

**Voices from the Grassroots Oral History Project**

Detroit Equity Action Lab

Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights

Wayne State University Law School

Detroit, MI

**Elena Herrada**

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER

March 22, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

## Narrator

Born to a family of revolutionaries and firebrands, Elena Herrada is an award-winning social activist, former member of the Detroit School Board (in exile), union organizer, and co-founder of Fronteras Norteñas. Elena's dedication to preserving the history and legacy of the Detroit Mexican community is reflected in her work. In collaboration with Julio Cesar Guerrero, Elena co-produced the documentary "Los Repatriados: Exiles from the Promised Land," a key film documenting the forced repatriation of Mexicans from Detroit during the Great Depression. In the mid-2000s, Elena served as the Director of Centro Obrero (Worker Center), a project of the AFL-CIO that assisted Latinos in the Detroit community with workplace issues and social discrimination. In 2018, she co-curated Michigan's first black velvet painting exhibition, "Black Velvet – A Rasquache Aesthetic," with Diana Rivera and Minerva Martinez in the Southwest Detroit community.

## Interviewer

Peter Blackmer is a Research Fellow at the Detroit Equity Action Lab, an initiative of the Damon J. Keith Center for Civil Rights at Wayne State University Law School.

## Abstract

Elena Herrada examines the impact of racism on education, labor, and politics and draws parallels between the dismantling of Detroit's education system, the systematic destruction of neighborhoods, and the looting of Detroit's assets during the period of bankruptcy. Elena shares her experiences as an elected member of the Detroit Public School Board "in exile" during emergency management, talks about her roots as a labor organizer, and discusses the relationship between the state takeover of the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) and Detroit's time under emergency management. As a former elected member of the school board, Elena provides in-depth information on the gutting of the Detroit Public School system's curriculum, budget, and buildings and casting students into over-crowded classrooms with under-qualified Teach for America teachers in dangerous buildings in disrepair. Central to Elena's analysis is a focus on race and how racism operates throughout Detroit's education and political systems.

## Keywords

1967 Detroit rebellion; 2006 immigration marches; César Chávez; Charter schools; Detroit Public Schools; Detroit, Michigan; Education; Education Achievement Authority; Electoral politics; Emergency management; Farm workers' movement; Gentrification; Immigration; Labor unions; Lila Cabbil; North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA); Southwest Detroit; Teach for America

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Transcript of interview conducted March 22, 2019 with:

Elena Herrada [EH]

Detroit, Michigan

By: Peter Blackmer [PB]

**EH:** My name is Elena Herrada, and I live in Detroit, Michigan.

**PB:** Could you describe your neighborhood growing up and what the city was like?

**EH:** Yeah. Actually, I grew up on the East side of Detroit, and I was--I went to Catholic schools mostly, and mostly everybody that I grew up with also did, and we lived in a neighborhood that was really multi-ethnic and multi-racial. Although, you know, at the time, you don't really think about it except that we could understand our Sicilian neighbors because the language is so much like Spanish. So other than that, we grew up in a community that was very stable where hardly anyone ever moved, and we went to school with the same people every day, and a lot of times also at Mass on Sundays because I went to Catholic school so you'd have a school that was attached to the church. So, we saw people six days a week. [laughs] It was really a...really small town living in Detroit, and [sigh] I was there for the riots in 1967, which people--in retrospect, scholars call the 'rebellion.' [laughs] I was under the bed. [laughs]

So, we lived in a neighborhood on the East side of Detroit where there was a racist white supremacist organization that lived on our block. It was led by a guy named Don Lobsinger, and it was called Breakthrough. He used to picket our house. He would throw tomatoes. [laughs] He would... [laughs] So, my mother and my parents were regular, very working class, and my dad worked at Chrysler, and

we--there was four of us, and we were really really ordinary in most ways except that we were the target of...of hatred in a sense because of some of my mom's activities, which were like really basic [laughs] church kinds of things.

And, there was a point in the neighborhood where the realtors would come and tell you not to sell to Black people. And, the neighborhood was fairly integrated. And then after the riots, it was like white flight just like consumed the neighborhood. So, I grew up through that. And so, watching how skin color affected everything, how whiteness affected everything, it was something that really informed my life in the early age, watching how people would move saying that the property values went down. And, I live in Corktown now, which is, you know, a regular neighborhood in Detroit except that it is extremely popular and expensive because it's white. So, the way that you see color impacts real estate value which then then informs everything from education to health to everything to transportation. It's something that you can't you can't separate from anything. Race rules everything.

And so, living through that and watching that and watching the incredible inequality that occurred in Detroit during that period of time--and that has kind of leveled off for many years. Detroit wasn't really getting gentrified, and there wasn't this comeback narrative, which is the most offensive of everything to say. That Detroit is coming back is really absolute code for whites coming back because, you know, obviously Detroit never left, and the idea that the nostalgia you see in the current--the lexicon. You know, you see the strangest things going on in Detroit right now, like a level of nostalgia that is like 'Make Detroit Great Again,' and it tries to erase the entire period of time when white people were gone and bring it back to this period of time like it's okay to come back. And, restaurants that haven't existed in 40, 50 years are just like being [laughs] dusted off and recreated. It's amazing! And, I never thought it was such an incredible line between racism and nostalgia. But in this instance in Detroit, it really is. There's this period of...there's just a love-fest going on with white people returning but to a particular memory before Coleman Young. It was like before Coleman Young. It's an incredible, incredible period of time that you look at.

And, the way in which development is occurring, the incredible unequal opportunities that we're seeing right now, and the incredible things that were

done, ordered to bring that about. It was the most violent violent economic attack on Detroit, far worse than a rebellion or riots could ever have been. So, it's a remarkable economic kind of time in Detroit.

[0:05:45]

**PB:** From your perspective, what do you think the motivating factor is for this white influx into the city?

**EH:** The motivating factor for the real estate, speculation, and all that, I think probably the water--as in the Great Lakes, as in the region--because it's really valuable, and it's one of the last places for fresh water. So probably on a bigger scale, it's...that's it, but there's, I think, a sort of primitive underpinning of what I call 'the way they came back' in my long-term project to writing this play called "Jones Day the Play," [laughs] which hasn't quite gotten off the ground, but it's got three acts, and one of them is leading up to 1967, so maybe like 1950-1967. And then, the period of time which I refer to Coleman Young's era as the period of blockade. So the 20 years Young was in office, there was basically an economic and internal blockade against Detroit. And then, following that was giveaways, which was the [Dennis] Archer period, and then the heist. So, there's the blockade, the giveaways, the heist.

And, this is--basically, to me, it feels like--and this...this could be really oversimplified, and I think about this all the time because I live it, you know, on the ground. I live in a really humble...I live very humbly because I feel like a certain level of economic participation is sinful in this period. It would be giving money to Jones Day, giving money to [Mike] Duggan, giving money to these people that did nothing to earn it. So, I'm just trying to kind of... I'm not exactly fully in exile or in the wilderness, but I'm trying to participate as...as little as I can in a moral way because I pay 4000 dollars a year in car insurance for hoopties with liability only in order to be able to have the privilege of living in Detroit. And if I had that money year after year, my house would have been paid off 10 years sooner, but I have to pay it to insurance, which is the situation everybody in Detroit is in which is of course a big problem now because white people don't want to pay that kind of money.

Now, what are they gonna do? So if you want to have them live here and count them as residents in the city of Detroit and look like there's actually a return, then how are you gonna do that when their addresses are in the suburbs because they're not paying that kind of insurance? So, there's all these problems they have to grapple with, what to do now. Next, it will be the schools because what if they want to put their kids in public schools? They're not going to want to have their kids in 45 kids in the classroom where there is no AP [Advanced Placement] classes. And now, there is one school library in the city of Detroit. Come on now. What are we gonna do here? What are we gonna do? So, there's these problems that they're gonna be dealing with. I don't know how they're gonna deal with them, except there's rumors that Dan Gilbert is gonna put a Cranbrook [School] downtown. That's what...that's on the agenda for a Cranbrook downtown campus. And then, there's private schools that are popping up, but there are cities where they're majority Black and white people do not have their kids in public schools at all. And, a lot of Black people don't either. And, Latinos are leaving to the suburbs.

