

**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

**Tom Stephens**

Interviewed by

PETER BLACKMER AND ORIANA YILMA

May 24, 2019

Detroit, Michigan

## Narrator

Tom Stephens grew up in Trenton, Michigan, a suburb of Detroit, and has lived in Detroit for many decades. He is a lawyer for the Detroit City Council's Legislative Policy division. An activist since the late 1970s, he has worked in the antiwar movement, the environmental movement, and movements opposing emergency management and water shutoffs. He was part of DREM, Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management. He is also a member of the National Lawyers Guild and is active in the Detroit Independent Freedom School movement.

## 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.

Oriana Yilma is an undergraduate student at Wayne State University majoring in Psychology and minoring in African American Studies.

## Abstract

Tom Stephens describes his neighborhood growing up, how he became an anti-war activist, why he studied law, his early legal work for the National Lawyers Guild, and his work for the Research and Analysis division of Detroit City Council. Topics include the history of the Detroit incinerator and the struggle against it, how he saw the country change with the neoliberal turn and the Reagan era and how Detroit was a microcosm of national trends, the history of Michigan's emergency management statutes and the fight against it, how the passage of the new emergency manager law depressed voter turnout and activism, the history of Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management (DREM) and his communications role with the organization, the loss of the DREM website, the Detroit consent agreement, the history of the Detroit bankruptcy, the history of the Detroit Water and Sewerage Department, water shutoffs in Detroit, Charity Hicks' water activism, and the United Nations declaration that water shutoffs were a human rights violation. Throughout, he discusses lessons learned from his organizing and activism work.

## Keywords

Antiwar movement; Charity Hicks; Detroit bankruptcy; Detroit incinerator; Detroit Independent Freedom Schools; Detroit Water and Sewerage Department; Detroit, Michigan; Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management; Education; Emergency management; Environmental activism; Evergreen Alliance; Flint water crisis; Foreclosure crisis; Great Lakes Water Authority; Great Recession; Law; National Lawyers Guild; Neoliberalism; Water shutoffs

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Transcript of interview conducted May 24, 2019 with:

Tom Stephens [TS]

Detroit, Michigan

By: Peter Blackmer [PB] and Oriana Yilma [OY]

**TS:** My name's Tom Stephens. I live in Detroit [Michigan] on the East Side. I've been there since 2001 and have been in Detroit in general since--what?--[19]82. I grew up downriver. I'm a member of the National Lawyers Guild. I'm currently most active with the Detroit Independent Freedom School movement, which meets in this room on Monday nights. And, I have a bunch of other affiliations, but not real active right now. I work for the City Council's Legislative Policy Division, the lawyers for the Council.

[0:00:43]

**OY:** Could you describe your neighborhood and the city growing up?

**TS:** Well, I grew up downriver in Trenton [Michigan] in the suburbs, sort of the edge of suburbia. I guess for...most relevant topic for this conversation is when I was in, I guess, middle school, the big issue was was I gonna be bussed to Detroit, right? It was the high point of the Civil Rights movement. I've been thinking about that a lot in terms of the Freedom School. Because it wasn't just whether we were gonna be bussed, it turned out in the sweep of history looking back on it to be a turning point in American history, you know, in the neoliberal turn, right, at the high point of the Civil Rights movement. So, that's kind of the way I gradually become conscientized, to use a big word, about what's going on.

[0:01:34]

**OY:** How has the city changed since when you were growing up?

**TS:** I didn't know the city very well when I was growing up, you know. We would come in occasionally, you know, for field trips, Eastern Market, went to the [Detroit] Tigers games a lot in [19]68, saw Gordie Howe play at Olympia [Stadium]. It's not there anymore. Nor is Tiger Stadium. You know, we...I always talk about Detroit geography. Now when any two long-time Detroiters are talking about where something is, the reference points are always where other things used to be. So, there's a lot of stuff that's disappeared. Politically--my friend Kim Hunter said it best and we've repeated it over and over again--it's the city whose grassroots political identity used to be based in the Black church and the unions which had lots of grassroots context and authenticity in the community and not so much anymore. And, those have been the biggest changes I think.

[0:02:37]

**OY:** What does racism look like in Detroit today?

**TS:** Hmm. Boy, how much time you got for that? Well, to name a very current example, like a letter I sent to the editors of the Metro Times yesterday, it looks like white takeover board of the Charles H. Wright African American History Museum bringing in an exhibit about Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings as an example of African-American history and selling their own enlightened wisdom on a subject like that without really engaging with what's really going on.

[0:03:18]

**OY:** How did you first become active in movement work?

**TS:** I was at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor [Michigan] as an undergraduate. It was 1979 or [19]80--oh no, it had to be [19]78 or [19]79 because [Jimmy] Carter was president, Soviet Union had invaded Afghanistan. Of course, we found out 20 or 30 years later that Carter's national security advisor [Zbigniew Brzezinski] was bragging that he was the one who goaded them into that. There was--and I was one of the oldest people because anybody born after January 1, 1960--and I was born January 8, 1960--who was required to register for the draft in order to protect Saudi Arabia from the Russian menace, and I wasn't real happy with that at all. I had spent my freshman seminar, which is a required English--what?--English 101 equivalent requirement at the residential colleges at the University of Michigan studying the recently completed Vietnam War, and I'd been somewhat radicalized, and it just... Right on time, they came for me, and they said, "You gotta sign up for the draft." And I kind of just said, well, to make a long story short, "Fuck that," and kind of became an activist.

