

[Transcript] The Ezra Klein Show / First Person: How the Left Is Cannibalizing Its Own Power

I'm Ezra Klein. This is The Ezra Klein Show.

Hey, this is Ezra. I'm out sick. Man, the cold and flu season this year.

So we wanted to share a recent episode from our colleagues over at First Person, another great New York Times opinion podcast.

This is a conversation with Maurice Mitchell.

He's head of the Progressive Working Families Party, and he wrote this much-talked-about, much-discussed essay about the internal conflicts that have roiled and, in some cases, paralyzed progressive organizations in recent years. Enjoy.

From New York Times Opinion, I'm Lulu Garcia Navarro, and this is First Person.

Toxic, problematic, impossible, broken.

Those are just a few words that have been used to describe the internal workings of progressive organizations in recent years.

Me Too and the Black Lives Matter movement have forever changed our workplaces, and I'd say for the better, but in many organizations on the left, they've also caused paralysis. Take the ACLU.

In 2017, it defended the white supremacist march in Charlottesville on the grounds of free speech.

In the aftermath, employees revolted, saying that the leadership was harming marginalized communities.

What followed were years of infighting and what the Times called an identity crisis.

And the ACLU is far from alone.

The left is eating itself.

And Maurice Mitchell has had enough.

He's the head of the Working Families Party, a progressive political party, and he's been an organizer for two decades.

He recently wrote a provocative essay about why it's time for a reckoning with the workplace reckoning.

Today, Maurice Mitchell on the inner turmoil, tearing the left apart.

Maurice, you're the head of a national political party, the Working Families Party.

And it describes its mission as uniting people across race

and geography against the wealthy and powerful

who, in your telling, use divisions among working class people against them.

Were you always very attuned to social justice, even as a kid?

Well, some of my first experiences was literally around the kitchen table

with my grandmother, who was an immigrant from Trinidad and Tobago,

who came here and worked in other people's homes to care for other people's children.

And she struggled really hard to get a sort of foothold in this country.

Where was the kitchen table?

The kitchen table was in Long Beach, New York, which is a suburb of New York.

And everything that I now am fighting against as a young person, I saw.

My mom was a union nurse.

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My dad was a union electrician.

And he was injured at the job.

And I saw his struggle to be treated fairly by his employer after an injury that took him out of the workforce.

All those things, I think, built in me pretty early on, this fire to challenge those barriers, because they just did not feel fair to me.

They did not sit with me.

And then the other piece, you know, by the time I went away for college,

I can't tell you the amount of times I was pulled over by the police.

I can't tell you the amount of really traumatic experiences that I had as a black boy.

You know, a nerdy black boy that was fascinated by ideas.

And unfortunately, the systems like the school system didn't know what to do with me.

And often tried to extinguish my passion for words and ideas and social change.

And that only built a bigger fire in me.

At what point did you start actually large-scale organizing?

So I went to Howard University.

The historically black university in Washington, DC?

Yes.

So I went to Howard in the late 90s.

I was very idealistic.

And it's funny because Howard in the late 90s wasn't necessarily a hotbed of politics.

But nevertheless, there was a moment that politicized almost everybody on campus.

Prince Jones, who was a classmate of all of ours, he was murdered by an undercover police officer.

And it shook the community to its core.

And I very quickly became one of the organizers of some of the protests that came out of that moment.

And I remember I was called to a late night meeting and there were a number of campus leaders around the table.

And we're trying to figure out what we should do.

And folks had kind of organized towards the position of having a march.

And Georgia Avenue is like the main thoroughfare in the community in and around Howard University.

And folks were suggesting that a bunch of students do a march down Georgia Avenue.

And I remember intervening because Georgia Avenue, it's a black community with a lot of local black businesses.

We would just be making perhaps a little bit more difficult the life of the community.

And the community was already aligned around our issues.

We wouldn't necessarily be bringing the fight directly to the power.

And we lived in DC and the Department of Justice was not too far.

And I remember very passionately arguing that we march directly to the Department of Justice, which we did.

And the Department of Justice has these huge iron doors.