So, there's basically this kind of apartheid hole in Detroit education and so--which is where my...where I've lived in the last several years because I was on the school board for several years. So, the economics of it without connecting the water to the school closings to the real estate to the barren education--because everybody wants an education for their child, then they'll have to go to where they can get it. So if you're poor, you have to follow a school, which means you have to leave that house, you have to leave that neighborhood. That's how they clear the neighborhoods in order to make the neighborhoods available for the people they want here. So, they put 30 million dollars into bike lanes. Like really? In the Motor City? So, there's a lot of things going on that really indicate that the people who are here, who have been here, are not welcome in our own home, and that we're always getting ready for company that doesn't pay taxes and that doesn't see us when we're here. So, it's a...it's an interesting time in Detroit, and I expect that Detroit will prevail, as we always do. But, this is a different kind of economic period where basically we're not welcome in our own city. That's kind of the...

[0:10:44]

**PB:** So, since we're--I do for a second kind of want to take us back a bit for a--since we're here. What do...what would it take, from your analysis from an organizing standpoint, for Detroit to prevail?

**EH:** Integration. Integration. If we don't have a movement to integrate the schools, to integrate all the spaces, to integrate neighborhoods, a very intentional and if necessary legislated integration process, then we're not going to prevail. We're gonna have a little...little rings of white people living in gated communities feeling very safe with private police and private everything, private lighting, private police, private schools, private everything. And then, everybody else. While we pay the taxes, and they get abatements. It's very, very colonial in its structure.

[0:11:35]

**PB:** When you're speaking before, I can't help but think about the billboard that's at the corner of Trumbull and Michigan for some hotel that says "Authentic Detroit."

**EH:** And, it looks like it's trafficking.

**PB:** Yeah, yeah.

**EH:** I know. I know. I made a comment about that, that it looks like this hotel is there for trafficking women. It's very disturbing, and it's just a free-for-all. There's this young white girl in pajamas. It's like, really? That was... That's on the... That's... I pass it everyday because that's my neighborhood. [laughs] This is really disturbing. Like, everything is for sale here. It's like Babylon. There is distilleries, bars. There's--on every corner now, there's a new bar or distillery, and then there's... [laughs] It's really...it's really crazy.

If you look at it just from a residential regular person's standpoint, they changed the parking so that the lane between the curb and the first lane is now a bike lane.



Okay. Then, there's these poles that you can push down and next to the bike lane is where you park. So, you're basically parking in what used to be the middle of the street. And then, every establishment is a bar. So, you have bicyclists that are riding in the same area as cars, and nobody got any instructions that we're not supposed to park by the curb anymore. You just get this 45 dollar ticket for--[laughs] but it's completely counterintuitive to park in the middle of the street, and nobody got any--we didn't get any memo that this was going on. And now, the bike lanes went up everywhere across the city, and it's getting kind of laughable where you see some of the bike lanes where like no one would venture. [laughs] Like...like, really? [laughs] I'm just gonna mention Conner and Gratiot. Like, really? [laughs] You're gonna ride a bike on Conner and Gratiot? Not because it's such a horrible neighborhood, but you will get nailed by 50 cars going on to the...

But, there's no collaboration, there's not notice, there's no memos because this is what emergency management actually brought. It brought in these projects that don't have to be vetted by anybody. City council doesn't have to approve them. People don't have discussions in the neighborhood. Like, is it really a good idea for one man to own every building downtown? 'Cause other cities might not think that's a plan. However, if there was ever a strike--if anybody decided to strike as in labor strike, as in Quicken Loans having a complete monopoly on everything downtown--everything would shut down. Everything would shut down because that's the technology, that's the transportation, that's all the buildings. It would be kind of counterintuitive to have that kind of concentration, but, you know, there was a union, Ford Rouge [Plant], had 100,000 members at one time, and they broke that up into all these different locals just for that reason. [laughs] He didn't want the whole world to shut down if there was one strike, and it's not even a general strike, it's an auto strike, but this would be like everybody works for Quicken Loans.

Everybody white downtown works for Quicken Loans. It's incredible. So, there's these parking spaces that they get that are blocks and blocks long, and they can take their people to and from their cars to the QLine, to and from everything. It's like this little bubble of a village. It's a company town. So, it will be interesting to see how that pans out. I don't think that anything is going to happen, anything for the predatory mortgages or anything like that, because there isn't any court for

that. But, I think something else can happen when there's that kind of economy of scale that's run by one person.

[0:15:52]

**PB:** So, since you started bringing us into the labor discussion, can you talk a little about your roots in labor organizing, your family's background in activism and organizing, and how that influenced your political consciousness?

**EH:** Yeah. My father and my grandfather both retired from Chrysler. So--and that...that's all our history in this country is, in the U.S. Our whole time in this country is Detroit, so. [laughs] We've never been anywhere else. We've lived, and we come from auto. And, my grandfather first--when my grandparents came here in 1920, my grandfather worked at Ford as everybody else that was recruited, and you--and he got laid off from Ford. And then, they were repatriated during the Depression. They were among the Mexicans that got kicked out. Almost the whole community was repatriated during that time, and they returned around 1932. And then, my grandfather worked at different auto and ended up retiring from Chrysler, and my father worked for Chrysler for 45 years.

So, my dad was strike captain of his local, and we really grew up on picket lines. There used to actually be a lot of strikes. There used to be not necessarily long strikes, but there was a lot of strikes in the [19]60s and [19]70s. Probably...yeah, not so much anymore since then. But, we grew up on every picket line that there was. Like, teachers in Crestwood [School] District, which is a historic strike that people in outside Detroit might not know about, but that's where they fired all the teachers when they went on strike. All the teachers got fired. That was really a big deal, and we went to their picket lines every day, brought food. And if there was...there were auto--different auto plants would go on strike. So, I really grew up thinking everybody did that, that everybody went to the Kroger's and walked the picket line with the people, you know. Normally, they were ringing up your food, whatever. And so, there were major, major labor strikes in auto.

And, I remember when the strike came. It was when [Ronald] Reagan was--first got elected because the air traffic controllers went on strike. And, my grandmother, my mother's mother, asked if I would take her to the picket line at the airport. [laughs] She was really old. [laughs] And, I took her to the picket line, and there was nobody there, and they weren't picketing. There was no one. There were no pickets there, and we had taken food and everything, and she was like, "What the hell? What the hell? How are you gonna have a picket line with no picketers?" And, that was--I...I mention that because that was really a turning point in labor where there was like this sort of a retrenchment or retreat. There wasn't anybody picketing, and they were privatized. They lost everything. They didn't...they didn't prevail. Everything was turned around. They also endorsed Reagan. And, I remember my grandmother on the way home saying, "What the hell is going on? The air traffic controllers support Reagan? People... [laughs] Like, what's going on here?" [laughs] So, it was a big change, and I remember that turning point.

And, we had grown up every struggle--every labor struggle particularly, not so much the broader human rights, but in labor, like the lettuce boycotts and the grape boycotts. And, César Chávez used to stay at my house in the years there was a boycott office in Detroit, and there was boycott offices all across the country, and he would go to all the different cities. We'd have fundraisers, and we had these committees that would go to the store and tell Farmer Jack's or the A and P or the other grocery chains, which you probably never heard of 'cause you're too young. We used to have grocery stores here. But, they would go--we would go to these places and ask them to take the grapes off or take the lettuce off. And then if they wouldn't, we would sabotage them. [laughs] Like, smash the lettuce, smash the grapes, or take them all home or ask people outside not to. A lot of religious communities were involved in that, too. I kind of grew up in that religious tradition of priests and nuns and the Catholic Left that got involved in labor issues. And then, it led into the work around Central America and wars against El Salvador and the different places around the world the U.S was attacking. So, our work was, you know, local and national and international in scope, but we didn't really think of it that way. We always just had these little support committees that were doing stuff.

And, César I remember saying, "No strikes without strikers," and that was...that really resonated when we went to that PATCO [Professional Air Traffic Controllers

Organization] line. Like, how are we gonna take part? How are we going to hold this for them? How are we gonna--you know, you're not on your own picket line. What are we gonna do? He used to say that about the farm workers. If the farm workers are not willing to come out of the fields and go on strike, then you can't have a strike. They have to be there for that, and that was a thing that really resonated in my...in my own understanding of organizing all those years, that you can't lead a worker's strike. Workers lead their strike, and then you support. Or, it's our strike, we lead it.