[0:04:35]

**OY:** What or who have been some of the greatest influences on your activism and legal practice?

**TS:** Wow. My freshman seminar teacher Marilyn Young, who passed away a couple of years ago. Around the same time as her, Noam Chomsky, Howard Zinn, Charlie Bright, other professors. Before them, Bob Dylan. Legally, the whole pantheon of the National Lawyers Guild people, especially Bill Goodman and Dick Goodman who were my--and Julie Hurwitz--who were my mentors here early in...early in my legal career.

[0:05:18]

**OY:** Can you tell us about some of the firms or organizations that you've worked for?

**TS:** Well, I guess primarily that's the National Lawyers Guild, which is a now--what?--75 year, founded in [19]37 as a racially integrated alternative of the American Bar Association, which was all white by statute at that time, by their internal statute. And, also was working with the labor movement, the Congress of Industrial Organizations--the CIO of the day--against the ABA's representation of the National Association of Manufacturers, you know, at a time when labor was on the march and social democracy was being introduced into American society. And, I joined that in law school, first year, and that was sort of my training ground for my adult professional political movement work. Done a whole bunch of things through them, peace work. I remember one of the more interesting projects real early on was providing legal support for gay men in Detroit who were organizing against AIDS [Acquired immunodeficiency syndrome], which, you know, we didn't even hardly know what it was at the time, but people were already organizing against it, and, you know, for government support for the victims. Just a whole range of things, you know. Civil rights stuff, labor stuff, peace stuff.

[0:06:33]

**PB:** What made you decide to go into law school coming out of your anti-war activism?

**TS:** Well, I figured it was--I'm just gonna wipe the sweat here a little bit. I'm sorry. It's getting warm now here in late May. It's late May, right?--I figured it was a way I could make a living and also I could do things that were interesting to me and were beneficial for people in general, others in society. And, I did good on the law school aptitude test, so it seemed like something I could do.

[0:07:05]

**PB:** That's the best reason, right? [laughs] Can you tell us a little bit about your experience working for the city council with the Research and Analysis Division that you were working with?

**TS:** Oh, boy. On the record and on video? Should I, really?

**PB:** As much as you...

**TS:** You know, local government has been just beheaded, right? Between neoliberalism and [Rick] Snyder's emergency management and the current Lansing [Michigan] legislature's mania for preemption. You know, they can't even turn around and spit, you know. They can't do anything, so. They really could do things, but they...they're not sufficiently grounded in struggle to be able to do anything about that. So, it's pretty frustrating.

[0:07:54]

**PB:** How did you first come into that role?

**TS:** Yeah, that's an interesting story. I was working for about three years out in Waterford [Michigan]. Hated the job. Terrible job. Had been looking for a more permanent place for a while after the firm that I used to work for that was a good place was basically going out of business and everybody left, and I was working for about three years out in Waterford for a firm that was just awful, and what was happening in Detroit, among other things, was the whole...the first--the third or fourth phase of the incinerator struggle was coming to a head in that the bonds that were undertaken in 1991 to retrofit it with baghouse and scrubber at like 500 million dollars additional costs were being paid off. And so, the city had an opportunity to make a decision about whether to continue with the incinerator or dispose of its solid waste, municipal solid waste, in some other way, and the council had nobody who knew anything about the incinerator on their staff, and there was one council member in particular, JoAnn Watson, who really wanted to shut it down. And so, they were looking for somebody who knew something about it, and since I was one of the people who started the Evergreen Alliance and--which was sort of the spearhead of the struggle in the late [19]80s--and I knew everything about it and I was looking for a job because where I was I hated, they offered me a job and I took it.



[0:09:34]

**PB:** What kind of... I mean, what did you learn or what have you learned through that kind of position, from being in that insider perspective, about the way the City Council operates, about...

**TS:** Not much about the way the city council operates. I pretty much knew about everything about the way the City Council operates from being in front of them back in the [19]80s around the incinerator and from observing other things and from working with Maryann Mahaffey. I think the one thing that has... The biggest thing that's changed from working for the government from before I worked for the government is before I worked for the government you would hear rhetoric about...by candidates about I know how to reach across the aisle and make deals and everything, and I would discount that as just a lot of hot air. I now believe, you know, working for--at least for legislative candidates, that probably is the most important thing. Because if you're a single legislator and you're not in majority, you know, you have a pulpit to some extent. You have a platform to speak, but you're just speaking for yourself. Whereas if you can put together a majority, you're making policy, and the difference from--in a legislative setting--is like night and day. You know, it's a whole different thing, so that has changed from that experience. But other than that, not a whole lot. I mean, I've certainly learned a lot about the city charter, but is any of that really worth knowing? Not really. [laughs] I mean, we got a charter. It's, you know, it's alright.

[0:10:51]

**PB:** Can you tell us a little bit about the background of the incinerator struggle and some of, like, the race and class components to, like, I guess, environmental justice more broadly in Detroit?

