

## **THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST**

**Unions: Key to Democracy**

**Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director**

**Guests: Cornell University law professor Angela Cornell**

**Colombia union activist and labor lawyer Mery Laura Perdomo**

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Hello, sisters and brothers. Welcome to The Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the executive director of the Solidarity Center in Washington, D.C. We're the largest US based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities and for greater equality in the global economy and for one just future.

September 15th is not a well known date, but it should be. September 15th is International Democracy Day. Now, more than ever, we need to understand how we advance and keep democratic freedoms, like the right to speak openly, protest peacefully and participate fully in our communities. One thing we know for sure is that there is a clear connection between vibrant labor movements and thriving democracies. My two guests today will talk about that connection.

Our first guest, Mery Laura Perdomo, a labor lawyer and trade unionist in Colombia, tells us how unions, together with young people and indigenous and black communities, achieved the election last month of the country's first progressive government. Mery Laura has been an integral part of the multi-year democratic process that unified people around their basic rights like decent wages, accessible healthcare, and an end to discrimination and the violence that has visited union leaders far too often in South America.

Later in the show, we'll put the recent events in Colombia into a global and historical context with Angela Cornell, the founding director of the Cornell University Labor Law Clinic, and a Cornell labor law professor. Angela is also co-editor of the newly published volume, the Cambridge Handbook of Labor and Democracy. She will explain how, by fighting to close the huge gaps between the very rich and the rest of us, unions push for a more equal society, which is essential to thriving democracies. Angela describes why union members openly reject authoritarian governments and why they are less likely to engage in xenophobia and nationalism.

A quick note about the interview with Mery Laura: You'll hear her describe the new government in Colombia as leftist. This is in reaction to the highly conservative and far right administrations that have come before it. Let's hear now from Mery Laura, my sister at the Solidarity Center and a lawyer at the International Lawyers Assisting Workers or ILAW network.

### **Mery Laura Perdomo:**

Hi, everybody. Pleasure to be here. My name is Mery Laura Perdomo. I'm a labor lawyer from Colombia. Actually I'm the regional coordinator for Latin America and the Caribbean for the ILAW network, which is a global network of lawyers assisting workers.

This year, we had two very important elections in Colombia. We had our elections to the Congress of the Republic, which is our parliament, and we had our presidential elections. For the first time in Colombia's history, we elected a leftist government, but not only that, we also elected as vice president, a woman who comes from one of the most marginalized sectors of society in Colombia, an environmental warrior, a black woman. I can't stress this enough, it's the first time in the history of Colombia that we've chosen an alternative, progressive, leftist government.

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There are several factors that explain why we got to elect this leftist government and why we have such an environmental warrior as a vice president and someone who also fights for the rights of those who have been marginalized. The first factor is that there was a big social revolution. It's part of a chain of big social upheaval that was happening all over Latin America. That changed the proportion of leftist governments in the region. It all started with a big strike that was actually called by the unions in the country in the last months of 2019. It was a call to strike in response to the deep inequality and the armed conflict that we had been suffering for a long time.

Also, you have to understand that the job market in Colombia is composed of 70 percent of people who live in the informal sector. When social distancing measures were enforced, these 70 percent of people did not have a way of making money. We also had a problem with our healthcare system because it had been privatized, it was not functioning properly, so it could not help people when they needed it the most and that resulted in more deaths. In 2021, the union decided to call again for another strike that was fed by the 2019 strike that had been cut short by the pandemic. This big social energy took over the cities, took over the whole country. When they saw that the government was doing absolutely nothing to respond to all this, this pushed Colombian people over the edge, that's when they decided that they needed to change everything that had not been working until then.