But, the thing that happened later--and this is like a whole jump, a whole leap following after. When NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] was passed, there would begin to be a lot of people showing up around the country from Mexico and Central America, and people didn't really make the connection for a long time. When NAFTA passed and there would begin to be a lot more Mexican migration to Detroit--because we really were one percent for every population of Detroit. In a city that was like 90 percent Black, Mexicans were like one percent. So, we were always a tiny little tiny little group of--but all of a sudden, there's like Mexican workers everywhere doing landscaping, doing brick work, doing the...the street blacktop. All of that work that used to be done by Black workers in Detroit, by white workers, all of a sudden it's Mexican workers that don't speak English that are here on like H-2 visas, which is most preferred before agriculture. We're like, "Oh, we are not in Kansas anymore. This is really a big change."

So, there was a big change, and when the march in 2006 happened, when immigrants marched across the whole country came out, Detroit had about 150,000 people marching down the street, and we were like [laughs] we had no idea there was this many immigrants here. Then, all of them, we joined them. [laughs] We didn't organize them, you know. We just followed. And, they were saying the same thing. They didn't have any idea there was this many people. It was literally coming out of the shadows, very literally coming out of the shadows. It's not cliché.

So, following that point in 2006--and the reason I mention that is 'cause everything changed after that. They were no longer strangers here. They were no longer hidden. They were no longer invisible. So, from that point--I kept saying before that, "I've never saw so many Mexicans I don't know because we are a

community, so small.” But following that, we became a much more cohesive community, following the march when people came out and they got fired from their jobs for going out on the march and then asking us, all the elder Chicanos, for help for getting back to work and doing those kind of things. So then, there was a real change when that happened, and that was led by immigrant workers who were undocumented who were completely vulnerable, some of them 16 and 17 years old. It was incredible. It was incredible. They were an utter, utter inspiration. [laughs] So, there...there is still a lot here, but not nearly as many as there were then. There’s been massive deportations, and also there’s no work. So, people follow work.

[0:24:18]

**PB:** With that major changes you’re describing, what were some of the kind of class implications? Did you see solidarity across racial lines, across class lines? Or, was there tension there? What did that look like?

**EH:** Yeah, there’s always been a lot of tension between the Latino and Black communities in Detroit as far--you know. Yeah, there always has been. Other people might say otherwise, but they might be from some other world. The world that I’m from, I’ve seen it in...in high relief, especially because there’s a lot of racism in our ranks. There’s a lot of anti-Black racism in every immigrant group ‘cause I can tell you growing up in Detroit from hearing from--every language group had a word for the “N” word, every single language group that we grew up with. So, there’s...there is an absolute anti-Black baked-in racism in every European country, in every Latin American country and every Central American country. And if anybody says it’s not, I would just say like, you know, you’re just from a different world because it’s really, really universal. And, that was something that I always found very troubling, and it’s the solidarity work that I’ve attempted to do. All of my life has been that, Black-brown solidarity.

[0:25:43]

**PB:** Can you talk a little bit about that work?

**EH:** Yeah, I'll get--I'll give you one really specific example that sounds really strange. This is a story of when...when NAFTA first passed through. We had all these people that--coming on these visas or being just...coming undocumented to work in all the places in Detroit where...where we didn't even know there was work anymore. Then, there was--I was working for a union. I was working for SEIU [Service Employees International Union], and I represented hospital and healthcare workers, but my good friend represented janitorial and the groundskeepers downtown, and she represented the people that were seasonal workers that cleaned up in Hart Plaza and downtown.

And, she called me at the office one day and said, "I need you down here. There's a whole bunch of Mexicans. I don't know what they're saying." I'm really cleaning this up. [laughs] I'm really sanitizing this discussion [laughs] 'cause then she said, "I don't know what they're saying, but this is our work, and they're doing our work, and there's a whole bunch of people over here waiting to come back to work from seasonal work"--which they had from like these contracts where if you work--this is what the union had had negotiated over many years. It's seasonal work. You can work downtown cleaning up doing the landscaping, doing the after the concerts in Hart Plaza. That was union work, and it paid decent. It paid far more than non-union work, and you had some benefits, and you were in a retirement plan, but it was seasonal. So, the people who did this work were just a little bit more better situated than homeless. It was--because it was seasonal work, it was... So, it was very marginal people, marginalized people were doing that work, but it was their work year after year after, and they paid dues, and they were in the union, and all they had to do was show their card and come back. That was like when there was labor, [laughs] when there was a union. So, they would...they could come back to work every year and get their job back and have a little bit more money than they made the year before because they actually had seniority. This is hard for people to imagine living in Detroit now who don't have any benefits or anything, but that was what they had.

But one year, when it was time to go back to work after the season was over...was--the season was beginning, and they were going back to work. The Black workers who had those jobs came to find a huge group of Mexican workers doing their work. They were...there...there was some foreman with them, and

they were nonunion. They were doing the work. They were doing this union work that had been there guaranteed every year. They had Cobo Hall. They had Hart Plaza, the area all downtown. It was carved out, and the union represented them, but all of a sudden there's these Mexicans workers doing this work. When she called me there, she called me--my friend who was an organizer in the janitorial--she called me to come down and translate because she said she can't even talk to them.

When I got there, it would be like your worst nightmare if you're a person like me, like a person that wants to do solidarity work. [laughs] There's this group of Mexican workers on this side looking, like, terrified, don't speak English. It's getting cold out. They're not accustomed to the weather. They've been brought here by who knows who. And, there's this group of Black workers whose work that is, whose work that has been for years and years. I'm like, "Tell me this is not happening. This is, like, not happening. This is the worst thing you can imagine. There is Mexican workers who have never been around Black people period ever, they're completely foreign here, and Black workers who haven't been around Mexicans at all except now to see them taking their work.

So, I begin to translate this, like, tension. [laughs] I go--[laughs] there's like this space between the two groups, and they're...they look like they're ready to just fight. And, I go and ask them, like, "Who are you working for? What are you doing here?" and they said, "No, we got hired to do this work." And, I had some questions for the--they made about half of the money that the Black workers made hourly, and they all lived together in one place, and they had no benefits, and they had H-2 visas which was no--which was crazy because it would be, like for agricultural work, if you can't get anybody else to do that work, you can get...you can bring immigrant workers. So, it was a very corrupted thing going on. There was plenty of people to do the work because they were standing there. [laughs] They weren't an abstract concept that this group should be doing this work because there's nobody else to do it because the people who've worked that job were standing there demanding their work back.

[0:31:03]

So, I went to my boss and told him that, you know, there's this problem, and there's these Mexican workers downtown, and they're working for this contractor, and there's these Black workers whose work that is, and they don't have the contract anymore. So, the contractor brought in Mexican workers, and the contractor contracts with the city of Detroit. This is after they had already broken AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees]. So, SEIU kind of worked bottom feeders of the contract labor. So, my boss, who was a union local president, says, "Oh, that's okay. We'll just sign them up for the union." In other words, you know, as long as they pay dues, it's not going to be a problem because there's a new contractor and the contractor can bring their work in. That's not true. There's a zipper clause that the contractor had to take whoever the workers were, but that was not being honored. That was just cast aside. So, my boss says, "No, you can just go--you can go talk to them. You can sign them up."

So, I went to talk to the Mexican workers and said, "You want to sign up for the union?" And, they showed me their work contracts. They could not sign up for the union. They would get deported for signing up in the union. That's the nature of an H-2 visa. That's why they want 'em. You can make them pay--you know, make them work for half the pay, and you're not allowed to join a union. If you get hurt, you get deported. If you get--if you do anything, you get deported. It's ideal for employers. It's like an employer's wet dream to have H-2 visa workers.