**TS:** Well, if you want the full story check out the next Riverwise Magazine because I wrote it up. It'll be a longer one. The background of the incinerator, it actually started even under the predecessor to...to Coleman Young, whether that was

Roman Gribbs or a previous I'm not sure, but it was before my time in Detroit, back at the time when I was wondering whether I'd be [laughs] bussed to Detroit in middle school. What happened, basically, was Three Mile Island shut down the nuclear industry in the country, and everybody said, "Hell, no. We're not gonna build anymore of these things. This is ridiculous." You couldn't insure them, and the Price-Anderson [Nuclear Industries Indemnity] Act has the taxpayers bailing them out if something goes wrong, and how that had to do with the incinerator was that left a whole industry of boiler engineers that had no work anymore.

And so, the companies that previously built nuclear reactors decided, well, maybe they could get some communities to hire them and pay them to build incinerators using the same personnel, and they actually went around to the National League of Cities with a whole presentation and, of course, it was Detroit that they snagged for the biggest one in the world. Combustion Engineering was the contractor, and Detroit's interest on the thing--you know, there was talk about this, and then after the Young administration, after the, you know, historic political earthquake of the African-American majority of Detroit taking power locally, Detroit had to figure out what to do to manage, at the time, 850,000 tons of municipal solid waste a year. And, they really didn't have any better, maybe even worse, relations with, you know, like landfill companies in the suburbs or anything or anybody in the suburbs, and they were concerned about, you know, if they signed contracts whether...how that could cost. And so, between the motivation of the industry and the concerns of the new leadership in Detroit, there was a mutual advantage to, hey, let's build a machine that will dispose of 850,000 tons of municipal solid waste in a year, and we have total control over it.

So, that was the initial thought, quote unquote, scare quotes, about why to build the world's largest trash incinerator in Detroit. They tried to do it on the cheap with inadequate pollution controls--this is getting ahead of your question, but what happened was that goes back--that planning process--goes way back to [19]74, [19]75 right after Coleman Young was elected. And then by [19]86, they were ready to proceed. That's how long it took to, you know, plan for such a huge thing, assemble the land, site it, make decisions about what pollution controls to use--bad decisions.

And then in [19]86, what happened--this is actually a very...a rather amusing and horrifying story--what happened was a staff member at the state...I think Department of Natural Resources, whoever--there wasn't a DEQ [Department of Environmental Quality] at the time. All the licensing stuff was in the DNR--was going over figures for incinerators, not specifically with regard to the Detroit one, but for one that was planned but was never built up north, and discovered a simple mathematical error in the Detroit health risk. A thousand-fold error. And, you know, there's this...there's this...there's this science, quote unquote, again scare quotes, of health risk estimates that had been performed on the proposed Detroit trash incinerator, and surprise, surprise they come up with the same finding they always come up with when they want to justify such projects. They were able to say, "Well, we've done this study, and we've juggled these numbers, and we've assessed emission and health risks and exposures based on the plumes of prevailing winds and all of the things that go into this health risk estimate, and we've concluded that for a million people exposed to the maximum amount of permitted emissions from this facility over the entire lifetime of this facility, there will be no more than one additional risk of cancer." That's the finding they always come up [laughs] when they want to justify a project. But, of course, the thousand-fold mathematical error was a little bit of a problem there because then they were saying, "Oh, well jeez, if that's correct, if everything that we've done is correct,"--big if--"then that would mean a thousand extra cancer deaths, and even in Detroit we can't tolerate that."

So, they announce that, and that's when we heard about it. And so, we found ourselves--how long ago? It was 1986, now 35 years ago or whatever it was--at a big public hearing in the Council Auditorium on the 13<sup>th</sup> floor where I work now in a room packed with some grassroots environmentalists, a bunch of city employees who were brought in to in some cases physically threaten people and to discuss this error and this new health risk estimate they were doing and whether to go forward with this incinerator plan without even the baghouse and electrostatic...with only electrostatic precipitators as air pollution controls, no baghouse and scrubber, which, in other communities where Combustion Engineering was building smaller incinerators, they were always putting on quote unquote state of the art pollution controls.

So, that was the big dispute at that time. If memory serves, it was April 1986, and the upshot of the hearing was they decided full steam ahead. We're gonna go

ahead, and we're gonna build it without baghouse and scrubbers. I remember the Windsor [Canada] paper [Windsor Star?] called me the next morning and said, "What do you think of the decision?" And I said, "Well, it guarantees the thing's gonna be defeated because it's gonna unify the opposition," and it was never defeated, but it did unify the opposition. And so, the years between [19]86 and [19]91 were a kind of a whirlwind of just proto-environmental justice. We didn't talk about environmental justice in those days. They talked about it in Warren County, North Carolina but not in many other places at that time.

And by April 1990 with the facility having failed its initial emissions test as to hydrochloric acid, dioxins, furans, and mercury, we found ourselves at another air pollution control commission meeting in Detroit. We were always insisting they meet in Detroit, and in those days they did on the weekend before Earth Day. I was only present for parts of the hearing because I was getting ready for a product liability trial by that time. My friend Allen Franklin and three experts that we raised money to fly in and use, the primary one being Paul Connett, who was a chemistry professor at St. Mary's University [Mount Saint Mary College] in upstate New York and really the world's leading expert on incineration, a fellow named Craig Volland, who was an expert on mercury and charcoal activated filters--in addition to the baghouse and the scrubber, if you wanted to control mercury, you need charcoal activated filters. They never had those--and a fellow named Richard Smith--Richard Cook, Richard Cook, who was the provost at Western Michigan University and a pretty active environmentalist. Ralph (??) and those three experts spoke to the Air Pollution Control Commission [laughs], and the Air Pollution Control Commission did not hide the permit for the incinerator.

