



Special Podcast: A discussion about the Race-Class Narrative to Unite Working People.mp3

Audrena Redmond: Hello and welcome to Radio Free CSU, the official podcast of the California Faculty Association. My name is Audrena Redmond, and I'm your host for this 10-part series, "Stronger Together," here on Radio Free CSU. This series is inspired by the intentional anti-racism and social justice transformation CFA began in late 2016 and each episode will discuss one of our 10 guiding principles with the CFA leader activists. However, we have something special planned for you this time. Our hope is that you, too, will be inspired to engage in anti-racism and social justice work. And join us again for more conversations about why an anti-racism social justice transformation is necessary. Today we are joined by Tinselyn Simms of the Service Employees International Union Racial Justice Center and Anika Fassia of Demos and Demos Action. I'm going to let them introduce themselves so.

Anika Fassia: Thank you Audrena. Yes my name's Anika Fassia and I'm the Project Manager of the Race-Class Narrative Project both with Demos and Demos Action.

Tinselyn Simms: I am since Tinselyn Simms, as you've said, and I am a Communications Coordinator at SEIU that works in partnership with the Racial Justice Center.

Audrena Redmond: I'm going to let Anika to explain what is the work that brought us all here.

Anika Fassia: Thank you Audrena. So I want to make sure that I give a shout out to our principles of the project. This was definitely not done in isolation. We worked with Ian Haney-López, the author of "Dog Whistle Politics," also a law professor at (UC) Berkeley, and nationally known linguist Anat Shenker-Osorio, of ASO Communications.

Anika Fassia: So they actually had a conversation, the two of them, from intellectual underpinnings of Ian's book "Dog Whistle Politics" which basically talks through the history of how racism has been used very effectively as a divide-and-conquer tactic of the right wing or the conservative side of politics in order to build vast amounts of economic wealth. Therefore exacerbating economic inequality to levels that we've never seen before. And so through their conversation, it became very clear that we needed to highlight this strategy and create an alternative. And that particularly after the 2016 election where the dog whistle became a bullhorn was that this was the time, that more now than ever, that we needed to no longer be talking about "should we or should we not talk about race" but when. But we need to talk about race now and how can we most effectively do that, which was the impetus of this project and given Ian Haney-López's relationship to Heather McGhee who was the former executive director of Demos and Demos Action. She was also a student of his. And he being a senior fellow and made the most sense for Demos and Demos Action to be the organization where this project was housed.

Audrena Redmond: Fascinating. So I have had the pleasure of hearing some talks and seeing the works and reading the works and I think it's really transformative. Not to overuse that word here,

but this really is transformative. So what did you find? What did you find from let's say the general population? And then what did you find when we talked to union households? So Anika, what do we find in the general population.

Anika Fassia: Sure.

Anika Fassia: So we did this both in a qualitative phase and a quantitative phase. The qualitative phase which was done in partnership with Brilliant Corners Research Strategies Cornell Belcher, where we did 14 focus groups. Both in states Ohio, Minnesota, California, Georgia. And then from those focus groups we really got a sense of the anecdotal evidence of where people are at in terms of having these conversations and then took that knowledge into a quantitative phase where we did a national online dial survey, where we did a sample of 1,300 representative adults in the United States, with over-samples in the African-American community, the Latino community, millennials, and low propensity voters. And we also had the opportunity to do this at the state level in Ohio, Minnesota, California, and Indiana. So there were five surveys fielded at once. And what we learned from the National Survey which is what I'll speak to on this podcast was that we can actually beat out on common opposition narrative and the status quo colorblind economic populism message, kind of familiarity message of the established Democratic side, with a message that leads with race and class as inseparable notions. That's a pretty huge feat. I think the common knowledge has been to avoid race and not talk about race particularly among the Democratic establishment, one for fear of backlash that we would lose even more white working class voters or white voters in general, which is mixed — some may say is why we lost the election in 2016. And that class is the issue that cuts across all race and that cuts across all races and which is why we need to be leading with class and not race.

Anika Fassia: And I think we flipped that notion on its head with this research which I feel like it is incredibly monumental.

Audrena Redmond: So when you say "talk about race" does that mean, are you saying instead of saying general working people are for example, we should say working people who are white, black, brown and Asian. Is that what you mean?

Anika Fassia: Great great question Audrena. So we asked we approached how we talk about race in many iterations through the focus groups and what we landed on is that when we say "no matter where we come from what we look like whether white, black or brown, we all want the same things," I'm paraphrasing some of the language here, but that is what we mean by naming race. And then we move into the problem statement which is "the use of racial scapegoating as a tactic by the right" and by that I mean people in power, powerful politicians and their lobbyists that pay for them are pointing the finger at poor families, black people, new immigrants in order to have economic gains while we all stand aside, you know, in our hard times. And so what we learned here is that strategic racism is not a familiar concept to the average individual. Those who are not living breathing working racial justice work and so just to simply name racism or strategic racism does not relay what we want it to relay. I mean trust me, in my heart of racial justice hearts, I wish that we could come to the table with but the average individual in the United States understands racism as animosity between two people of different races.

Anika Fassia: And so in order for us to connect with folks on how strategic racism is being used as a tool we learn that the best way to do that is through the notion of racial scapegoating. That keep people in power are pointing the finger at people like me, a woman of color, new immigrants, black people, poor people, you name it. In order to distract from who is actually creating all the economic inequality that we're all dealing with today.

Audrena Redmond: Tinselyn, what does this study mean for labor unions?