So, here's these Black workers, and it's probably a hundred people standing over here and probably about a hundred Mexican workers over here, and there's this like tension going on. And then, I'm told to just organize the Mexican workers. I said...I'm like, "Naw, that's...that's not... [laughs] that's not going to happen." They can't join the union, and even if they could, this was their work. This was the people's work who had been up for years and years. And so, my boss--then, my boss goes into this other thing of like, "You're not gonna support your people?" I was like, "Oh, man. [laughs] This is really getting intense. This is intense." [laughs] So now, we're defining who's my people, which was a really painful hard time because there were these Mexican workers that were living like...they were living like basically sharecroppers, living in this one hotel, and they had the same conditions as migrant workers, meaning that they lived on mattresses lined up like that. And when they got up to go to work, the next crew slept on those mattresses while they were still warm, and they had absolutely no amenities. They had no



rights, and they could get deported if they... If they did anything, basically, they could get deported.

So, [exhales deeply] thus began a long long saga of that particular struggle of Black-brown solidarity building. And so, a friend of mine who was working with me in a group that--we had a group of...a group of Chicanos that we could speak Spanish, and we were from the House of Labor. I was a union local president at a later time. We could discern labor rights but also began to do immigrant support work. We went around to the Black churches and ask for an audience with congregations so we could actually explain NAFTA, explain what the free trade agreement was. What are these Mexicans doing here? Why are they here? All of a sudden, why are there Mexicans here? Why are they bringing kids with them to work? Because they had people that were underage working these jobs in order to get the work done in so many hours. So, there were extremely exploitative conditions that they were--nobody wants to compete with that. Who's going to compete with that? You're supposed to--you get 12 dollars an hour a year, and you work until it's done, and if it's not, you get overtime. But, they have to get done in six hours, and they are getting half of the pay and no benefits. So, what employer doesn't want that, right?

So, we had to actually explain to people in the community--like, we laid it out, and we had to discern, "This is who they are. This is what their conditions are," so that we could actually not have this just unfold by itself and hope for the best. So, we did a lot of that kind of work, and it was...it was very hard. But whoever we talked to, we had no media. We had no newspaper. We had no radio program. We had no nothing. We had ourselves going through groups of people, that kind of organizing. So, that's an example of it, and it's far from, far from effective in terms of being able to just build better relationships, but it's what we could do. It's better than nothing in this, and it's what we could do. I'm sure that the people that do remember, [laughs] like, "Oh, yeah. [laughs] They did explain why those Mexicans were here." And there, it got much deeper, and it was a much longer struggle, and we did ultimately win that, but it took about 10 years. It was a 10-year struggle.

[0:36:14]

**PB:** So, do you see...do you see prospects for that kind of organizing now looking ahead in terms of the crises that are being faced in the city of Detroit?

**EH:** I see people doing things on their own, mostly. I think on a one-to-one basis you can do that, but I don't...I don't see any institutional or organized way of doing it. I just don't. [laughs] I think there's too many incentives to keep things very divided, and that's where, you know, the powerful forces can make that happen. So, it's up to day-to-day people to counter it.

[0:37:01]

**PB:** Do you mind if we jump over to education?

**EH:** Not at all.

**PB:** To start with, I really want to get into your experiences on the board [Detroit Public Schools Board of Education].

**EH:** Okay.

**PB:** I'm sure we could take a lot of time to talk about that. But before we go there, could you kind of just walk us through the history of the state takeovers of the DPS [Detroit Public Schools]?

**EH:** The first one that I know of was in 1999. There are people who know this stuff way better than me. Helen [Moore] does. Tom Pedroni knows. But in 1999--I know this because my kids were in school during the first takeover, and they went to Cass [Technical High School]. They went to Cass Tech. It was like amazing, a flagship school. I was really excited about them going there, but very shortly after they started, the twins--my twins--so, they're in the same grade. [laughs] Single

parents that got twins, my hat's off to you because you can never ever do the parent-teacher conference right because you just can't be two places at once.

But, that's part of what the struggle was with the takeover was because I had to take them out of Cass because day after day after day they had no teacher. I don't mean subs. I don't mean bad subs, although they did have a lot of funny stories about them bringing in subs from the park across the street, but that's another story. The park [laughs] from across the street at Cass Tech was no joke, and they brought... [laughs] and they brought in people from the street to sub, and they were like--[laughs] the girls would describe their subs as sometimes be--like, they would just prop an adult in front of the classroom. There was some wild times at Cass Tech, in the old Cass Tech before they built the new one. And--but, there were many times that they didn't have any teacher at all, and they would have them in the auditorium, just hold them in the auditorium just during any section that didn't have coverage. So, first hour, second hour, third hour.

And one day, my daughter told me that there--there's two of them, and they're very different, but one of them said to me on her way out, getting out--I was dropping her off, and she said, "I feel like they're stealing our lives." That's what my daughter said about school during the takeover when there were no teachers and there were no books and there were no subs because they had this fund for subs and any time they didn't use it, there was a surplus. So, they just had these empty classes or security guards that would just harangue kids in the auditorium. And so, my daughter telling me, "I feel like they're stealing our lives," you know. I said, "Get back in the car," and I took them with me.

And at the time, I was president of a small union local that I represented cafeteria workers in the auto plants. So, I was always going from one plant to the other, and I would do like stewards training, grievance handling. I would be in the office sometimes, but mostly I was in the plants, 70 auto plants in the...in the Southeastern Michigan region, and I just took them with me. I just took them with me, said, you know, "We got a grievance beginning here. Today, we're going to start bargaining over here. We got to do management meeting over here." You know, I just took them with me. They were in ninth grade at that time, and one of them is more...sort of...I would say mainstream, for lack of a better term, just... She said to me, "We have to go to school sooner or later." Otherwise, I would have

just kept taking them with me. We have a meeting--we were fighting over with the city council to get living wage at that time, so we could go to the meetings downtown at City Council. We were everywhere. We were, you know, whatever was going on, that was what we were doing.

And so, I took them back to school after about two weeks, and they were never even noted as absent, and they didn't miss any work. And by the end of that year, the first year, I asked them if they wanted to go to a different school. They could go to a different school, or I even gave them the option to go to a suburban district where their father lived, go to a Catholic school, or switch. So, one chose Holy Redeemer [High School], the Catholic school nearby, and the other one went to Western High School. So, we love Cass Tech. I was like, [laughs] Cass Tech! I always wanted to go to Cass, but I could never get in there. I never had nearly the grades. And then when my kids could get there, there was like nothing left of it. It was just ravaged. So, it was a big...that was a big heartbreak, a big heartbreak, because my girls were really smart. They were getting...they were languishing in school, and they could see everything that was going on. They were really discerning about the racial aspect of takeover, about--they were very, very clear on what was going on.

So, one went to Holy Redeemer when the other one went to Western, and within the second year--so now, they went from Cass Tech to those schools. Now, Holy Redeemer's closing. So, the Catholic school that had been there for 100-some years decides they're closing. And, I was beginning to get a sense of what was going on. I was not on the school board, but I always went to school board meetings, and when I--I have older--so, I have four daughters, and these twins are my younger ones by ten years. So, I had been around this block, and my oldest one had gone to Catholic school too, and she had [laughs] talked to me earlier. This is way before school takeovers and everything else. She said, "Why didn't you take me out of Golightly [Career and Technical Center]?" 'Cause I used to go to the school board meetings, and I said, "'Cause I didn't want to be the mommy that shoots up the board. So, let me just get out of here." And so, I was like...I really--let's try something else.

So, I put her in Catholic school. It had its own drawbacks, of course. But, I am a product of Catholic education, so I guess the worst parts of it were sort of baked into me. So, if you--one thing about Catholic schools is that you really, really learn to write. You really learn to write in Catholic schools. And if you can survive everything else that they do--I mean, I'm not talking about the criminal things that they do, but I'm talking about just the general Catholic culture. If you're part of it, it doesn't bother you that much, but--so, I was kind of relieved that I could have that...that option for her.

But for the twins, they closed the Catholic school. So that, you know, that was like there's something going on here, [laughs] right. I feel like they're closing our grocery stores. They're closing our--there's a blockade going on here, you know. So, they went to Western. The one, the one year, wanted to go to Western. The other one wanted to go--said she wanted to continue in Catholic school. But then at the last minute, she decided to go with her twin. So, both went to Western. They graduated from there.