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And when we came, the security guards began to close those doors.
And it was so symbolic of everything that we were working on.
They were literally closing the doors of justice as we marched towards the front of the building.
And it intensified the investigation.
Unfortunately, they didn't pursue the investigation.
But for me, if I had not spoken up when I felt like the action logic was off in that moment,
then that protest, that action would have had a different effect.
And so I learned a lot.
And I wanted to be part of more things like that.
After graduating from Howard, Marie started working for nonprofits,
organizing on the local and state levels back home in New York.
But then, in 2014, Michael Brown was killed by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri.
I remember sitting at my desk in Manhattan watching a live stream online in real time.
You are lawfully assembled.
We ain't doing nothing but saying, hands up, don't shoot.
This ain't your daddy's civil right movement.
The contrast of me sitting behind this desk and of those young people,
just everyday people in Ferguson responding so bravely to police with riot gear and tear gas,
it compelled me to action.
So I quickly, I picked up the phone, I reached out to a local organization,
and I pretty abruptly, I left my job, I left my friends, my family, my community,
and I went to St. Louis to provide support as best as I could to that organization.
And I had the privilege of being one of the organizers there on the ground
that helped to propel what might have been a moment for some people into a movement.
We're talking about division, and I'm thinking back at this time,
there were definitely voices that emerged as leaders in the movement,
but it was really a constellation of people and groups.
And we don't agree on everything, and it's okay not to agree.
I mean, how did disagreements about direction get resolved?
Well, I'll say two things.
A lot of us were students of the civil rights era,
where we understand popularly the civil rights era as the heroic actions of individual activists,
usually men, usually men in suits,
and so we wanted to interrupt that and to create the conditions where many, many leaders,
with many ideas, could see the movement for Black Lives as a venue to build power.
And I think there's some upsides to that,
but the challenge is making sure that there's some coherence there.
I mean, how did that manifest for you on the ground during those early days of the movement?
Well, you have to understand the movement for Black Lives is becoming a cultural presence
at the same time that Donald Trump is becoming more and more of a cultural presence in his own
right.
And I remember being in debates about whether or not elections were effective or necessary,
or if it was simply our job to hit the streets.

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We were debating whether or not the Republican or Democratic Party had anything meaningfully different to offer Black folks.

And I was on the side of the debate that felt that electoral power was a very necessary and important form of power.

And I think most people would agree that four years under Trump versus four years under Clinton would provide some meaningful differences for everyday people.

In retrospect, I wish I was more vocal.

Why didn't you speak out?

When I think back, I think I was muted by the orthodoxy of maximalism.

Somehow there was a unspoken culture that said hitting the streets and that tactic was more of a legitimate and consistent tactic.

What you're saying about the orthodoxy of maximalism is that people didn't want you to compromise and that there was this idea of staying pure to the cause?

Yeah, absolutely.

And there was an idea that the tactic of direct actions and the tactics of protest somehow signified being pure.

And so I demurred in order to stay true to that orthodoxy and I deeply regretted it.

There is a cost to hewing to the tactics that make us maybe feel the most correct but don't present, ironically, a more correct and accurate picture of the terrain.

I think the outcome of four years under Trump versus the outcome of four years under Clinton, those aren't just abstract.

Yeah, those aren't just abstractions.

They have real life consequences.

So of course, President Trump was elected and the left lost power both nationally and on a state level.

At that moment, did you feel like you had to make a shift in terms of how you are going to move forward in this new landscape?

Yes, absolutely.

What I came to believe was that our work is a series of both ends, right?

So the folks who are arguing that we needed to hit the street, they were right.

The folks who are arguing that there were meaningful differences between Clinton and Trump that were worthy of us leaning into the electoral front of the struggle were also right.

And Trump's election proved that.

And so that inspired me to eventually leave a organizing home and a political home in the movement for Black Lives to join and lead the Working Families Party

because I felt like there needed to be venues where we could build a multiracial United Front.

Black people are around 12% of the overall population.

And so if you're interested in Black life, you have to be interested in what the other percent of the population is concerned with.

This period when you became the leader of the Working Families Party, it was a huge moment of upheaval for power structures and hierarchies within the workplace.

I mean, it started with me too, then very quickly became about race as well as gender and obviously then came to a head in the summer of 2020 with George Floyd's murder by police.

