to their own lives.

That's phase one of the project.; that's where we started in Whiteville, North Carolina and where we're going to start when we go to Richland Center, Wisconsin on July 12<sup>th</sup>, and when we go to Mount Pleasant, Pennsylvania in early September. The education piece is where we will let people know all of the policies that they need to understand. Then at the end of our curriculum we'll talk them through six different pieces of curriculum about the economy. At the end of that we'll ask if they want to do something about this, and if they do, we invite them to join American Deciders.

American Deciders is a community-led group of people. Right now we have the American Deciders of Whiteville and they work together specifically to reach out to lawmakers. They have a lobby trip planned to Raleigh on July 19<sup>th</sup>. Earlier this week on Monday, they met with their county commissioners to tell them that they hoped they would sign a letter of support asking the North Carolina lawmakers to come to the table across party lines and negotiate a higher wage floor. They've now got a petition going in their community that they've gotten the mayor and lots of average citizens to sign. The citizen signers are Republicans, Democrats, and Independents. The biggest group of all can't stand any of them. They're doing exactly what you're saying, Ralph, and I think doing that really successfully. And that's the model we're going to follow in all of these states, which includes a long chunk of public education to help people understand the economic issues and then ask them to make a proactive decision to join American Deciders.

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And we hope that American Deciders - which will be a bipartisan, cross-partisan, multi-racial group of people focused on economic issues - that they will go engage with their lawmakers and either one of two things will happen. Their lawmakers will tell them that they're not going to raise the minimum wage, and they're not going to fix the tax system, in which case I think these

American Deciders are going to do everything they can to get them out of office. Or politicians -who are lagging indicators and who tend to want to stay in office - are going to wake up and smell the coffee and make the changes that we need to see. And either one of those outcomes are perfectly fine with me. This is not a partisan issue. The premise of this project is that working people in America should be able to have the economy that they need regardless of what political party is in charge.

**Ralph Nader:** And this is a perfect time for it. Between now and right after Labor Day, 75% of the days members of Congress are going to be in recess, they're not going to be in Washington, they're supposed to be back home. And especially August is a great time for these town meetings. The demand should be we want to talk with no one other than our lawmakers. No flacks, no staff, no PR intermediators. We want them on the stage in the auditorium back and forth and we want a resolution of how they're going to vote when they go back to Congress.

**Erica Payne:** That's exactly what we're doing. They're going to see them in Raleigh and then the next step after that is going to be to organize a town hall in Whiteville and invite lawmakers from all levels of government. Because even if the lawmakers don't have specific jurisdiction over the minimum wage, the Republican and the Democratic Party are chockablock full of lawmakers who are on the city council, the town council, and the county boards. We want to get every single lawmaker at every level of government to focus on the economy. The economy is what is going to make this country work or not work, and it is currently not working.

**Ralph Nader:** And Erica, in North Carolina, the chair of the State Democratic Party is a very vigorous young woman in her 20s. So, you've got some new energy there to get people out and to get the lawmakers to come and meet with the people and listen to their demands.

**Erica Payne:** Ralph, you're exactly right. I had an opportunity to spend some time with Anderson Clayton who is half my age at 25, and I think has four times my level of energy; she's a real pistol. She and I were talking about the dynamics of North Carolina. And just FYI, I've met with the Republican head of the Columbus County Republican Party, so I'm a bipartisan chatterer on these topics. But Anderson let me know that she felt similar to us, that if a lawmaker would run on raising the minimum wage, they would highly resonate with working people in the country. We've got people in Whiteville who literally make \$8 an hour. If you call Burger King and ask how much they pay, it's \$8 an hour.

And one of the things we pointed out to them is that in a small town in Washington State of the exact same size with the same makeup, folks who work at that exact same job are making \$15/\$16 an hour. The difference is the law, not the skill of the people. It's a location and law issue. North Carolinians should certainly be able to get the same wages as the people in Washington State.

**Ralph Nader:** Erica, before we go to the questions of Steve, David and Hannah, I just want your opinion on something. I know you don't want to take a stand on this, but you know all about it. There's a proposal for a stock transaction tax on stock trades, bond trades, and derivatives, which would, at a one-third of 1% sales tax, raise \$300 billion a year. Billion, with a B. People in New York have been proposing it. And Governors Cuomo and Hochul have opposed it. The

interesting aspect of this is people in New York walk into a store to buy necessities of life they're paying 6%, 7%, 8% sales tax state and local. But if someone bought \$100 million of ExxonMobil stock today they'd pay zero sales tax. I know this isn't in your charter, but would you advocate something like that as public policy?