Everybody went, "Whoa!" Nobody thought this was gonna happen. It was ridiculous. This, you know, this scrubby bunch of anarchists, environmentalists in the Cass Corridor against Coleman Young, the city, Combustion Engineering, Western Engineering, DTE--Detroit Edison as they were called at that time--city management, Honigan, Miller, Schwartz & Cohn--and I'm leaving out three or four other major corporations [laughs]--and the Air Pollution Control Commission denied them their operating permit, which meant by law they had to shut down, and they did, for two or three weeks, and they got together--that was a fascinating couple of weeks. We were on the front page basically every day of the papers, and they pulled together a meeting of all the local leaders who hardly ever met in the same room. You know, talking about the county execs, the mayor, the

governor, and they drafted a consent order, which would retrofit the thing with the baghouse and the scrubbers as I mentioned earlier at a cost of about 500 million like four or five years down the road, and said go ahead and reopen and operate it. And when... [laughs] when they had another meeting and ratified that after another one of their...these public comment periods, and I spoke at the comment period, and I had a very young son at the time and took him home, when the final vote came to reopen it, things were thrown at them [laughs]. People said, "What do you think of that?" I said, "Well, what can I say? My friends don't like their rights being violated. There's a lot more violence on one side of this than another." And that's how the incinerator was forced down our throat basically.

[0:20:07]

**PB:** So, given that the incinerator was just announced closed--or this might be...

**TS:** Is it closed now? They announced it was closed, and I think it's closed. Yeah.

**PB:** In the process, I guess.

**TS:** It was closed for a few weeks in 1990 too. That was pretty cool. We had a rally over there on Gullen Mall on Earth Day, and then we had a march to the incinerator site which was closed down, and this was Earth Day. This was the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the original Earth Day. So, we got calls from the west coast and people said, "You know you were the lead in the world news, [laughs] World News Tonight." It's family video. We're pulling our kids in our wagons over the freeway. [laughs] It was pretty fun. But, you know, they got together and screwed us, as they always do. None of those victories are ever permanent. You just gotta keep fighting.

[0:20:57]

**PB:** So, what do we need to learn from that struggle? Or, what made portions of it successful? What parts maybe weren't as successful from this vantage point?

**TS:** Boy. The base was way too narrow. I mean, the lack of involvement of people in the Black community in an environmental struggle in 1986 through 1991 was totally fail. We never had a chance. It was, you know, the fact that we got so far as we did was a miracle. Part of what happened was, you know, it started in [19]86, and the summer of [19]81 woke everybody up to the fact that global warming and the environment was real because in the summer of--summer of [19]88. I said [19]81. Summer of [19]88, it rained in about mid-April, and then it like didn't rain again until August except maybe once. It was the weirdest thing. It rained for about 20 minutes, and then five minutes after it rained, you went outside, and you couldn't even tell that it rained. It just [makes sucking sound and laughs]. So, we had this huge drought, and everybody's like, "Well, God, this climate change thing is kinda real, isn't it?" So, consciousness changed, and the thing was so poorly handled by the city so arrogantly. At the time, there was a much more robust remnant of the Civil Rights and anti-war history of the [19]60s so to speak than there is today.

So, by way of saying all that, what are the lessons? Even if you can't win, sometimes it's still worth fighting because of the principle--probably a good lesson for today with regard to impeachment of the president [Donald Trump]. If you really want to win, you better be better organizers than we were, and you better make sure you have a strong social base and strong political base and a strategy that's calibrated to win. It's hard to say because, like I say, environmental justice wasn't even an issue then, and it is what everybody is talking about now. Although a lot of people are talking about it now, although it's never been recognized in law in any way. So, I guess the ultimate lesson is the lesson that my constitutional history professor at Wayne [State University], Sandra VanBurkleo, said, "It's another chapter in the perverse history of the constitution," right? It's just weird. It's all very weird. Definitely, you have to learn that when you make decisions like that on narrow criteria like, "Well, we have 850,000 tons of municipal solid waste a year, and we have to figure a way to get rid of it. Let's pay this corporation to take care of it," that's probably not a good decision making process. I think that's--for me, that was the biggest single lesson. We should probably come up with strategies that, well, first of all define the problem better than that, and then

come up with a strategy that's actually, you know, suited to the real problem as opposed to some kind of narrow stupid question like that.

Beyond that, there's many, but I don't know how...I don't know that I feel up to [laughs] trying to explore them all right now. I'm still a little bit stunned by this sudden announcement that they were gonna close it, and of course some people wanted to celebrate that. I don't see the point in celebrating it because it just went on too long and the criteria that were used to create it and to maintain it and even the criteria that were used to close it are all the wrong criteria, you know. We're still not taking care of business as far as we're taking care of corporations and other forces of unjust domination, but we're not taking care of business as far as life on the planet. And so, I'm not sure. We haven't learned any lessons, really, from it, not many people. It's very discouraging in the long run.

[0:24:30]

**PB:** This is gonna take us in a little bit of a different direction. Did you have any involvement in [19]99 with the state takeover of the schools in Detroit?