The two big strikes called in 2019 and 2021 by the unions, respond to three big reasons, I think. The first is that the government decided to implement a series of reforms in labor that just wanted to create a parallel system for social security that was going to turn work into an even more precarious and more flimsy situation for many of the workers. Second, they wanted to launch a series of fiscal reforms or tax reforms that meant that they were going to raise the taxes for the poorest households, while lowering the taxes for the powerful corporations and the rich people that had put the previous president in power. The third reason, I think, is the anti-social violence that we've been seeing in Colombia, because Colombian union leaders are still being murdered for what they do. Together with the anti-social violence that we're seeing, and the fact that the government was trying to deepen the inequality with the proposals that they have put forth, that made people realize that they couldn't take it anymore.

One of the most important factors that explain how we got a new Congress and a new government is, as I said, the inequality that we've been talking about in our conversation. This inequality is picked up by the unions and there were other social movements, environmental movements, student movements, movements for racial equality movements for the defense of human rights. All these movements, including also the LGBTQ+ community, they had all been resisting and fighting back, but working separately, because in a weakened democracy what the government always does is attack social movements, try to hamper their growth, try to keep them from reaching government, try to keep them from establishing a dialogue. When the unions called these strikes, the unions were united and then the social movements they heeded the call, and then they got together as well. I'm talking about indigenous rights movements, environmental movements, LGBTQ rights movements, university students, both coming from private and public universities. This unity was heard in all Colombia.

Of course, when a democracy is weak, what would the government do? It just brings out the worst in them. Not only they didn't want to hear what they were saying, but they also attacked them. This movement, when the social movements started working together, they brought all their demands from all regions in the country, regions that might have very different needs, because in some regions in Colombia, not only are they starving, but they lack internet access, they lack access to potable water, they lack access to hospitals. The social movements decided to work together and they presented all

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their proposals in a single document that they submitted to the government. The government did not listen. When they were dismissed, this was the wake up call for Colombian society. They realized that they had to change things.

We had focused so many of our efforts on changing, on getting to pick something different in over 200 years of our republic. We focused on taking the streets. Every union became essential where the campaign was discussed. They became forums for the discussion of the politics of how to change the country. In every square you would see students talking to the citizens about the different candidates, about the different political programs and why this was important.

The celebration was huge. There was a party like you had never seen. Not even if Colombia had won the soccer World Cup we would've seen such a celebration. Everybody was dancing in the squares, cars were honking. We cried. For the first time, we didn't cry out of sadness or over the bodies of all those that we had lost, we were crying out of happiness, because it was a beautiful, historic moment.

The following day after celebrating, we were like, "Okay. We have to get organized, because we have fought. We have won. Now it's time that we hold this new government that we elected accountable." We kept organizing. We kept our activism and the three unions immediately called on their bases and started working together. The Solidarity Center, ILAW, international foundations and other labor academics started working with these big union centrals in Colombia. We worked together with them to create an agenda that incorporated the recommendations that the ILAW had done over the years, the recommendations of Colombia's commercial partners, such as Canada, the EU, the U.S., the OECD. We put together all the recommendations so that we could create an agenda and submit it to the president and the vice president, who by the way, comes from the labor movement and put forth our proposal in a big labor conference. The social movements are doing the same thing.

It's like after celebrating that they won, we called the government and said, "Okay. We elected you and this is what we want. This is what we expect." This government is going to start by doing a huge tax reform for the first time in our country. It will be a progressive tax reform that will raise the taxes on the rich, those who have never contributed to society and invest in the poor. We prioritize political reform, reform of our healthcare system, reform of the labor movement, which of course we are helping to shape. Of course, an energy reform. In total, we are hoping that there will be at least 12 major reforms over two years.

One of the reasons we believe that there's going to be a big change is that there's already been a change in the high ranks of the military and the police. Because if you think of what a democracy is, a democracy needs participation from society. It needs also the state to guarantee the safety of that society, but that's not been the case in Colombia. In Colombia, the government used to be allied with those who acted as if they were above the law, attacking the people. In Colombia, as I'm sure that you saw also in other instances in the U.S., in Colombia, we saw police attacking the people killing people in the streets in protests. We saw this on videos that people would circulate on social media. All these things weakened democracy, because then people lose faith in the fact that the government might represent them or that the state actually has their interests at heart.

