



Conversation with Erica Smiley

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you start by introducing yourself, telling me a little bit about yourself, Jobs With Justice, your role and journey to this work?

Erica Smiley: I'm Erica Smiley. I go by Smiley. She/her/hers. I'm based in New Jersey, but originally from Greensboro, North Carolina. I'm the Executive Director of Jobs With Justice, which is a national network of community labor coalitions that seek to expand organizing and collective bargaining power, both the number of people who can do it as well as the ways in which we can do it.

The so-what of it all is so that it's not just for this vague sense of workers' rights, but really so that we can expand democratic decision-making and standard-setting in our economic lives. That is not just a political project, but something that should happen in all aspects of society. So that's who we are.

And we do it by centering workers as whole people, operating at the intersections of how workers see themselves not just because it's the morally right thing to do, but because it's the only way that we'll win. So centering struggles against white supremacy, against patriarchy and gender discrimination as a means of winning, as a means of uniting people across multiple barriers against common economic targets, common enemies to negotiate fair standards.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's a lot. That's good work.

Erica Smiley: It's a lot. We like to think of ourselves as a democracy organization with an emphasis on economic and worker pathways towards democracy.

Ashley Hopkinson : What do you think makes Jobs With Justice distinctive and if you were to describe it, who would you say benefits from your work and how do you see them benefiting?

Erica Smiley: I don't want to be too general and I also don't want to be too specific. Certainly in any given campaign, the workers in that specific company or employer or industry or even market will benefit from victory there. Of course, if we're successful overall, we'll expand the floor or a set of fundamental standards for everyone. But those are two very different ends of the spectrum. ...And so when you say, "Who benefits," what do you mean?

Ashley Hopkinson: I can rephrase that. So let's say we're talking about labor, we're talking about work. So it's about democracy. It's about fair work practices, and largely, it's workers. But when you're also doing that, maybe you have influence with policy? Maybe you have influence with having created a program? So it's my way of asking, do you feel like the organization is working across different departments, across silos, and how do you see the work branching out?

Erica Smiley: That's helpful. Thanks for the clarification. The way that we define victory in any campaign or effort is by how many of the people who are directly impacted by whatever it is we're trying to change, whatever standard or shift we're trying to make are not only a part of setting the change itself, but are also a part of the enforcement and implementation of the change.

So essentially, the governing. If you think of a collective bargaining agreement, it's simply a policy for a workplace. It's the legislation, it's the law of the land of a workplace. And there is a labor management committee and other committees that essentially enforce the law and file grievances. And in some ways, it's not half as sexy as it sometimes shows up on TV. That's when there's a conflict.

But really, when someone needs to take parental leave and it goes to the committee and there's a policy and they make sure it's the right policy and there's paperwork, right? It's democracy. It can be messy. It can also be mundane...But the beauty of it when it works is that it's smooth and people get their needs met...You don't think about it because your needs are getting met. You get time off to take care of your kids. You know?

Ashley Hopkinson: Right, so you're not the one who needs to take to the streets or raise a ruckus.

Erica Smiley: That's right. You can pay your bills, your lights are on....I say all that to say that we define victory when the people who are helping to make those decisions and make all of that run smoothly are the same people who are impacted by it. So in the context of a collective bargaining agreement, that includes workers...it's workers, it's managers, it's the employer ...and the labor management committee.

When we think about co-enforcement strategies...we think about expanded versions of democracy in economic life, when we think about winning for workers outside of a union context, we sometimes think about ways that we can have co-enforcement strategy for workers who are a part of the monitoring of the law and the implementation.

(For example,) when we won the Essential Workers Board in Harris County, Texas during the pandemic to monitor and set standards for workers who would be deemed essential during major crises, that they would be a part of setting the standards and also a part of the implementation, the enforcement, the monitoring across different industries and sectors.