**TS:** No. No direct involvement. No.

**PB:** So, I want to take us up into the 2000s if that's alright. And, if there's thoughts that...if there's like a...

**TS:** I could--I should go back, and there is one story related to that. It wasn't in [19]99, but it was shortly after that. Some of the people that were fighting the state takeover of the schools and the general corporate reform and white supremacist reform of public education that has been so poisonous for the last several decades, they prevailed on the State Board of Education to meet in Detroit for like the first time, and they met over at...down at WC3 [Wayne County Community College] in the auditorium, and I did participate in that, and I thought we made a pretty good presentation to them about how, you know, they were just off...they were destroying public education in Detroit.

The thing that sticks with me...the thing that sticks with me the most from that particular meeting--well, other than the total inefficacy of the State Board of Public Education sitting there and not able to do anything about anything. One of the reformers spoke there, one of the Skillman [Foundation] people--or I don't know that she was with Skillman specifically, but she was with one of the groups, the many groups, that's funded by Skillman, which has been driving this train the whole time. And, I thought that the contempt and the disrespect and the, well, frankly, racism that was audible in her voice and visible in her demeanor and clear in her message was that she said, "Do you realize how difficult it is to take a child out of this community and educate him or her?" was really a revelation to me of what was going on. It was a step in the whole understanding. And I publicly thrashed her in front of the Board of Education for that. I said, "I can't believe that mentality is even allowed to come out to you here and that you don't stand up and take that person's name down [laughs] and make sure she doesn't have any more involvement in any of this."

Unfortunately, it wasn't just an isolated incident. You hear that from them all the time, you know. This community is so degraded, and it reached the point where--like, I wasn't involved in the takeover, but I...we're doing the Freedom Schools now because we eventually decided somebody had to do something as an alternative. I think that I came to understand that--well, going back to my undergraduate days in an alternatives in education class, I learned that one of the things that makes us humans is that we learn no matter what we do, right? I mean, we're always learning. We might be learning bad things [laughs], but we're always learning. It's inevitable, and the problem with the state takeover and the whole corporate white supremacist reform movement that's been oriented around charters and high stakes testing and so-called accountability and all that bullshit is that what they're teaching the children of this community is that your community sucks, your families suck, and you suck. That's what they're teaching them. You know, they're hearing. You start talking to them, you know, that's what they're being told. And, you know, as soon as you give them some kind [laughs] of meaningful opportunity to learn and deal with what's going on around them, you can see a light go on.



So, that...that's been my experience with it. I wasn't personally involved in it when it was going on, didn't have kids in the system, but had become involved in it since. And especially in the situation we're in right now, you know, as Henry Giroux wrote the other day, there's never been a time when education as a political activity was more important. It's just absolutely critical now. I mean, everything we do has to be, you know, an educational strategy in my view.

[0:28:20]

**PB:** This corporatization of education in public--corporatization of public education, to be specific, that you're referencing, do you see that as part of a...was that an advance guard in some ways of the broader corporatization of the city or was this following in tow of a broader process?

**TS:** It's a much larger thing, way bigger than just the city. Although, as with... I mean, Detroit... What I always say about Detroit is Detroit is the same as everywhere else except more so, right? And, I had a really unique insight into that particular process because I graduated from the University of Michigan in 1981, you know. What, six months after they assassinated John Lennon? Four or five months after Ronald Reagan was sworn in as president. And then, I took off, and I spent a year abroad between undergrad and law school, and I came back to a country that was like, whoa. [laughs] I mean, now it's sort of like the country I grew up in, but at the time it didn't seem like the country I grew up in.

And, one of the...the first project that I did when I got back was I went and I interviewed a bunch of people and I did some research on the...what had been happening at the University of Michigan when I left, which was originally called the quote-unquote "Smaller and Better University of Michigan," which was basically the shifting of resources from meaningless things like the Department of Education or the Department of Natural Resources and the geography department into more lucrative things like arms research and, you know, support for the CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] and the military industrial complex, and I did a report on that that never saw the light of day. There was a monthly in Detroit at the time where the guy seemed to be interested in it, but he didn't want to run it.

But... So, that was... Like I say, this was happening. This was the neoliberal turn. In the early [19]70s, the Civil Rights Movement crested, and the environmental movement came of age. The women's movement. The Trilateral Commission and elite formation of corporate leaders from Western Europe, the United States--North America, I guess--and Japan got together and concluded there was a crisis of democracy. And, [Noam] Chomsky's written about this so eloquently and so funnily, you know. And as Gil Scott-Heron put it, "Damn it! One person wants to read him, the whole damn world wants to read him." I mean, there's just too much democracy here. We've gotta do something about this. And, we now know, of course, Justice Lewis Powell, before he was Justice Powell, when he was general counsel for the National Association of Manufacturers, had written a document that's called the Powell Memo, which if you haven't gotten your hands on it and read, you ought to read because it was like a road map for everything that's happened since, you know. We're dealing with environmentalists. We're dealing with civil rights activists. We're losing the county. The business community better get organized, you know. And so, that's where, you know, you hear about the Koch brothers now and ALEC [American Legislative Exchange Council] and all that stuff. It was all very cogently mapped out.

And, you know, being away from the country for a year and coming back just as it was gaining momentum, it was just obvious. It was right in my face, you know, and has been ever since. So, that was sort of how I experienced it, that it wasn't just Detroit, and it wasn't just education. It was a huge project of class domination and control with racial aspects, and it was very well planned out and extremely well-funded. And, you know, people fell into the trap just like lambs to the slaughter, you know, led by the quote-unquote Macomb County [Michigan] Democrats who voted for Ronald Reagan in 1980 and voted for Donald Trump in 2016. And, you know, that's been the...that's been the struggle for my whole life, really, is to try to deal with that kind of reality. Mostly failing [laughs], you know. Still kicking now.