When it comes to anti-union violence, well, I think it's very important that he chose Francia Márquez as his vice president, because this sends a message to Colombian society. It says, "It's okay to be part of a union. Unions are important for democracy. They're important for social dialogue, they're needed to respond to the needs of the workers." I think that both on a symbolical level and on a factual level, the decisions that president Petro has made show us that he's actually ready to implement these changes.

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We believe that impunity and antisocial violence can end in Colombia. I think my words show how I feel, how the country feels.

I've been supporting union work even before I left university. It's like we were used to losing, because we would protest against what the government would be doing, we would try to raise awareness and we were always doing so in a defensive way, because we were used to losing and we didn't want them to harm us anymore, to take away anymore rights. I made the personal decision to support president Petro and Francia Márquez's agenda believing that change was possible. Now, we're happy. We're hopeful. We believe that change is possible. It's great because we're seeing union colleagues who are actually part of government, now.

In fact, not long ago, in the ministry of labor, we saw an ex-president of one of the biggest unions here in Colombia become vice minister. This is someone who had been part of the worker's rights fight, part of ... He had been in jail for going to strike. Seeing these changes gives us hope. We know that change has just begun, but we have the opportunity to build from the ground, a more just an equitable society. For the first time, in a long time, every time that someone calls me from another country, I feel proud of sharing what was going on in Colombia. I feel really happy to share what we're doing here.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

What's happening in Colombia is so incredibly exciting and shows the power of workers and independent unions, when they unite across diverse communities. Labor has been essential to democracy for more than a century. Our next guest, Angela Cornell, reinforces how unions not only are effective in standing up to authoritarian regimes, but by fighting for a level playing for the working class they create more stable democracy.

Hello, Angela Cornell. Welcome to the podcast.

### **Angela Cornell:**

Hello. Thanks very much for the invitation.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Well, really excited to talk to you today. Let's just jump right into it. Based on your analysis and research, observations, what is the connection between labor and democracy? Can you give us the big picture and then we'll talk about some more specifics.

### **Angela Cornell:**

Labor unions have long been instrumental in the struggle for democratization, in the defense of democratic institutions, in the face of autocratic challenges, in the expansion of political, economic and social rights and just broadly advancing the voice and interests of working people around the globe. It was over a hundred years ago that the UN's International Labor Organization was founded, building on that consensus that labor rights are essential for social justice and political stability. But unfortunately, we still see unions under assault around the world.

If you don't mind, I'd like to step back just for a moment to reflect on the current context, because this is a critically important time to be discussing democracy since we're witnessing some of the greatest challenges to democratic regimes since the 1930s. After 30 years of steady democratic advances in

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much of the world in the latter decades of the 20th century, countries in every region of the world have taken an authoritarian turn. Democracy's global retreat has coincided with the organization and political strength of labor unions, in much of the world.

Returning to your question about the link between labor and democracy. There's extensive research and empirical studies on the working class and unions and the critical role that they've played in forging and defending democracies. The organized working class has appeared as a key actor in the development of full democracy almost everywhere. The organized working class were the primary carrier of democracy, playing a decisive role in the forging of democratic regimes and the most consistently pro democratic force, which pushed forward and fought for democracy against the resistance of other class actors.

Some of the more emblematic examples of labor movements instrumental in the push for democracy include, of course, Poland with Solidarity, South Africa, Brazil, Chile, Egypt. The Tunisian labor movement, UGTT, received the Nobel Peace Prize for its leading role along with other civil society organizations in preserving democratic transition. Now, some of these countries have shifted, but it doesn't discount the instrumental role and accomplishments of organized labor.

Perhaps, it would be helpful to discuss some of the ways in which unions bolster democracy. Empirical research confirms the broad, positive impact of union membership in most types of political and civic involvement, including voting, protesting, signing petitions. Union membership has positively affected electoral and collective action outcomes, especially for low income voters. There's something very important about union organization in the workplace and the way it advances meaningful decision-making roles at work, which makes a crucial difference in the advancement of political participation. This experience really helps to develop the qualities that are necessary for active participation in the democratic system. The direct involvement in collective bargaining can advance these qualities as well as other workplace negotiations if they involve real power sharing.