But, I had always been very involved as a parent, as just, you know, parent-teacher conferences and trying to keep up with things, and they were really, [sigh] really extremely unchallenged in school. There was just--I think at Western at that time they had two AP [Advanced Placement] classes--two AP classes. One was math, and the other one was English. And if you have a school of 2,000 to 3,000 students, and you have two AP teachers--this was during the takeover, right. I don't think that anybody really looks at the details of inequality, at the deep roots of what it means when there is no school library, when they save money by closing the school library, and there's no labs, and there's no AP. Because the white districts got AP, not all of them, but definitely they weren't in Detroit.

So, when there's, like, these reports that we have students graduating with a 4.0, but then Wayne State [University] says, "We're taking 10 points off for that. We're taking," you know. If you say you're going to have a 4.0 at Western High School, Wayne State is gonna treat that as a 3.0. Then, Wayne State gets attacked for being racist or for being classist, for being elitist. But actually, what Wayne State was trying to do was be able to admit people who would actually be able to finish a semester. So, there's...there's really a lot of baked inequality, and unless you're

in it, you don't see it. But if you're in it, you're part of it. So, you begin to sort of internalize that...that inferiority. You just think, "You know, I got a 4.0 at Western. I got a 4.0 at Cesar Chavez Academy, or I got a 4.0." But, a 4.0 means that that's what they're reporting to the state because they took over the resources and the school, and you're really basically saying that they don't need anything else here. Where are they going anyway?

So, I'll come forward from being a parent to--my kids graduated with honors at Western High School, and my one daughter always said she really feared for her peers, that she feared for her peers because they were giving out A's to people that really couldn't write a full sentence. And, she was...she was like a student assistant to the AP teacher, and my kids could--I--we come from writers, you know, from, you know, people that really write a lot, from op-eds to grants to, you know. We just come from writers, so it's...it's very natural to us, like math is to other people--not us. So, we just have a capacity for writing, and my daughters were writing other people's exams for them and writing people's essays for college and writing--I don't know how many...how many people at Western got into school because of my daughter's assistance because that--she felt like people were just really cheated.

If English is not your official language, if it's not your first language, or if you come from--if you just come from a family that doesn't read and write much, then you're not gonna have the same advantages, and it's completely unfair. It's totally unfair. Like, how you're gonna fare in life, it has everything to do with these things in life that you have no control over. It's...it's--that's why racism is such a...it's completely... Like, you can't do this because you're in a Black district. You don't get libraries. You get 45 students. Barbara Scott Academy [actually Brenda Scott Academy], which was an EAA [Education Achievement Authority] school, had 100 kids in the kindergarten class, 100 kids in their kindergarten class, five years old... [laughs]

[0:48:50]

**PB:** So, how did you even explain this to your daughters when they started asking questions?

**EH:** I'd lay it out. I'd lay it out, which is probably not the best move because they were really wildly cynical by the time they were six, but they were--I mean, I'm very direct about it. And, they...they also--because they're not Black and because they have certain privilege of movement, they were even more infuriated because everybody around them was getting treated on the basis of race without any...any concept of things people are being denied or the merit of their abilities. So, they were...they were angrier and angrier at the racism of the whole situation. They just, you know--and this continues. It just doesn't get better. It gets worse. And, that's what I think is the challenge in front of us now.

But if--even being on the school board, I feel like I had a platform that other people on the school board didn't have. So, there were 11 of us on the board? I think there was 11 of us. I should know this. There were seven of us in exile, and I was the only person on the board that wasn't Black, and I feel like I also had a platform that other people didn't have because I was a parent going to school board meetings for years and years, and I was always raging on the board. But, I never knew the kinds of things that I would learn. Like, I never heard the board members say at any meeting that the state refuses to give us the bond money that we passed. The state is sitting on the bond money. So, everybody's really pissed at the board because we passed a bond, and there's no improvements being made because nobody is listening to what they're saying. Nobody's listening to them saying, "We did pass a bond, and we're not able to make the changes, build these schools, do anything else because the state wouldn't give up that money because the state wanted to control that money." They're not having this Black district control that kind of money.

I didn't know that until I was a board member. I had no idea until I was a board member, and this is...like, begins the sort of idea of what segregation does, and the reason--and this is--try to work with me on this. My daughters call this my beautiful mind. But, this idea of what happened with Detroit Public Schools going from DPS to an at-large class-one district with 11 board members to being then dissolved and turned into DPSCD [Detroit Public Schools Community District] which now has seven board members. Okay, let me try to lay that out. The city of Detroit went from at-large voting to district voting in the last charter. Why did they

do that? Some people say so that all the communities can have representation. So, the board did the reverse.

So, I got elected twice running for school board for my district, which is Southwest Detroit, which is a majority Latino community. I got elected twice as a district board member, but then I had 4,000, 5,000 votes, which is what you get in the district. But, I ran at large, and I got 14,000 votes, and I can't win because it's at large. So now, I have the same work that I did translating for parents and doing advocacy and doing anything else, going to the board about things, going to the library commission. I do those things, but I'm not elected, and I can't get elected because I can't get elected at large. I...you just can't. It's... I can only get elected in a district. So, that's one of the things that I think is sort of baked into the inequality here. And, the parents that I deal with, the mostly Latino parents, they can't go to the board for anything. I mean, they can't even be understood. Somebody would have to translate for them, much less culturally and everything else. So, it's created a--it's, like, set us way back. It's like going backwards 'cause we had representation, and now we don't. And, that's kind of one of the things that is going on. That's... I don't...I don't know how else to describe that particular thing.

But, there's also this whole thing about the city going to districts because districts, according to especially the older Black leadership, would be...would make things very unfair. So, look at the district where [Mike] Ilitch and [Dan] Gilbert run everything and look at District Six where I live, which is Corktown and then it also takes in downtown. That's District 6, and it's just laid. It's got all kinds of police, you know. It's got all kinds of lighting. It's got all kinds of amenities, but the other districts don't. So, that inequality was created out of these districts.

So, look at both sides of this argument where people say that the districts will make things unequal or unfair for the broader city. But then, why do they go at large for the school district? Well, this is my theory is that white people didn't want Detroit Public Schools. They don't want 'em. They don't care about them. So, they just narrowed it down. They don't ever want to have representation in Detroit Public Schools. They're not gonna put their kids there. They're not going to work up--they don't...don't care. The only thing that they cared about is that they can put a white superintendent over the schools so that there can be a white man



and a white superintendent, and that will just show everybody we got this under control. But, there's no desire whatsoever to approve the schools or to go from 45 students to a classroom to 35. I mean, there's just no interest in improving the schools, none at all, because they don't want their kids in those schools because they don't ever intend to integrate those schools. That's the...that's my take on it.

[0:55:20]

**PB:** So, I want to just step back just a bit to kind of get--I want to have a view of your experience coming on to the school board. So, why--a little bit about why you decided to run the first time and what you found, like, what that experience was like becoming a part of the school board.

**EH:** [laughs] Okay. This is a...really actually a silly and dumb story of how I ended up getting on the school board. But initially in our community, we had--it's been a Latino community for a hundred years. It's been a, you know. [laughs] We've been here for a hundred years. [laughs] We're not new here. But, we had only one state representative ever elected, and that person, the first time we ever had a Latino state representative elected, she [Belda Garza] got knocked out in her third term. So, she did--she served two terms and a third term. This white guy [Steve Tobocman] comes from the suburbs with all kinds of money and knocks on doors and brings his friends and takes that seat. [laughs] Really, we're like, [laughs] "Wait, what? What--wait?!" So, it was--there was a lot of resentment in the community. So, he does his three terms and then brings his friend [Rashida Tlaib] and sends a letter saying he wants this person that the second they put in was, you know. She wasn't terrible. She has been a much better Congressperson now than she was a state representative to me, in my estimation of it. But, she wasn't Latino, and we were kind of like, "Wait, what?"

That was kind of the one the things I started thinking about. We have to really be able to take back this district in terms of having Latino representation, but we couldn't really because we always had too many people running for the seat. We always got like four people who say, "I'm gonna--she can do that, I can do that." I'm, like, kept on trying to say, "Let's all try to find one person and draft that person," because one thing you don't want is a person who says, "I'll do it." I just

feel the person should be drafted and that other people can get behind that one person, rather than have four people run and have these other rich people come and say, "This is our county. We're gonna get,"--[laughs] you know--"You guys do what you want. Go ahead. Have your fights. In the meantime, this is our person." And, they did that three times! Three times!