[0:32:04]

**PB:** I want to get into that in greater detail particularly when we get into emergency management and bankruptcy particularly.

**TS:** Yeah, we sure will. [laughs] Greater detail.

**PB:** But ahead of that, I want to ask you about the mortgage crisis and the Great Recession, what that looked like in Detroit and, like, maybe some of the contradictions between federal government responses to bank and automotive crisis as opposed to the human impact.

**TS:** Right. I mean, that's what I meant when I said a minute ago it's been in my face ever since. It's just continual. I mean, you've got these massive unmet human needs, you know, and it's like nobody cares. Hell, it's their own fault, you know. Get a job. And, you've got these corporate contradictions is the right word, right? I mean, they...it's their world. They make the decisions about investment. They make the decisions about production. They make the decisions about reproduction of the society, all the basic policy decisions. John Mogk, who was one of the law professors when I was there, just said the other day, "The city is run by corporate developers," and that's been true all along. There's a matter of degree. Now, it's completely run lock, stock, and barrel, but that was really true.

And, your question gives examples, right? I mean, when Chrysler's in trouble, there's money. When GM [General Motors] is in trouble, there's money. When Wall Street is in trouble, there's money. Jeez, 700 billion dollars overnight. Who knew? But as our people struggle with, you know, all the issues that we have to deal with--the health crisis, the education crisis, the environmental crisis--somehow there's never any resources to deal with any of it. What's that all about, you know? Well, very smart people have really explained it in great detail, but somehow we have this corporate media and this educational complex that never shares the information with anybody and sure as hell doesn't give anybody any kind of agency or ability to deal with it unless they take it themselves.

And, you know, that's where we're at. and that's why we're organizing Freedom Schools now [laughs] is because none of this stuff is ever gonna get solved if we're relying on elected officials to lead. And, you know, if you just look at American history or world history, none of the real progress ever comes from that direction,

right? It always comes from people getting self-organized and bringing pressure from the bottom. How you do that in today's world with the comprehensive surveillance and the kind of data they've got on us and the kind of hold they've got our minds and every other point of purchase we could have is a huge challenge, but the new generation is doing a pretty good job or rising to that challenge. You know, I'm at the point where, hey, how can I help, you know?

[0:34:43]

**PB:** So, you're speaking about this broader global context throughout this analysis, right? Could you--I want to, like, bring explicitly the questions of race and class into this conversation about particularly we're looking at the global context. Like, what's the connection between race and class in Detroit and this broader system of neoliberalism, corporatization, disaster capitalism, you know?

**TS:** Well, Detroit's like the frontline of the whole thing, right? I mean, one of the frontlines. Greece was the frontline at the same time. There's other frontlines. But, you know, going back to the golden age of capitalism and American imperialism, you know, between World War II and the early [19]70s, the Powell Memo, Detroit is the wealthiest big city in the country--in the world. Detroit's got this giant industrial base that is the core of the national and even the world auto industry, which if you look at development all around the world, every single country wants to have an auto industry for obvious reasons, its spinoff benefits, the heavy industry, the capital that it attracts and how it allows you to affect social development even more than the water and sewer systems, which we also need to get into. [laughs] Well, not almost as much as the water and sewer systems, sorry.

But, Detroit was, you know, both the tip of the spear on the rise of that system and then--in a dynamic that sort of replicates Haiti, right? Because you had this relatively high paid, very skilled industrial proletariat primarily of color in Detroit staging things like the wildcat strikes [laughs] at the Chrysler plant in the [19]70s and all the whole strike wave in the [19]40s and the whole strike wave in the [19]30s [laughs] because you had these grassroots leaders changing the shape of the country and its political economy in the most crucial, transformative decades

of the twentieth century, capital said, "We need to do something about this. We need to make an example of these people." And that's what they did, right? You know, like no other city, suck out all the capital, build a wall around these people, and say, "Alright. You've got it." And, Coleman Young recognized it was happening at the time. He said, "Yeah, I'm here because they don't want it anymore."

So, that brings us up to 1970 and 1980. This is when I'm starting to grow up and become semi-aware of what's going on, coming in to watch concerts at Masonic Auditorium and Olympia [Stadium] and Cobo [Hall] and ballgames and so forth. And Detroit, which has been on this rocket ship leading this industrial transformation of humanity and the, you know, the hegemonic power of American imperialism, Detroit is cut off, like I say, like Haiti in the eighteenth century, and said, "Alright. You're on your own now." You know, because the auto company--ever since World--the auto companies ever since World War II has been pulling out capital saying, "We're never gonna be in this situation again where one union in Flint [Michigan] can shut down one of our plants, and it shuts down our whole corporation. That cannot be allowed to happen." And so, that's going on.

And, this is my biggest gripe: while all of that was going on, where were our leaders, whether it's the union leaders or the church leaders or the local elected officials? What the hell did they think was gonna happen? Well, of course, they thought, "Someday, they'll come back," you know, just like Chrysler's coming back now. And, of course, Jimmy Boggs and others saw right away, you know, saw 50 years ago that ain't ever gonna happen. You know, we're in a whole new thing here. We're making people irrelevant. What everybody's saying, not what every robust left thinker is saying now, you know, Jimmy Boggs was already saying it in 1973, you know. There's these excluded people. What are we gonna do about them? That's the question.