In terms of other economic relationships and dynamics, when you think of, say, a tenants' organization trying to negotiate with a set of landlords, is there an enforceable agreement that allows them to also be a part of the governance of the agreement and to make sure that whatever was agreed to around rents and conditions and safety and facilities is intact? And the same thing around, debts or mortgages. Is there a clause that allows those who all have a mortgage with a certain bank in an area to renegotiate rates if something changes? That's how we define victory.

The idea of who then benefits, I think is an interesting one because, on the one hand, certainly those who are directly impacted by that economic relationship — whether it's an employment one or housing or debt — but then you also have the residual impacts of democracy, particularly democracy in an economic relationship, in an economic arena.

You might have a standard shift that raises the floor in a way that impacts an entire community. So when you have an industry that's actually bringing good jobs to an area -- like once we were able to organize the auto industry in the early days in Michigan — all of a sudden you have Motown, you have a booming environment, you have a booming culture, a booming community because you have all the wraparound sectors and industries that now have to be in place to nurture the workers that are in an industry and they can now afford to do those things.

Ashley Hopkinson: I appreciate your framing on democracy and the reflection that decisions now can raise the floor like collective bargaining for example having a ripple effect for generations to come because they raised the floor on a workplace issue.

Erica Smiley: There's a reason why unions have traditionally been called, "schools of democracy."

Democracy in itself, it's a practice. It's not like when people run for office, they tend to talk about issues and values, and those are more sexy, "I believe in," and, "we should have," and these types of things.

Whereas democracy is a do, "We should do," and that's sometimes not as attractive when you want to just win a quick election. ..It's a muscle.It's a muscle that has to be built, and it's one of the most critical things that we can do and a critical thing that we can have. So you have to have containers through which it becomes a part of the culture and the DNA of society.

And those who are clear that democracy is a threat to them, those whose agenda, let's say, is not popular to the majority are very clear and have been trying to cut back on institutions that train people in that muscle (of democracy) for a while. They've tried to roll back public schools and critical thinking and education. They've tried to roll back unions, they've tried to roll back institutions of voting and so forth. They're clear.

And so the fact that oftentimes our movements are so focused on just these issues (is not enough) ... Because even the idea of wages and compensation is critical, but it's an issue. Democracy in itself is the thing that gets us there more consistently.

...At Jobs With Justice, I say we're a democracy organization that emphasizes the economy and focuses on workers and collective bargaining, but that democracy is the path to get there. It's the key to have consistent and fair wages, to have dignified lives.

In terms of your original question about who then benefits, there's also even more. If you continue to pull the layers of the onion back, there's also some of what I would argue are the hidden impacts of democracy at work and democracy in an economic framework, whether it's within employment or housing or debt.... There was some anecdotal studies around corrections officers who had union versus who didn't, and the incidents of domestic violence. Those who had a say at work, dignity at work, some way to weigh in on what was happening, for better or for worse, there were less incidences of violence in their homes across the board.

...So on this question of who benefits, we could honestly argue that we all do. I think that the metrics can be applied differently. They can be applied based on patients, to nurses and medical staff, they could be applied based on family and incidents of domestic violence, they could be applied based on democratic practice and the number of cultural integration and crossovers, crossover hits, or even just democratic participation. We all know that union members are more likely to participate in elections and voting.

Ashley Hopkinson: Yes, that tracks. Do you think that's a success marker as well?

Erica Smiley: When we are successful and when collective bargaining and democratic governance in work is expanded, there is a palpable impact, a tangible impact on democracy. At the end of the day, at Jobs With Justice—that's what we are after. Not just individual workers' rights, we are after democracy.

There was even a study in Tunisia on the role of unions because you know the Arab Spring and that was one of the places where essentially the labor movement was able to overcome the threat of authoritarianism, whereas in places that had weaker labor movements, that was a lot more difficult. And then Adam Dean came out with a book recently called "Opening Up by Cracking Down," which was actually about making a case around free trade being an anti-democratic practice.

...He basically showed how crackdowns on labor also paralleled the rise of authoritarian governments and of right-wing populism, and how betraying labor through some of these economic agreements that ultimately hurt workers' ability to be a part of democratic governance, such as free trade, actually created the conditions for some of the right-wing populism we've seen around the world through Modi, through Trump, through Bolsonaro, through you name it.