So by this time, I'm like, "I'm going to run for a seat that nobody wants, that nobody--that doesn't pay any money and that people will get behind." So, I went to the community people, the leadership, and I said, "I'm going to run for Charter Commission." Everybody thought it was a charter school. It was like I had to explain what the Charter Commission was. It was really like--what I was trying to do was say one person should run for an office, and that person can tell everybody what's going on, and everybody can get behind that person. And, I knew that if I said it doesn't pay any money and it's only for three years, nobody's gonna want it. I'm not gonna have competition for it. So, everybody was like, "Yeah, do it." You know, because when I told them it doesn't pay money, nobody's saying, "Oh, well. I'm gonna run." [laughs] So, they're like, "Why do you want?" Just, let's do this, okay. So, I got people to support me for that, and this is what I was just trying to do to just build the...build the level of solidarity in our community to get behind a person that could win. But, I could only do that if it was really basically something that people don't want to compete for. So, that's how I first got into running for office.

I did win the general election. I didn't win the general. I won the primary, which is the first time any Latino won city-wide anything, which doesn't mean anything. [laughs] It's like...it's like a historic [laughs] non-entity, but it was like I got--I had dead last. I was eighteenth in the Charter Commission, and it's really interesting because in that commission, in 2009, the Charter Commission vote was all over the papers. It was everywhere. Fast forward to 2019 and in 2018, the papers were completely silent about there being a charter election. And by the time we knew about it, there was already Dan Gilbert's five people already certified to be on the ballot. So, we had to scramble for four days to get anybody and get the signatures in. So, that's why we had this big split on the Charter Commission because the media kind of held it for Dan Gilbert's people, and then the people had to gather to do this other--so, all that to give the background of...

The following year, my school board member, the president of the school board, had to step down because of some scandal that occurred on the school board, and he was the chair, but he also represented District 2 where I lived. And, somebody from the school board, who was on the board, called me and asked me if I wanted to apply for that seat on the board. So, the way the board worked--even under the emergency manager, we still had this particular right, and that was the board fills vacancies. So, people from the community go forward. They say, "Why do you want to be on the board?" And, you have to be vetted by them, and they fill a vacancy, which was always the case because people would run for another office. You would get elected to state representative because they always use the school board as a launching pad for an office that pays money. So, there were always these vacancies.

So, I ended up being appointed by the school board for the first time when my representative Otis Mathis had to step down. So, Otis steps down. I step in, and I served his term, and I ran for the next term, and I got elected. And then, I ran for the next term and got elected. So, I guess seven years I served on the board. That was how I came to do it, but it was also because I was really just trying to get our community to get behind electoral politics in a way that we could win something.

That was the goal the whole--I even had this one event where I ask people who were undocumented, this huge group of immigrants that I was working with, if I could I could do an event at their house. It's like--it was really radical because [laughs] I wanted to--I'm kind of on this tip of if you live in a place, you should be able to participate in the life of that place. It's actually part of the Declaration of Human Rights that you can participate and you can make a life in any place regardless of your citizenship. So, I went to the people and said, you know, "If I explain to you what the charter is and what the city is doing, will you give me a house party to do that?" And, they were like, "Yeah, we'll do it." [laughs] So, they put up these red and white, blue papers. [laughs] It was hilarious. These are all these solid Mexicans. They put up all these American flags. Homeland Security kept going up and down the block. [laughs] It was like this big party on 25<sup>th</sup> Street. We were having this big thing, and they made it really--like, table things for all the guests and everything. It was the most gracious event that I ever had. It wasn't a fundraiser. It was just to tell people, like, this is how the city works. This is the council. Like, to be able to explain the governance of the city to a group of people

who didn't speak English and can't vote, I felt like that was...like this was like we're in heaven. This is what I want to do.

So, I did--I didn't get elected to the charter, but I did get elected to the school board. And then, people would see me in the street and say, "Congresswoman, how are you?" [laughs] It would be like, first, I didn't win. But then, it wasn't for Congress, but it was okay. [laughs] So, I kind of was just kind of trying to get people involved and feeling like you're part of a place, basically like, you know, you live here.

[1:03:01]

**PB:** So, you're on the school board at the time that emergency management is...

**EH:** I got on the board in 2010, in 2010, and Robert Bobb had come in 2009 thanks to Jennifer Granholm. Right.

**PB:** So, can you tell... Can you explain to us for the record what it was like being on a school board that...

**EH:** Had no power.

**PB:** ...was disempowered?

**EH:** Well, it seems like there was a big effort to make sure the school board had no visibility and no power, and the ones that were most involved in that campaign were the nonprofits in the community. They were deeply involved in that because they didn't have to bid on any contracts. They didn't have to go before this black school board to get approval for anything. They could--it was happy days for the nonprofits because when there used to be a director of--like, the head of the art department. It's instead broken out, and all these contracts are given out, and

somebody can get hired for 150,000 dollars a year and hire staff and rent a little office in the community and really look like heroes because they're giving art to these little Black kids and brown kids. And, they were hiring people like sharecroppers.

So, when--there used to be teachers teaching art in the classroom everyday, and they had a pension and a paycheck and a life. They became contractors with 1099s, and they would get in their cars and drive around the schools. And, you know, the school gets this, the school gets this. If this school has this budget, they can do it. If not--so, there's a whole bunch of schools that don't have art or music anymore, and other schools that do. Don't ask me how they do it. I don't know how they do it.

But then, there was the whole gift card thing. So, some contractors gave a whole bunch of gift cards to administrators and principals, and there was nothing coming from the top down in the normal structure of things. Because when you take an economy of scale and just grind it up and hand everybody a piece of the action, some people get it, and some people don't. That's why government is always infinitely more fair than privatization. It's because you're guaranteed certain things if--with your taxes. But, that's one of the main things.

So, the nonprofits were telling parents especially in Southwest Detroit that--I...I only say that because that's my district, my experience. I don't know if they were doing that all over, but I do know that they were telling families not to call the board, that the board has no authority, and basically discrediting us, and you couldn't get anything done if you went to the board. You should go to them. So, they became the power of--they usurp the power of the school board, and so did our state representatives and council members. I can't imagine being an elected official and saying that another elected official should have no authority. I just can't even imagine it, but they did. [laughs] They did. [laughs]

[1:06:18]

**PB:** So, what's the motive?

**EH:** Mostly, it was race. It was mostly race because it was a Black school board and the elected officials that were doing it to us were white and/or Latino, and also because they could get contracts, and they--if you had to go before the school board--like, you know, the normal way of doing business is like you're a contractor, you want to have this contract in the schools. It's not just for that school, it's for these schools 'cause it's a school district where everybody will get the same thing, theoretically. So, you have to go before this big board and get vetted, and then they would vote for whether or not you have a contract.

That's how we got the--Barbara Byrd-Bennett, who was the head of the Office of Accountability, who is in jail now, but not because of Detroit but because of what she did in Chicago [Illinois]. There was a 45-million-dollar textbook contract 'cause she had voted--she had worked for Houghton-Mifflin before she came to DPS and had done this in Cleveland [Ohio]. And then, she came to Detroit with Robert Bobb, and she sold the district a contract for--the biggest textbook contract in the history of public education. And, it didn't have licenses with it, so they couldn't open the book anyway. But, also important to know--which you'll never see in any reports anywhere--is that those books were 10 years old, and they didn't have the Euro in them. You know, there were some changes in the world since then. Stuff happens. So, Detroit students didn't get the memo about the Euro. So, there was...there was a social studies curriculum that had gotten that deal, and she made a lot of money. And then, she moved on to Chicago. But in Chicago, there was still a media that followed with it, so she went to jail. Nobody went to jail here except 13 principals who were completely probably hapless in the whole mess. One or two of them really needed to go to prison, but the rest of them were just trying to be principals. [laughs] All the wrong people are in prison. Yup.

[1:08:42]

**PB:** So, I mean, that's a lot. That's...

**EH:** I know. So, I haven't told you about Oakman [Orthopedic Elementary] School, Detroit Day School of the Deaf, Southwestern High School, Redford High School.

**PB:** We can go there. I also want to--I think it's important for us to understand, too, what the relationships are and what the impacts are between the state takeover of the public school district and then layering on emergency management of the city and what impacts that tandem has upon the Detroit Public Schools.