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I'm wondering how you took in the demands for change to the traditional hierarchies and power structures because you've just come to lead an organization which has an agenda outside. But all of a sudden there's all these internal pressures. Did it seem like a good thing to you as a leader when it started? The pressure inside organizations for change. It felt righteous and a necessary correction. I mean, I don't have to tell you that in every institution, men with power were given the authority to sideline and to abuse and to ignore women. And when women spoke up, our culture did not create any space for them at all. And so this was a necessary correction. Did it complicate your role at all? I mean, did you have to make changes in how you were leading? I mean, so for sure these corrections should complicate our roles, right? You know, the cultural demands of the Me Too movement and the cultural demands of the Moomer for Black Lives created a demand for a more fair, more egalitarian, more consistent culture in the Working Families Party. And I saw it as my duty to take that mandate very seriously. And I as an employer cannot end patriarchy and sexism and white supremacy and racism. The best thing I could do is to acknowledge it and to when it happens and it will happen, right? My job is to be upfront and transparent and honest about those dynamics and work my hardest to create a compassionate and caring workplace. What did that look like? Well, it looked like a number of things. It looked like diversifying our workplace. It looked like this is, I think, a really important story. The party was unionized under me and I could just tell you how I felt during that moment. I felt very uncomfortable and it posed so many questions about me as a leader. I questioned what it meant that after so many decades, the party was unionizing under me if I had done something wrong. You know, I lost sleep over it, honestly. And, you know, I grew up in a union family. I've been committed to and have worked for the interests of unions. But personally, just sharing personally, yeah, I wrestled with it and I had to wrestle with how I responded. And in the moment, I recognized the union and I was really proud to do that. And it ended up actually making us a more powerful and stronger workplace. After the break, Maurice starts to see the left as its own worst enemy. I'm Lulu Garcia Navarro, the host of First Person from New York Times Opinion. On the show, I talk to all sorts of people about the experiences that shape their beliefs. Some of my friends got shamed and called out in school board meetings. You start wondering, oh, is this going to happen to me? Beliefs that can be polarizing, but the emotions behind them are central to understanding the world we live in.

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Oh, yeah, I've had my concealed weapon and I've had a gun on me, but now in my later age, switching over to a classroom, that's a whole new ball game.

I want to explore opinion in all of its complexity and every opinion starts with a story.

I'm going to ask you this because this is like a very volatile period and you decide to become a politician.

I really want to understand how that happened.

I mean, what inspired you to run for office?

First Person from New York Times Opinion. Listen to new episodes wherever you get your podcasts. So you personally, Marisa, are experiencing the results of some of this upheaval within the workplace.

You're having sleepless nights, but you ultimately welcome the change and you think it makes your organization stronger.

But then last fall, just after the midterm elections, you wrote a piece called Building Resilient Organizations.

It's the 6000 word long piece.

It's gotten a lot of attention, especially in progressive circles because it's a public critique of, and I think to borrow a phrase from my colleague, Michelle Goldberg, the left self-sabotaging impulse.

What was it that you were seeing that prompted you to write it?

So in this piece, I was trying to present what I see as the internal challenges of the progressive movement, but also a vision for the future.

And I'm writing this piece observing the fact that the far right, the ultra ultra far right, the violent right wing, these forces are not marginal forces.

These are violent neo-fascist forces.

And progressives specifically have the tools around what leading a pro-democracy movement against these forces could look like.

However, our organizations are operating in ways that are suboptimal.

And I could no longer tolerate that, and I felt in my bones a desire to lay out an analysis so that our organizations could be more effective.

At the beginning of your essay, you say identity and position are misused to create a doom loop that undermines the effort to build political power.

Can you take me inside this doom loop?

Can you give me an example of what it looks like? I mean, what have you seen?

Sure.

So I've witnessed identity, whether that's somebody's gender identity or racial identity, one's position, whatever it is,

being weaponized in ways that were not useful for the work.

For example, I'll use myself, right?

So like I said before, I'm the son of Caribbean immigrants.

I've been in conversations where we would be debating ideas and then somebody might stand up and say,

well, as a black son of Caribbean immigrants, I think the organization should support candidate A.

And then that would move the room in one direction or just shut the debate down completely.

But why isn't that...

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The thing that we needed most was to continue the debate.

So if I said as a Latina whose parents didn't graduate from high school, I think X.

Why is that a problem? Am I not centering my full self?

Am I not saying where I come from so that people can have a better sense that my experience informs my opinion?

It is not a problem, it only in how you employ it.

Oftentimes, people use that phrase to do the opposite of opening up.

People use that phrase to close down and to almost suggest that because I have these identities, like because I'm a black son of immigrants, that this is a mic drop, and my identity in itself establishes the legitimacy of my position.

Whereas your identity is a jumping off point that could create greater awareness, more connection, the possibility of deeper curiosity and solidarity, oftentimes people are misusing that.

And so it's not the fact of, you know, I...

There could be two black son of immigrants who have differing opinions, for example.

Absolutely. And look, I am black, so is Clarence Thomas.

So simply elevating my black identity as a totalizing argument for the legitimacy of my ideas is, I think, a misassessment.