Tinselyn Simms: Well in 2016, the SEIU members and member labor leaders passed a resolution that essentially said we cannot achieve economic justice without racial justice. And what that meant is that economics and issues of class and race are intertwined and inseparable. And if we think that we can just do one without the other, we are kind of fooling ourselves in certain ways. We have to be talking about race and class together because that is the way SEIU members and working people across the country experience things. Moving in that direction, the Racial Justice Center wanted to figure out how do we do that. How do we talk about it in a way that galvanizes people and bring people closer together to build a powerful movement that moves all working people to have a livable wage and benefits and things that our families depend on.

Tinselyn Simms: And what we found in that was that Demos was looking at a similar question and we began talking to them and we began say this what we what they're doing they're definitely applications to arm union members, and so that's how we joined together and decided that we wanted to be a part of this research. And for us it's really looking at what's happening and what's the lived experiences of working people that are part of the labor movement. And that experience is not very different from people that are outside of the movement. We all want the same things we want to be able to have healthcare, we want to be able to have time off of work to take care of our loved ones, or take sick days. We want to be able to have wages and we want to have a voice on our job and we want to be able to have those things together and we had to figure out how do we talk about it. This research has helped us in many ways figure out how we could do a better job of that. So while we were looking for this how do we utilize this in the work that we're doing to galvanize people around the movement of building powerful working people. We approached the study that we could learn from it and then now we're also saying we want to share it with other folks right now.

Audrena Redmond: Yeah which is what you've been doing and what we're doing here. So can you talk a little bit about the results, the national results, and that it's important to talk about race specifically call out those races and as well as I clearly identify the other side. We would call them the greedy rich or the.

Anika Fassia: Certain politicians.

Audrena Redmond: Certain politicians.

Anika Fassia: Lobbyists that pay for them.

Audrena Redmond: Did that message, Tinselyn, is that the same message that resonated with union members when they were surveyed?

Tinselyn Simms: Yes. What we found was that the union members resonated in the messages in the same way that what we would call the general population of the survey. We did not find anything that would make us think that this is not something we should be talking about with union members. We found out that a race class narrative was much more powerful when speaking about how working people could come together and that didn't matter if they were in the union or if they were outside of the union. And so we are being cognizant of this as we're continuing to have conversations and as we continue to try to move an agenda forward and that's what we found at the board.

Audrena Redmond: So we use a term here, and I don't think we've used it before, which is the Race-Class Narrative. Can we can you clarify a little more what that means?

Anika Fassia: Sure. So I just want to reiterate the importance of this project was that we are swimming and living and breathing in a race-baiting environment. By that I mean where race is being used to separate us to divide us for the economic gains of the few. And the reason why we decided that we needed to have empirical evidence about talking about a Race-Class Narrative was we were responding to this race-baiting environment through a class-only message. And so it was it was pretty much falling on, you know, falling flat because if you hear you know someone from the right saying MS-13 is coming to kill you and then an hour later someone from the left comes and knocks on your door and they say "Debt-free college," well, the person is thinking "I don't care about that free college because MS-13 just shot me."

Anika Fassia: So our message is we're not responding to the race baiting culture that is everywhere. And so we needed evidence. And some findings to support that like this class-only plan are not working. It's never worked and that we really need to bring forward an alternative narrative that speaks to the race baiting environment that we are living and breathing and so that is speaking to race in an affirming multiracial social solidarity way and speaks to the economic prosperity that we all deserve. And so our thought was that this is not a race or class debate. This is not even a race AND class debate. This is race class, inseparable, reinforcing each other and needing to tell the story from that perspective.

Audrena Redmond: Thank you. Thank you for explaining the Race-Class Narrative to us. So what can people do? What can our union members do — and they're members of the general population — so what can people do? Tinselyn?

Tinselyn Simms: Well I think the first thing we have to stop fooling ourselves about is that whether or not it's optional to talk about race. Right? A lot of times we treat the conversation about race as if it's something that we can do or we cannot do. And the truth is that that's not real. Right?

Tinselyn Simms: The conversation about race is happening and unless we're having that conversation too, we're conceding that the narrative that's being put in place by the opposition that is the narrative that is. That it's real and that's the narrative that's going to resonate with people. And so I think that's the first thing we have to realize is that we are having lives that are being impacted by racialized issues and if we just try to talk about them as economics-only issue, we are missing the point and we are conceding defeat.

Audrena Redmond: I'm floored. I want more of this and I hope you all will share this will listen more than once and that you will go and find more information. So where can people learn more?

Anika Fassia: So this information is all completely open source. There's two parts of this — there is a c3 aspect to the project which can be all of it can be found on Demos website at demos.org where you have all the data, we have handouts, we have links to the state findings. And then we also have a video that brings these messages to life that was done in collaboration through the Peoria Project. And then for the partisan aspect of the data you can find out on our Demos Action website at demosaction.org. That's the c4 aspect of the research. If you have specific needs where you would like to incorporate this into your work, whether that's through door knocking scripts, blogs, Op-Eds, you want to bring a training to your team or have a webinar for your staff, please email us at RCN@demos.org and RCN@demosaction.org for the political side.

Audrena Redmond: And so Tinselyn, for people who are looking for specific union support around this work, where would they reach out to find more information?

Tinselyn Simms: Everyone can reach out to the Racial Justice Center and email address there is

rjc@seiu.org.

Audrena Redmond: Thank you. Thank you so much. I've been joined today by Tinselyn Simms, of the SEIU Racial Justice Center and Anika Fassia, of Demos and Demos Action. My name is Audrena Redmond I've been your host. That's the end of our podcast for today, but do join us again for more conversations discussing the Guiding Principles of CFA's Anti-racism and Social Justice Transformation. Remember, transformation as an action verb, meaning "a thorough or dramatic change in form or appearance." Thank you.