Ashley Hopkinson: I see what you're saying. It's as many beneficiaries as we choose to measure, if we're measuring. And so from that perspective, it's all of us in many different areas across many different things.

Erica Smiley: That's right. I didn't want to just say, "Everyone" without qualifying, but everyone.

Ashley Hopkinson: Earlier you mentioned something that I thought was powerful around what is beneath the issues we discuss. We have an economy that is centered around growth and you may hear a report that it's doing well or the GDP is doing this whereas the average person is experiencing our economy based on what's happening in their lives and may not feel that way. What do you think it will take for us to have an economy that works for all of us? What can leaders do to improve the conversations that we're having even around economics and labor?

Erica Smiley: I think part of the issue is how we define working. So if defining working is just looking at the GDP...there's an assumption that says that if the GDP is good...that alone (matters) regardless of how the benefits of that are distributed. ..When we say, "The economy is doing good," well, what does it mean for the economy to be doing good?" And then as soon as we start doing that, everyone starts to call us socialists.

Ashley Hopkinson: Then it gets real complex real quick.

Erica Smiley: Well, not even. It actually gets real simple real quick. We get relegated and the conversation ends and it's like, "All right. Well, that's it..." I think some people just have to get over that.

Because I think during COVID was a great example of seeing some people finally get over that because there was a moment in April of 2020 when there were a set of workers at General Electric who led the way and insisted on turning off the invisible hand of the market and turning on the real hands of people when they said, "We have to stop making engines for planes. The planes are grounded. We need to make ventilators for people to breathe. If we aren't going to free up the ventilators that are available or help free them, we need to make them because that's the thing that people need. We don't care what the supply and demand is or what your numbers are telling you, what GDP says, we need to make more plane engines. We need to make ventilators. That's what people need." And so what would define the healthy economy or what would define good for what those workers did to be (considered) good?

So I think part of what we often articulate to leaders in Jobs With Justice training is there are some...who really value profits over people when it comes down to it, they'll just call it the bottom line, what the bottom line is. And then they're the rest of us who value people over profits, as the bottom line. And so if we want to define the economy as being good, as the bottom line (being) people over profits, (it's) like those workers at General Electric when they were saying, "We need to make ventilators, not plane engines," then I think that there are many different types of interventions we would make into how democracy is done and how democracy is done within an economic framework that would shift the nature of our everyday economic lives.

Ashley Hopkinson: You mentioned the pandemic more than once, and I wonder if there is an example you can point to from your own experience in doing this work where you feel like the U.S. got it right, where there was some progress towards that we could replicate if we just determined to replicate it. So I guess do you have a gold-star example? Do you have something that has given you hope and promise or that you've seen implemented in some way that has been able to make a change or that has the potential to make great change if there's investment in it, prolonged investment?

Erica Smiley: I hope I haven't sounded pessimistic. I actually have a lot of hope right now...I'll start with the pandemic and then try to lead to the current moment.

One of the things that happened, just to build on the GE workers, is that in being defined as essential, many workers, many working people who had maybe just traditionally been identified as low-wage,

realized that in being identified as essential, they realized their role in the economy in a different way. So instead of being low-wage workers, which is just like, "Who are you? You're in a low-wage job," maybe because the dominant narrative will tell you that you did something bad or you weren't smart enough or you weren't something, now you're essential.

And of course, many employers were saying it because you have to go to work even though it's not safe, but actually, the economy depended on you to work. That's power though, right? People aren't dumb, despite being told that maybe they weren't smart enough. People aren't dumb.

When you have power, that tells you you could maybe negotiate a different set of terms, and so many people did. They said...I'm not expendable.