**Erica Payne:** Here's the thing. I certainly think a financial transactions tax is a good idea, but that will not fix what's wrong with America. There are three things that we need to change in the American tax code. Number one, and by the way, we have proposed all of these in a new publication we just put out called "Crack the Code". There are three principles that need to go into the next major rewrite of the "American tax code. Number one, we need a tax that is directly tied to the level of inequality in the country, so as inequality increases, the tax on the richest people in the country would also go up until it makes our country less unequal. This will be a tax that in the beginning would generate a tremendous amount of revenue. Although that is not its purpose. Over the long term, if done correctly, it would actually bring in no revenue, because we would have solved the inequality. So that's number one – a tax tied directly to the level of inequality because the inequality is the cancer we're trying to solve.

Number two, we need to equalize the tax rate for every kind of income, regardless of how you make it if it's over \$1 million a year. Right now, if you make money off of your money, you pay a lower tax rate than if you make money off of your sweat. So, in the game of their money versus your sweat, their money is winning. We need to end the differentiation between capital gains and ordinary income.

**Ralph Nader:** Ronald Reagan agreed with you on that, but he couldn't get the Republicans to follow up. He said that taxes on capital gains should be no different than taxes on earned income.

**Erica Payne:** There's absolutely no reason they should be different. What lawmakers want to argue is that you need that incentive for investment. Well, guess what? What else are they going to do, stick their money in a mattress somewhere? Mattresses don't provide very high returns.

But the third point is that we need to eliminate federal taxes for American citizens up to the cost of living. If you cannot yet afford to support yourself, we should not ask you to put money into the kitty, particularly when we've got billionaires building rockets. So right now, in the federal tax code, you start paying taxes at around \$15, \$16, \$17,000 a year after the standard deduction. We want to raise the standard deduction to about \$35,000 a year so you do not pay a single penny in federal taxes until you get above that point. And there is already a provision for this in the tax code. If you are delinquent on your taxes, you don't have to pay your back taxes until you have passed the cost of living. So right now, we have delinquent taxpayers who have a bigger benefit in the tax code than working people who have been paying their taxes all along. Because you don't have to pay if you're delinquent until you would pass the cost of living at around \$35,000 a year, whereas if you're a working person, you have to pay a lot earlier than that. Those are the three principles we're going to be pushing. They seem incredibly straightforward to us.

**Ralph Nader:** Those and more are in the engrossing book by Erica Payne and her colleagues called *Tax the Rich*. She's got a very generous offer to make you. Hannah, do you want to describe the generous offer by Erica to our listeners for her book, *Tax the Rich*?



**Hannah Feldman:** Sure thing. So at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com) on the show page, you'll find a form where you can request a free copy of "Tax the Rich". Patriotic Millionaires is providing a free copy to the first 30 listeners who request it. That's at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com).

**Ralph Nader:** There you are, listeners. Well, we're out of time. Erica Payne, we wish you a great success as you mobilize people in their common interests. You have the polls behind you. You have the facts behind you. You have the morality behind you. You have the future behind you. You have the overall justice behind you. How can you possibly fail? Thank you very much, Erica.

**Erica Payne:** Thank you. Thank you. [Americanagenda.com](http://Americanagenda.com).

**Steve Skrovan:** We've been speaking with Erica Payne. We will link to the Patriotic Millionaires at [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com) along with a special offer from Patriotic Millionaires for Ralph Nader Radio Hour listeners, a free copy of Erica's book, *Tax the Rich: How Lies, Loopholes and Lobbyists Make the Rich*. Even Richer to the first 30 listeners to submit their request using the form on [ralphnaderradiohour.com](http://ralphnaderradiohour.com). I want to thank our guests again, Abigail Disney and Erica Payne. 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", which includes Francesco DeSantis with "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:** Join us next week on *the Ralph Nader Radio Hour*. Thank you, Ralph.

**Ralph Nader:** Thank you, everybody.