**EH:** Well, we had been under emergency manager since 2009. And many times, we--the school board members in exile, which is not everybody. It was the majority of us. We went to city council many times and asked them not to vote for the consent agreement. We asked them to oppose anything that the emergency manager brought because we believed that we would have our day in court one day and that we could say, "We did not agree to close these schools, and we didn't agree to gut the curriculum of the African-centered curriculum that had been there which made the scores go up exponentially. We didn't agree to new contractors every time they came to start a new curriculum so that everybody had to get new..."

These teachers--and you see it now 'cause I'm telling you emergency management has not left Detroit Public Schools. If a...if a nation is under colonial rule and they get freedom, it takes a long time before they know they're free, and I really feel like this is what we're facing in Detroit too because everybody is still acting under the consent agreement and under the emergency management.

And so when a new contractor comes in and they can bring a new curriculum, all the research shows even the worst most mediocre curriculum takes five years to adjust to to teach, for students to learn, for teachers to learn it. But if they get new contractors every year, they wipe them out and get new textbook deals. So, there's never any continuity or stability of anything that anybody is learning. So, you can guarantee failure, especially because there is so much money in failure. And, there is no money in success because if there was, we would have really successful schools. But, the money is in failure. The money is in all this federal money that comes in for failure. The money that comes...that comes in for special programs, that's where the money is. So every time new contractors come in, they get these new contracts for textbooks, for different types of curriculum, and you

just can't do anything with that in a year, two years. You can't do it. All the research shows it takes at least five years. But, we haven't had five years of stability in [long pause] 20 years, probably...probably 20 years.

But, the thing that I really want to go on record for, that I really want for anyone to think about and hear, is what happened to the EAA students. The Education Achievement Authority took the 15 buildings that we had just built with our bond money. There were some exceptions to that. There were these schools that had what they call "SIG money," school improvement grants, and it was millions of dollars because failure, it's popular. So, the schools that they took that are really old schools that weren't valuable as new buildings had SIG grants attached to them, and they were able to take that money. And, they took the new buildings, and they didn't pay any rent in those buildings, and they got all the money that went to those students for four years. And when that time was over with, they were supposed to have paid rent to the DPS for those buildings.

Judge [Steven] Rhodes forgave that debt. He said they didn't have to pay it. He also gave his friends from Life Remodeled--he gave this Chris Lambert the building called Durfee [Elementary-Middle School], a beautiful building. It's the only school that has K-12 in it 'cause it's dangerous to put little kids with big kids by all...by all the new literature. That's why it's split up to K-5, to middle schools, to high schools. But, Life Remodeled got this new building, Central Collegiate [Academy] and Durfee, and they put all the kids in one building, and they rented out the building to community groups. So, we paid for the building that Judge Rhodes gave to his friend on his last day in office as emergency manager. So, there's been a lot of giveaways of our property, and that's not the worst of it because people don't necessarily learn because of the building they're in, although it's hard to learn in a building that's moldy or raining or raggedy or cold, and that was a big problem.

But, it's impossible to calculate the harm that was done by the EAA because no one will calculate it. There's a 3.2 billion dollars in bond money that has not been accounted for, 3.2 billion dollars, and the buildings that were taken are now returned, and we're supposed to be happy that we got them back. But, there's been nothing to remediate those students that sat warehoused for four years.



There's nothing that's been--I just want to say to anybody...anybody who had a child that went to school to remember the first day of kindergarten for your child. Can you imagine taking your child to a school where there's 100 kids in one room with one teacher and two assistants? 100 five year olds. A hundred five year olds. They don't even know when they go missing. They can't even keep track of them. So, that was one of--that was Brenda Scott Academy. Brenda Scott would be rolling in her grave if she knew that that school was named after her and they were doing those kind of things. But then--and it was in the paper, and nobody did anything. It was like, you know, it's just the way it is because Black people don't deserve anymore than that, especially the poorest Black people who live in Northeast Detroit, who live in District 3 where the highest number of homeless and shelters are. What do they need anyway?! What do they need?! Who cares if they go missing or whatever happens to them? A hundred five year olds. Now, you tell me how anybody could imagine that happening to a hundred white kids. It just wouldn't. It wouldn't. They wouldn't even think of doing that. That might put 30 if--but 100, no. Nope.

[1:16:05]

**PB:** So, can you explain where the rise of the charter schools in Detroit fits into this landscape?

**EH:** Well, the cap on charters was lifted during emergency management. So when they started closing schools and handing them off to charters, that happened during the chaos of emergency management. So, it was a way to let them in.

**PB:** And, how...and what impacts have this rise in charter schools had on public education in general in the city?

**EH:** Well, it pretty much turned it into a sham, and it's--they say that some of the charters are being returned at DPS now. But, my assessment of that would be that they have taken everything they could get out of them, and that they're returning buildings that are useless in to communities that no longer exist because charters,

the first thing they did in the Detroit Public School takeover, the very first thing, was to sell off all the buses. So, the charters got buses, and DPS didn't have them. So, if you were a--they gave away the buses for pennies on the dollar. That was one of the first things that they did so that the students who were in a public school in their neighborhood that took a bus to school now don't have a way to get there. They would have to take the Detroit Public Transportation, which is incredibly unreliable. So, they wouldn't necessarily be able to get to school on time. So, getting rid of the buses was a big advantage that they gave to the charters because they used the buses for the charter.

Now, the charters can go pick up our kids and take them to schools, which were our buildings, and they can do it at a fraction of the cost. So if you can...if you can teach--if you have a teacher that is a master teacher and, you know, makes a pension and is in the union, has a decent, you know, level of living, and you can replace that person with a 24-year old Teach for America--because the charters could put them alone in the classroom. So did the EAA. Most students didn't even stay through lunch. So, they would just leave. But, the Teach for America was a big part of the whole thing. The charters and the Teach for America were a big part of dismantling of public education here.

**PB:** Late stage capitalism.

**EH:** Mmhmm.

[1:18:43]

**PB:** I mean that's just what's coming to my mind in terms of, like, the system feeding on itself and the privatization of public resources.

**EH:** Right.

**PB:** Do you see that in a bigger context?

**EH:** I see that a lot of what the U.S. did to the rest of the world wound its way back to our internal colonies, the internal colonies being--I don't know if you know that context of the barrio, the ghetto, and the reservation, and when you can't escape these places because we don't have...we don't come from somewhere else. [laughs] This is, like, where we're from. We're not foreigners, but we're also second-class citizens here. We can't get out of here. So, yeah. The next--that was the next feeding frenzy of capitalism, but--and, you know. But, it's impossible to do it without racism. You just--racism is such an essential part of that plan. It just wouldn't work otherwise.

[1:19:38]

**PB:** So, can we...can we turn to talk a little bit about your organizing against emergency management specifically? I'm thinking about--if you could walk us through--we talked to Councilwoman [JoAnn] Watson about this, about the rest of you and Bill Wylie-Kellermann waged on city council.

**EH:** Well, you know, probably 100 people waged that. That was--we were the only people that got arrested for that, but everybody--people were begging to get arrested, and we all went down together. When I say we all went down together, I mean we went down, [laughs] like, literally. I wasn't trying to get arrested 'cause I'm not one of those people that...that--I don't don't volunteer to get arrested ever, and I had never gotten arrested in my life before that, never, because who's going to pick up my kids from school and whatever. So, I wasn't getting arrested with people that want to do that. I worked too long and too much with prisoners and the criminal justice system to volunteer to get arrested.

But, we were there protesting the Jones Day contract. We were asking Charles Pugh actually--ironically--who ended up going to prison. We asked him not to support the consent agreement, and people were there--a lot of the people in the city council chambers that day were there on business. They were there begging for their water not to be shut off. This older lady was something. Her mother is 90 years old and not to shut her mother's water off. And, this other guy was there

about the water. So, they were there on other--it was the same business, but they weren't with us. We didn't show up with them. And then when I went up to the front of the council, the people started singing. They started singing "We will not be moved." Somebody...somebody bumped into me, [laughs] and I fell. I...I went down. It was a mob. Somebody bumped into me, and I went down on the ground. And as soon as I did, somebody else went down and somebody else went down and somebody else went down. And then, they were just, you know, pulling us up and threatening to arrest us.