'If I'm essential, you take care of essential things. The essential part of a car, the engine, you take care of that. You get regular oil changes, **you make sure** it's taken care of.' The essential part of a house, you don't mess with that. You don't mess with foundation walls, you don't knock those down when you're renovating. The essential parts of your body, you take care of those things. 'How are you not going to take care of essential workers? Why am I getting paid these low wages? I'm not a low-wage worker. This is low-wage work, and it shouldn't be low-wage work if it's essential work.'

And so we saw a pivot with workers beginning to organize and demand dignity and respect in a very different way. People began to organize as essential workers, including some of the examples I gave earlier...Workers began to organize in their unions themselves. There were workers who were laid off in industries like hospitality that had been grounded, who stayed organized with their union. Workers in airline industries stayed organized, even as unemployed workers, still identified as housekeepers or flight attendants or whatever to negotiate standards of their unemployment. And then some of those same workers negotiated around either rent forgiveness or rent moratorium for the shared sacrifice. People kept organizing.

Some workers started to experiment with sectoral approaches. So instead of just looking at wage boards, (they) started to look at health and safety boards, like in Los Angeles. There was another form of an essential worker health and safety structure in New York that workers were looking at under the New York HERO Act, in addition to trying to win funds for workers who had been left out of stimulus payments, like funds for undocumented workers in places like New York and DC.

We began to see upsurges. Employers started freaking out because workers began to leave low-wage jobs. And we saw these dominant narratives as if they were just going home to collect checks signed by Donald Trump. But in actuality, many workers were just getting better jobs or they were leaving

their third and fourth job to just keep the one and two that were now paying better. So instead of working that extra shift at Walmart, they could actually survive the one shift as a nurse because they could negotiate better pay there and still see their kids' soccer game on Saturday.

So workers began to organize and negotiate. And then as time continued, we began to see that translate into more rank-and-file workers beginning to organize unions, both with existing traditional unions as well as new, independent unions. So in April 2022, we saw two significant elections at Amazon, one in Bessemer, Alabama, one in Staten Island, the first one that won with the company. And it was from the workers at JFK and Staten Island. Chris and Derek and many others had walked out after asking for PPE, for personal protective equipment, during the pandemic, and then had gotten escorted out by police after being fired.

When we look at workers as whole people, part of what was the motivating factor for many of the people in that plant was the fact that the disproportionate response of the company on Black and brown workers to escort them out by police after asking for just basic protection from the pandemic was a motivating factor. And when you looked at Mike down in Alabama, in one of his rally speeches for other workers saying, "This is our Black Lives Matter movement," because a lot of this was happening around the same time of the murder of George Floyd, of Breonna Taylor, people were incensed. And so not only were they now mad about being expendable despite being essential, but we're also seeing their work sites as a site of struggle for democracy, that it wasn't just that they fighting for workers' rights or wages, but they saw themselves, as we see them, as on the front line of the battle for democracy.

And so that began to continue and catch fire even across other sectors. And I'm saying this. It's not like it hadn't been brewing. Many of these folks had been organizing for years, but it began to catch on in a very different way at Starbucks, at Trader Joe's, at Apple, at you-name-it...People all over the place were filing for election for ULPs to get unfair labor practices, to get the NLRB involved. People were beginning to step up and step out.

We heard about the big brands, but working people were beginning to take action around the country...and seeing this not just as a moment to step up for themselves, but seeing themselves as players in the economy, that they have to do something, that there's not just a pandemic, but there is, especially in 2022, 2023, a crisis in democracy. This is our place to fight it. We can't just depend on these elections that themselves have turned into these global circuses. We have to do something here as well.

And so now we're in this moment where we have these federal investments that are now inserting more money into the economy than even the New Deal did, even adjusted to inflation, to create a sustainable energy industry and with good intention to help us adapt to climate shifts. And I think that there is this huge opportunity, and workers already are aware of it to some degree, to avoid the contradiction that our political leaders have fallen into in the past, which is to say, to have an eye so far to the future to forget to address the harms of the present. You can't tell someone, "You got to do this and make this sacrifice so your children have a planet to live on," but your children and you can't eat right now to do it. That doesn't make any sense. That's not going to work. It's not going to work.