Oftentimes, though, people talk about that or front-load that because they want to be taken seriously,

especially when in a group of perhaps white people.

And there is a sense that they need to be listened to, and so therefore they front-load their identity.

I mean, do you think that white people get shut down when this gets done and there's perhaps a better way to do it?

Well, what you just described, that dynamic, that's the story of my life as a black man in this society, right?

Being in rooms where there's white people who have a lot more power

and where I have to come up with strategies to figure out how to be legitimate.

And absolutely one of the strategies for legitimizing yourself includes elevating your personal story.

There's ways that that could be done in ways that I think are productive, but we run the risk of over-correcting.

As a black person, it does no favors to me for me to say, as a black son of immigrants and then for white people to sit on their hands and shut up,

I need to be sharpened by debate.

You know, I might at the end of the day think you're wrong, but I need the back and forth in order to sharpen my position or change my mind.

And so nobody is doing anybody favors, we're just performing while, like I said before, the far right is assiduously organizing to take all of our rights from us.

And so, you know, we have this hypothetical space, which by the way, we've all been in, where, you know, you are having a contentious debate about an issue.

And there is a sense that white people have to be silent in order to show solidarity.

And yet you're saying they need to engage, but the risks are so high.

Well, it's interesting, right?

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It's my job to sustain the risk of possibly feeling really, really uncomfortable or having somebody maybe call me out.

It's my job to sustain that risk in order to pursue a real and durable conversation that sharpens everybody.

And so when we talk about risk, it's actually really interesting.

I think it lets white people off the hook because they could somehow suggest that they're performing some form of solidarity by remaining silent.

When the most uncomfortable thing to do, if I was a white person in a debate around racial justice, is to stay in the debate and run the risk of being wrong.

Run the risk of offending somebody, but staying in the debate and staying in the relationship.

And good, solid relationships could withstand those dynamics.

And that's a harder thing to do.

This brings me to my next point because in your essay, you also say that the ideology is one that sees anything less than the most idealistic position as evidence of corruption.

I mean, I'd love to get your thoughts on this idea because if you have the discussion, you also make this point that there needs to be a willingness to compromise.

So I talk a lot about this idea of maximalism, right?

Oftentimes, we're arguing the correctness or the moral sort of clarity of a position.

And therefore, if anybody takes any other position, they must be morally compromised.

They must be selling out.

But there's another piece of that dynamic is the power that we have in order to achieve that outcome.

And of course, we have something less than 100% of the power, so we can't expect 100% of the outcomes.

So that negotiation, that compromise is actually not a decision.

It is a reality.

If you have less than 100% of the power, any fight will be a compromise.

Give me an example.

Just love to be grounded in your own experience.

Yeah, I could give an example.

So we'll go to the 2020 elections at the Working Families Party.

Following the presidential primaries, we were left with the binary choice of Biden or Trump.

And especially inside of the staff, there was a debate, right?

Because Joe Biden doesn't come from a progressive background.

He's considered a political moderate.

And we're a progressive organization.

And so some people argued, and this is a legitimate argument, right?

This is a good faith debate.

Some argued that it's our job to present the most ideologically pure position for the left.

And if that's the case, then how could you endorse Joe Biden?

The other position is that it's the job of the Working Families Party to present a venue for working people to have the most political power.

And then from that position, how can you not endorse Joe Biden?

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We did endorse Joe Biden, and I'm very proud of the work that we did to make Trump a one-term president.

And we have a lot of differences with Joe Biden, and they pale in comparison to the differences that we have with Trump and the very, very far right.

And a vote for Joe Biden, it's a vote for working people to be an organizing terrain.

We're over the next four years under Biden.

We are in a better position to organize our forces.

So the Intercept published this very long piece last summer about the internal strife unraveling progressive institutions, and I mean from the ACLU to Planned Parenthood.

And I want to go through some of the examples in the piece.

Please.

There's been reporting around strife at the environmental group this year, a club, which caused the executive director to step down.

The turmoil was so all-consuming that the organization, according to a congressional aide, didn't really engage in a serious way in discussions surrounding efforts to combat climate change and Biden's build back better plan.

So the whole purpose of the organization was kind of halted because they were having so many internal discussions.

I mean, have you also lost out on political opportunities because of internal strife or had the work stymied because of these debates?

So I could only speak from my experience.

People have asked me what spurred me to write this article.

I first started writing it as a note to myself because I had to deal with challenges inside of the Working Families Party.