Unions build political power in local communities, as well as the state, national and global levels. At all levels unions and union federations, advanced policies that benefit working people and help to counterbalance the role of capital. Unions help to consolidate democracy by holding corporations accountable. This countervailing power that strong unions have played is important when transnational corporations have such enormous power and influence.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Wow. I'm so glad you raised the issue of the private sector and the role of unions in holding corporations accountable. You made a connection to democracy. Could you say a little bit more about that?

### **Angela Cornell:**

With the expanding power and role that corporations play, quite broadly, throughout society, there is a need for this countervailing force, in a way, to bring forth or advance the interest of working people. That's critically important around the globe.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

The examples you were sharing, there's a clear line of unions fighting to level the economic playing field, closing huge gaps between the very wealthy and everyone else to ensure that wages support families.

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Can you tell us more about how a more equal society economically as well as socially, culturally, is essential to thriving democracies and the specific role that unions play there.

### **Angela Cornell:**

As union membership has declined, we've seen disparities between the rich and the poor increase. This gap actually has even grown during the pandemic. The very wealthy have seen their wealth expand dramatically. This level of inequality erodes social cohesion, it undermines democratic institutions. In addition to the disparities, we've also seen dramatic gaps in the growth of workers' wages and that of the level of CEO compensation, with the latter growing dramatically. While working people have not reaped the benefit of their increasing productivity in recent decades, CEO compensation has skyrocketed. Substantial research demonstrates that unions reduce inequality, which is important for bolstering democracy. Unions not only lift the wages and benefits of their members, but they also help raise the wages of non-union members. As union membership has declined, so has wage growth. Importantly, unions have also been instrumental in the passage of labor protections, the social safety net, including social security, minimum wage, overtime, workplace health and safety, medical leave, among others, confronting strenuous oppositions from business interests. Furthermore, labor played a key role in the passage of civil rights legislation and the prohibition against housing discrimination.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

When you're talking, I'm thinking about examples of countries like Brazil and Colombia, where the labor movement is allied with social movements and are part of a progressive vision of social change and democracy there. I understand there's new research that shows that unionized workers are less susceptible to appeals of xenophobia, racism and nationalism because through unions, they come together with workers of different races. I think that's the reason. They come together across ethnicity, religion, gender. Can you tell us more about that?

### **Angela Cornell:**

That's exactly right. According to recent scholarship, unions diffuse and reinforce values of solidarity among their members. This can effectively counter the exclusionary ideology of the radical rights. Radical right parties and populist leaders have been able to garner support from white nationalists and build on anti-immigrant sentiments and xenophobia. These very extreme positions have been able to gain support from the white working class, which has faced significant challenges under neoliberal globalization. But union membership reduces racial resentment towards African Americans, which helps to explain why the labor movement is the largest mass membership organization of people of color. This work reinforced the ways in which workers of different origins and nationalities participate together in the union context. It really documents that union members have more effectively been able to resist radical right parties and leaders.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

I just wonder, because unions, their leaders and members, in so many countries around the world often have been among the first targets of authoritarian regimes. They're certainly the targets of right wing populist regimes. Why are they often the target of authoritarian regimes? What is it about the labor movement that threatens these other kinds of leaders that are not democratic?

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### Angela Cornell:

I should clarify that when I'm talking about labor unions, I'm talking about independent unions with political and organizational autonomy. In some places, business interests, and even the state can control and dominate labor union. But back to your question, independent labor unions are often the target of repression in the fight for democratization, as a result of their role, historically, in displacing colonialism and fighting fascism, where they were promptly the target of repression in Nazi Germany, Mussolini's Italy, Franco's Spain. I mean, even in democratic regimes, trade unionists have been persecuted by business interests. In some countries, those interests are linked to right-wing militias or state actors for their role in advancing the economic and political interests of working people.