But, me and Bill were the only ones that were arrested, and Charles Pugh was talking to Gary Brown at the council table, and they did not want any Black people arrested. And, they actually said it within earshot, and there were buses outside to take people. There were buses outside to take people, but they did not want to give the public image that Black people were against emergency management. So, they just...they took me and Bill. So, we get... [laughs] we get outside, and there's a bus there, and there's about 50 cops. And, you know, my sister is a Detroit police officer, retired, so the cops, I know them. And, they were like, "This is terrible. They want to arrest us because we're defending pensions."

We're defending--like, we're asking them not to support the consent agreement, and I'm saying this as a school board member who I believe that if you oppose every single thing that you're doing--you know, that they're doing--that we'll be able to get some of our goods back, that we can say, "We did not agree to this. We did not agree to this," 'cause that's what actually emergency management was supposed to do, that you can go back and say, "We never agreed. We didn't sell our buildings. We didn't give this away. We didn't. They took this." You have to go on record for that, and we were asking the council to do that, but the council wouldn't. The only ones that would fight it were JoAnn Watson, Brenda Jones...there are two more whose names are escaping me. I know this is really sinful to forget the other two that voted with us. But, they didn't prevail.

So, they took us to jail where we were treated like royalty. We were treated like royalty in jail because the police were really gracious with us because we were...we were defending the republic. [laughs] That's what we were doing. So, that was the first time that I had gotten arrested. And then, the next time--we did continuously protest at the Fisher Building. Out the window, we'd hang banners.

We went through the Fisher Building with megaphones, with bullhorns during the Fisher Theatre's opening performances. We gave them hell 'cause our building, you know, our school offices were in the Fisher Building. So, we...we made our presence known all the time. We always protested. We went on the record protesting. I don't think we ever stopped. We never stopped a single school closing. We never saved a penny from being stolen, and it was heartbreaking. But at the end of the day, you can say, "Well, where were you [laughs] when you came for our schools?" I, you know.

[1:24:38]

**PB:** So...

**Herbert Taylor [HT]:** Excuse me. You mentioned that you need to be somewhere at 5:30.

**EH:** What time is it?

**HT:** It's 4:58 right now.

**EH:** Okay. We could wrap up pretty soon then. I don't know if you have anything specific you want to... Thank you.

**PB:** No problem. We can scale back, and I want to ask you--though, I kind of want to go into greater depth there about the lessons that were learned there from that. So, I mean, what are the takeaways here in terms of fighting and fighting and fighting and not being able to actually implement any degree of control, of power in this city?

**EH:** That's a...that's a good question. You know, last night, I went to the Call 'em Out dinner, the Sambo awards, which I used to think were awful. [laughs] I used to

think that was awful. [laughs] Now, I think like we need this [laughs] tar and feather awards now. [laughs] I used to think it was like banishment to have people called these awful names for selling out the community. But last night at the event, there were...there was probably 300 people there, and a lot of them were the long-time warriors that have been on this fight forever, and it's really important to have a community. It's important to have resistance to injustice that's consistent, that's unwavering, that no matter what you know...you know that, like, I don't have to...

You know, when I was growing up in the farm workers' struggle or in a war demonstration, if you saw something on the news, you would show up, and everybody would be there. We didn't have social media. We didn't have--you'd know there were people who would just turn out because they would fight injustice on these fronts, and we really still have that in Detroit. We fought--I did the recount of the [Mike] Duggan...the Duggan write-in campaign. It was one of the most corrupt things I have ever seen. Detroit couldn't write in Duggan. That's insane. But, I went to the recount every day and saw how it actually happened, and I can say that even though we didn't prevail in getting rid of this fraudulent front of a mayor, I know that Detroit didn't vote for him, and I feel incredible relief about seeing that they cheated to win. And, they cheated because they didn't believe that they were going to win. On all sides, I felt better. They knew they weren't going to win.

And, I know people in Detroit are...people in Detroit are really really sophisticated politically. People aren't stupid. It just looks like we're stupid because we don't have the mechanism to overturn this kind of power. We don't have courts. We don't have--there is no avenue of redress here. There is no avenue of redress here, but that doesn't mean the people accept it or don't know any better, and I feel very relieved at being part of a community that at least just not only knows but speaks up, that isn't afraid, that doesn't waver. I think that's really important. And, I think also people won't fight if they don't think they can win, and I think that's a very immoral approach to life, that you don't take on a fight because you can't win it. I think it's a really--it's how bullies win all the time. It's how injustice prevails.

But, not everybody is like that, and you pick your community, and you stay with them. And, I come from generations of that. I don't even have a choice about that. I come from the people that were pelted with tomatoes and being called all kinds of awful names. So--and my daughters are the same and my grandchildren. I see it in my grandchildren as well. So, I'm not even the least bit discouraged. I'm not discouraged, and I know that there are people who will fight this fight no matter what. And, you live life, and then you die. I mean, you can live out life and be complicit, or you can live your life and fight the good fight, and either way you die. It doesn't matter in the end who won. It doesn't matter. It matters how you lived your life. It matters how you go on the record.

[1:28:58]

**PB:** So, from an organizing standpoint, what do you think it's going to take for historic Detroiters, longtime Detroit, Black and brown Detroiters to win back control of this city?

**EH:** I don't think it's going to be winning back. I think it's going to be something completely different. Yeah, there is no winning back, and there is younger people--if you look at the Charter Commission and the younger people that are stepping up. And on my social media, I have a lot of really young people on my social media because I'm an elder... [laughs] I am a trusted elder. So, I am not worried about that, and they're not...they're not nostalgic either. So, we can be nostalgic for the days of Coleman Young. We can be nostalgic for the Black Power movement or the Latino Power movement or the Chicano Power movement that was. But, that's no longer, and they don't want that. I mean, they don't want that. They want something else. They're not nostalgic anymore. White people are nostalgic for when they had everything, when they were in control of everything, and they're not willing to give that up. And, I think older people of color are nostalgic for--because we were part of a movement that really shook things up. But, I think the younger people are creative, and it's going to be something completely different for them. And, I'm down with just backing behind them [laughs] whatever it is that they want.

I am not in favor of people not being able to read and write. I'm not trying to write the curriculum. I'm not trying to tell anybody what they should eat, where they should get it. I'm like, I want you to be able to read and write, and if you can do that, you can make all your own decisions. That's...that's where I'm at. I'm really--I have complete faith in the young people.

[1:30:55]

**PB:** So, I guess leave us with--and, I mean, you kind of touched upon it. One thing we're asking everyone is just to get an idea of what's your vision for a different Detroit, a more just Detroit, a more equitable Detroit. What would that society look like?

**EH:** For one thing, it would be integrated. It would be like in neighborhoods, at tables, at--like, you wouldn't go to these restaurants and see all white people. You wouldn't go to these spaces where there's all Black people. And, you know, like let me give you an example. Like, all the tourists in the Fisher building are white, and they'll go across the street in the Secretary of State building and everybody is black. It's not just segregation. It's extremely uneven lives, unequal lives, unequal opportunities. That has to change. And, I don't know how it's gonna change, but I know that it can because we have the capacity to do that. We have confronted these things before, but there has to be a will to do that. There must be a will to do that, and I don't think it's just on the people in power to do that. I think it's immoral to accept that arrangement. If we're poor, it's immoral for us to accept that arrangement.

[1:32:16]

**PB:** And did--the final, final thing--did--we were also asking everyone--because Lila Cabbil is part of putting this project together, one of the things we want to put together is... So, if you have a particular memory or anecdote or tribute that you would like to offer about Mama Lila, we would welcome it.



**EH:** You know, I think I was about 18 years old when I met her. So, I've really known her my entire life, my entire adult life anyway. I always think of her to the Rosa Parks Institute, which I know wasn't the last stop that she made, but I always attribute her work to Rosa Parks, and her...her warm embrace to everyone in the work that she did. She talks more than I do. [laughs] Lila talked more than I do. [laughs] So if you were around her, you got a lot of lessons from her. And, she really loved, loved, loved Detroit like we do. And yeah, there's a Lila-shaped hole in the universe.

**PB:** Thank you.

**EH:** Thank you.