Just to give them as an example, (the auto industry) has taken a lot of this money to basically abscond from some of those hard-fought contracts that workers, particularly Black workers, were a part of winning in the Midwest even as recently as last year in their most recent contract, and then trying to move facilities and work to the South where the majority of Black workers still are in this country to take advantage of non-union labor, a cheaper workforce, and of southern governors who are opposed to democracy and opposed to unions and opposed to Black people voting and all the things that we've been talking about.

And so this is a moment where workers are doing their part to organize. We had a significant Volkswagen victory last week. There are workers at Daimler stepping out today. They just stepped out, that's really exciting, in my home state in North Carolina ...There's a vote coming up at Mercedes in Alabama. Steelworkers organized Blue Bird, which is a bus facility, and the IUE's got a new flyer...Workers are moving. They're all moving. They're sticking their necks out. The southern political economy, and I say political economy explicitly because they're clear that they're trying to defend an anti-democratic way of life, is on the move.

They're trying to defend a way of life. And I think that there are people who are getting caught off guard who are acting like it's just about an election...It's just about jobs (and) "No, you're missing it. You're missing it." First rule of fighting the war is knowing when you're in one...what's happening here.

This is an opportunity for the administration to actually step in and not just put their thumb on the scale shop by shop, but to actually say, "Is this a chance to leverage this opportunity with the federal funds to negotiate some set of industry standards?" Given that the industry is so concentrated in this region, can you negotiate a set of industry standards in the region that would bypass the southern political arm, bypass the states, and give workers a chance to negotiate a policy for an industry that's going to impact everyone throughout the southern region, particularly where the majority of Black

people still live, in a way that could right 400 years of wrongs of anti-democratic practice, both politically and economically?

You asked me if there's something that I'm excited about. Yes, I'm excited about that because that, to me, is far beyond any piece of federal legislation, far beyond any one collective bargaining agreement. The idea of actualizing some of the aspiration from the great Reconstruction of correcting the compromises that threw the South out of the New Deal, the reason that my state's the second-lowest union-dense state in the country almost forever. I think that, to me, the fact that we even have that opportunity in my generation, feels like the opportunity of a lifetime.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think best illustrates the value of this work, labor and democracy work and the importance of an economy that serves all of us?

Erica Smiley: I'm not sure. I guess it's one of those things where it probably depends on the audience, but I would imagine that for most people in this country, the things that matter most to them are the ability to navigate their daily lives with a sense of ease, the ability to not have to constantly have to think about where and how they're going to pay for things, and instead be able to think about planning for the next big family event or friend-gathering, visiting people and their big trip, big vacation that they're going to do, enjoy just whatever entertainment show, but to be able to know that they have a job where their contribution is appreciated, not just where they're going to get it over with.

...I don't want to underestimate work as something that people also find value in or feel valued by. There's dignity in work. Most people won't tell you, "I'm a worker." They'll tell you what they do. A lot of the people at Volkswagen have dignity at Volkswagen. They'll tell you what they do at Volkswagen, and there's a lot of pride and dignity in that. Even people who are in very low-wage sectors have a lot of pride and dignity in some of the work that they do.

And so I would imagine that the thing that would be the best indicator for most people that a society and an economy is working is if they could have a job where they feel that their work is valued, both by how they're compensated, but also how they're treated and valued, and where they are able to navigate their daily lives, thinking about joy and family and entertaining things and recreation and things that they want to think about, and where they're able to take care of themselves and their health in a way that they don't have to worry about bills and insurance and that type of thing.

...I don't want to be *Pollyannaish* and assume that it's a world with no worries. I'm not utopian. There's always something, of course. But I think that having visited places where the fear that you can't find child care for your kid, or having been to a place where no one's worried about where they're

going to live, or no one's worried about getting to a doctor if they get sick, then it just gives you space to worry about things that might matter a lot more to you at the end of the day. And so I would hope that that would be the measure.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's wonderful, thank you.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*