I should also add, we were talking a moment ago, and you mentioned this as well, the ways in which authoritarian leaning leaders and regimes target immigrants, and try to build on racial divisions. I'd also like to note, we also see many of these autocratic leaders and parties undermining the interest of women as well. We see that affecting policy. The labor unions have been important, not just in racial equality and also advancing the interests of immigrant workers, but also in the advancing interests of women, which have really come under assault as well.

### Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well, I know that the collection of unions that are in the AFL-CIO are, combined, the largest membership-based women's organization in the United States. That most certainly translates globally where we have more than 70 million women in independent unions across the globe largest women's organizations in the history.

This is a really inspiring conversation. It's inspiring to me to think about the possibility of working people coming together, building these institutions and standing up for democracy and democracy that delivers and has meaning for real working people. To have this conversation at a time when we see in countries from Myanmar, the crushing of an independent labor movement, the dismantling of the labor movement of Hong Kong, the dismantling and imprisonment of the entire labor leadership of Belarus and exile of those leaders among so many others, while we're simultaneously watching the amazing forward movement of Colombia led with this labor movement and a broad coalition of social actors trying to rebuild a democratic future for that country.

I guess, as we're kind of closing, I'm just curious, what inspires you? In all the stories, countries, that you've looked at and you've been interested in, in your academic and personal career, which countries' stories and labor movements have inspired you and give you the most hope?

### Angela Cornell:

I should say, when I think about the labor movement in Colombia, where I have done some work, I have been so incredibly impressed. I mean, in the U.S., we sometimes say it's a struggle to form a union, imagine in a place like Colombia, where over the years being a trade unionist is putting your life on the line. When I interviewed trade unionists in Colombia with my students, there were plexiglass protections and there were bullet holes in the outside of the buildings. So many trade unionists had put their lives on the line. So many trade unionists have been murdered in Colombia in the past. That's why it is so incredibly exciting to see that country's transition. We think it will be an enormous win for the working people of that country.

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I'm impressed by independent trade unionists around the globe who risk so much to fight for their free association, the right to work together with other civil society organizations and advance the interest of working people. That's really an amazing thing. I'm also super excited about what I see happening in the U.S. A lot of young people and people of color are fighting for the right to have unions, in workplaces that have not traditionally enjoyed union rights. I'm impressed. I'm impressed with their tenacity, with their creativity and their success. I'm really excited about what the future holds here as well.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

Building a more diverse, inclusive, and economically fair future in the United States and around the world, that's what unions are about. That's what democracy looks like. Thank you so much, Angela Cornell, for this really exciting interview and for the tremendous new contribution to the literature in your book. Could you just tell us a little bit about your book as we're closing out?

### **Angela Cornell:**

Absolutely. This year we have published the Cambridge Handbook of Labor and Democracy. We hope it will move the discussion forward and emphasize the critical role that unions have played historically and are playing today in bolstering our democracy. We really need vibrant and independent unions to thrive and to have strong democratic institutions. We think this is the right time for the book. We hope that it moves the discussion forward in the right direction.

### **Shawna Bader-Blau:**

When we think about what makes democracy work, Angela Cornell and Mery Laura Perdomo make it clear that unions are fundamental. Unions reduce inequality, which is important for individuals to thrive and participate in their communities. Unions have been instrumental in the passage of worker protections and in creating a social safety net, including; minimum wages, workplace health and safety and paid sick leave. Unions unite people across communities and, in so doing, foster greater understanding and acceptance, building resistance to anti-democratic movements built on racism, nativism and ethnic and religious hatred. Through the collective strength of working people, unions can stand up to authoritarian governments. Many times they offer the only successful resistance because of this united front. When we look at how we make democracy work, we look at unions past and present, they have shown us the way.

You can follow and subscribe to The Solidarity Center Podcast on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you find your shows. Learn more about the Solidarity Center at [solidaritycenter.org](http://solidaritycenter.org) and follow our social media on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network. Our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. A special thanks to the staff of The Solidarity Center, who assisted with this Podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, we work to ensure a righteous future for workers. Dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. For The Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.