And I think a lot of times the conversations get reduced to these wacky sort of millennials who are presenting unfair demands of management or these abusive managers who are shutting down debate and are just oppressive and advancing white supremacy culture.

What I've seen in my midst are very, very decent people who are very, very passionate. For in a debate where they're talking past each other and the relatively young, relatively new people that were becoming really frustrated, they were very hardworking people who were very, very passionate and very aligned.

They didn't show up at work and decided, you know, we're just going to like raise a funk, right?

They came to work because they wanted to change the conditions. That's why you come to work at a social justice organization.

And likewise, people like myself in leadership, I don't come to work to reaffirm and re-ascribe the forms of oppression that I claim I want to challenge.

However, if we, as leaders, if we sit on our hands or if we get into bunker mentality, if we become too defensive, whatever, then these things begin to bubble up into these ruptures that I think we've seen.

And we can't tolerate any rupturing of any of these really, really vital organizations that are working on climate change, working on racial justice, working on the front lines of gender justice.

We can't afford that. So it's not the debate, but it's in how we hold it.

So let's talk about what you see as the way forward. If organizations on the left are being paralyzed

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by infighting, but the change that has happened has been beneficial in parts, how do you balance those two?

How do you keep what's good without losing the thread?

So rather than play whack-a-mole with the different symptoms of maximalism, if it's some of the ways that people misappropriate identity politics or whatever else, there is a unique responsibility of leadership to create clarity about what our North Star is, about who we are as a political vehicle, and about the specific strategies that we're responsible for. Organizations need to be clear and need to say that with their chest so that these debates could be more productive so that we're not debating the very core, the very DNA of the organization every single time.

Can resolving all of that just fall on leadership? Don't all ranks need to check themselves?

Well, I believe it's the responsibility for all of us. I think that leadership has more of a responsibility, right?

I encourage people both lower in the hierarchy and younger people to interrogate some of these ideas. The answer isn't shutting things down or getting people to toe the line.

And I've certainly been in organizational settings like that when I was younger where I didn't necessarily feel like my voice mattered and I had some good ideas.

And it's important that we create venues where they could express that fully and we don't undermine or quiet it because we're annoyed.

Maurice, you think both and rather than either or thinking is really important.

But are you trying to have it both ways? Because, you know, people do find it incredibly irritating to constantly be terrified of being on the wrong side of purity politics.

You know, do you know how to use the latest acronym to be ultra-inclusive? Do you find a particular policy potentially problematic?

And do you want to discuss it more? And are you scared to do that because you might get canceled? I mean, a lot of people feel frightened by this.

Well, you know, I am squarely middle-aged. I'm 43 years old. And I'm pretty sure in the history of 43-year-olds, there are 19 and 20 and 21-year-olds that say things that drive the 43-year-olds crazy and annoy them and confuse them.

And that is part and parcel, I think, of intergenerational work. And thank God for younger people, annoying, you know, generationally older people, and being impatient and demanding of our society, things that people who might be a little bit older can't yet see.

I think what I find unfortunate, and I've said this over and over again, the central struggle, the central struggle of our time is a fight against authoritarianism, not the debate in a workplace between 20-year-old, recent liberal arts school graduates and their crotchety 40 or 50-year-old bosses.

You're saying that the classic combat, the classic scenario of antagonism. Yeah, like that happens, but that is not the central struggle of the day.

And the other thing I would say is that in reality, it's not showing up, at least in my experience, as this neat sort of generational struggle, because, for example, the other month, I spoke to the leader of BYP 100, which is an organization that does amazing movement work in black communities,

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and it's a youth-based organization. They are having conversations about this article because they, as youth organizers, are recognizing that these themes are getting in the way of the organizing that they want to do,

and they want to figure out how they could take some of these concepts in order to wrestle with the work that they're doing.

So I know there's tons of young people that appreciate this language to talk about this stuff, and there's tons of folks who are my age and older,

who I think, you know, when I lay out some of these orthodoxies that need to be challenged and some of these tendencies are like the main offenders, right?

So it isn't really as neat as that. But again, I think, yes, it's true that there's folks who are annoyed by people constantly challenging our society, our organizations, to do more, to be better, to be more consistent.

And I actually think on balance, that's a very, very, very good thing for our organizations. We need that, but we need to put it in the context of the larger struggle.

Maurice, thank you so much.

Thank you. It was great to be here with you.

First Person is a production of New York Times Opinion. If you liked this episode, let us know. You can email us at firstpersonatnytimes.com.

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