And so, Detroit was like this little microcosm for everything. And when you get to 2007 and the bubbles burst, you know, the housing bubble, the stock bubble, Detroit has already been suffering through foreclosure and unemployment and deindustrialization and, you know, the consequences of our continual, you know, racial problems, our inability to face each other and deal with each other as, you know, equal human beings, the discrimination against Detroit and all that. Detroit's been suffering from that for decades. And then, the system itself almost

goes bully up--belly up. Bipartisanly, the George W. Bush and the Barack Obama administrations get together and bail out the auto companies and bail out Wall Street, and it's like, well, gee, what are we gonna do about Detroit? What are we gonna do about communities like Detroit? African-American cities in Michigan, for example. What are we gonna do about them?

And in 2010, you had the triumph for the Midwestern GOP [Grand Old Party] oligarchs, right? Every state in the country from Pennsylvania to Wisconsin, except, I think, Illinois--Illinois's generally been Democratic. Even they might've been Republican for a while--goes Republican. You got, you know, Rick Snyder in Michigan portraying himself as a sort of an alternative to the Paleo-Republicans, you know. Kind of a business friendly, technocratic, you know, tough nerd, right? And, it was--this is an interesting story about it. His first--I was working for the council at that point, had been there for about two years. His first State of the State speech--I never listen to politicians' speeches. It's not good for my mental health, so I don't do it. If I need to know, I'll read it later. My boss comes in. The director of what at the time was the Research and Analysis Division for Council, he comes in, and he says, "Did you watch the speech last night?" I said, "No." He said, "Well, he said something about emergency management. He said he's gonna amend the emergency management statute." This is how sharp some of the people who've been around Detroit are [laughs], you know. He said, "See what he said. Find out what he said. I saw it in there, and that's gonna be big." And I said, "Okay," and I found the text of the speech, and there's about three sentences about, yeah, we're gonna amend the emergency management statute, and I thought, "Jeez, big deal," right? How the hell did I know that this was gonna become, you know, the major professional activity for the next 20 years? I didn't.

[0:41:20]

Within a few days of that, another one of the, you know, great Detroit activists, Russ Bellant, who's been, you know, writing and researching the global fascist counter offensives since even before I was aware of it, an old friend and now good friend, he has good contacts in Lansing, and he got a copy of the draft bill which was the original draft of Snyder's original Public Act Four, his first amendment to emergency management act, and he sent it around as a PDF, and since I had been

asked by my boss to keep on top of this, I opened it up, and I immediately read it. And I said, "Oh my fucking God." [laughs]

It's like this blueprint for the state to take over a city, right? I mean, you know, if you've got financial problems...if you've got financial problems in 2011 [laughs] two years after the Lehman Brothers and the crash and everything, here's what we can do as soon as we want to. As soon as the treasury says we can do it, we're gonna take over your whole damn city. [laughs] We're gonna send in an emergency manager--now remember, there had been emergency financial management since at least early [19]70s where you could send in an emergency financial manager who would say, "Here's your budget. Don't care how you spend it. You decide how to spend it, but this is your budget," and that's...that was subject to abuses, and it was abused grossly by Robert Bobb in the Detroit Public Schools, and the Circuit Court actually enjoined him from doing it. And after they did that, Snyder got elected, and he introduced this new statute.

Even then, that statute was not really targeting Detroit. That statute was passed--we were told by our advocates in Lansing, the Michigan Municipal League people, and I think they're right, that that statute, that version of the emergency management act, was primarily intended to target a whole bunch of other communities in Michigan where--that are smaller communities where, like, there had been like an auto parts manufacturer, an electrical industry, refrigerator manufacturing, whatever it is, and it used to manufacture...it used to employ half the people in town, and now it's closed. What do we do? It was targeting those kinds of communities, not targeting Detroit. Because Detroit was, as we found out, was a whole different megillah, right?

But at the time--I mean, remember the rise and fall of Kwame Kilpatrick coincided with the Great Recession. Kilpatrick resigned within a couple weeks of the Lehman Brothers. So, Kilpatrick had resigned. For about six months, Ken Cockrel was interim mayor. And then, Dave Bing was elected mayor in a special election just before Snyder was elected governor, and Dave Bing had no idea what he was doing. Similar to Snyder, similar to Trump, here's a guy who has never been involved in politics, has never had a job in politics, has never showed any qualification or even interest in any kind of actual political leadership, and he's now the mayor of the City of Detroit in the middle of a crisis. So, as of--I think it

was November. It was between September--I think it was November of 2011. Dave Bing goes on TV and does something that no responsible leader of a city would ever do. He says, "We're in crisis now. I just don't know what to do!" [laughs] I mean, you know, I mean, we're really falling apart, basically. I did watch that. I did watch that speech, and that's why I say I never watch political...politicians' speeches because it just made me crazy.

And, that triggered the process that led to a so-called consent agreement, what the scholar Jamie Peck calls "the ludicrously misnamed consent agreement" that was imposed on the city in March 2012. And then, well, we didn't breach the consent agreement. Snyder met Kevyn Orr, and he met Jones Day, and he read Jones Day's Law Review article about how you could cut pension and rationalize municipal finances that way. And he was like, "Well, fuck this consent agreement. I'm gonna hire Jones Day, and we're gonna make Orr the Emergency Manager, and we're gonna make Jones Day the restructuring counsel." Ahhh! You know, the whole city run by the same corporate law firm, both the lawyer and the client. This is nuts. I mean, I was...I was literally going nuts for about a month after we found out about that.

The way we found out about it was really interesting. We were at a meeting. It was March 11<sup>th</sup>, 2012--2013. I'll never forget it. March 11, 2013, and we were at a meeting of what we used to call the FAB [Financial Advisory Board] at the time, which was, under the consent agreement, the state-appointed board of fiscal overseers, the predecessor for what later became the Financial Review Board that was established by the state legislature as we came out of bankruptcy. And, we were at these meetings. Some of the same people are on these two boards, and they have the same annoying procedure where they sit up there and ask people questions, and sometimes they're rude to them, and, you know, they're basically learning about all of the stuff that everybody who knows knows about municipal finance and governance in Detroit. They're sitting up there and asking these questions.

So, we show up at this meeting, and there's a presentation by Miller Buckfire, the investment bank, which had been hired by Bing to help him, to help advise him during the...under the consent agreement. And, you know, like everything else, they've got a PowerPoint, and there's a line in the PowerPoint that says, "We're



gonna recommend new counsel. We're gonna recommend new counsel." And somebody on the FAB said, "What do you mean you're gonna recommend new counsel?" "Well, we think we have new lawyers who..." "Well, can you tell..." "No, we can't tell you anything about it right now." You go home, and there's an article in the Free Press online says there's this guy Kevyn Orr from Jones Day who his name has been leaked as the proposed emergency manager. And at the same time, the Bing administration let drop the proposed contract with Jones Day as the restructuring counsel with a contract, we found out within a couple days, a contract that was capped at 3.5 million unless they filed for bankruptcy. Well, of course, at that point we knew they were gonna file for bankruptcy. [laughs] It was totally obvious. I mean, how stupid do you think people are, you know? And, that...that was the railroad, you know.

I mean, I was like--you asked about lessons from the incinerator thing. That was the...that was the equivalent between Earth Day 1990 and the consent agreement, you know. Okay, some politicians in Lansing and their corporate handlers have gotten together and written some papers and put together some papers that under their interpretation of what laws say allows them to do things that they really should never be allowed to do [laughs] under the state Constitution or the federal Constitution, but they're gonna do it, especially not in a racial context. That's what they're gonna do, and that's what they did. That, you know--and it was... They're so clever, you know. I mean, it is kind of clever because I was sitting there and there wasn't anything I could do about it. Not for lack of trying. Talked to everybody I could think of, did everything we could to try to support litigation, appeared personally myself in the bankruptcy with Judge [Steven W.] Rhodes and pleaded with him to give us a hearing on the constitutional issues, even got him to answer, to speak to me.

But, there was nothing we could do about it, you know. It was totally set up. I mean, Rhodes was, you know, picked to do the job. It reminds me of something that I think it was Bill Kunstler said about the Chicago Seven trial where he was watching, you know, this story about the judge, Julius Hoffman. There's a book called Tales of Hoffman because the judge's name was Julius Hoffman and, of course, the lead defendant was Abbie Hoffman, and he was acting like a complete clown through the whole trial. At one point at the end of the day, somehow this giant bag of marijuana appeared on the defense table [laughs], and of course they were convicted, but it was overturned on appeal. They dragged Bobby Seale in

from, you know, some other activity that he was involved in and said, [laughs] “You’re one of the conspirators!” And, he stood up and wouldn’t take it. And so, they gagged him and tied him to the chair [laughs] and kept him in the trial. So, unsurprisingly, there was a new trial. And, the reason I tell this story is because I think it was Kunstler who said, “Jeez, I can’t figure out what’s going on here,” and realized that whenever there’s a crisis like this, somebody from the system like Julius Hoffman or Judge Rhodes steps forward to deal with it. There’s just, you know, an endless rank of people [laughs] that they can draw out for that because it’s really good for your career if you’ll do that for the system, for the powers that be. And that’s what happened, clearly.

[0:49:43]

**PB:** Where does Detroit Future City fit into all of this?

**TS:** Oh boy. You know, I think I have a little different take on Detroit Future City than most people. I don’t think it ever did much but take control of the conversation, myself. I mean, I wrote about the first...the initial five meetings that they held when I think it was called--yeah, it was called Detroit Future City then, and later they called it Detroit Works. And, it’s really been a continuous rebranding exercise, and it’s sort of generally reflective of these, you know, of this ideology of white supremacy and capital neoliberalism and everything. It’s generally reflective of those, and it tries to soften the edges and sell them to people without much success as far as I can tell. I think it’s generally consistent with what’s happened, but it’s not been--to me, it’s more just sort of a propaganda window dressing thing than anything real. I’m not sure if I’m right about that, but that’s been my impression.

[0:50:36]

**PB:** So, can you tell us a little bit about those struggles that were waged against P.A. [Public Act] Four?

**TS:** Yeah, that was magnificent, wasn't it? I mean, with no institutional support at all, the people of this city and like-minded folks around the state got together and said, "We don't like this." Like I say, you know, the evolution from emergency financial management that had been in place since I think [19]72 or [19]78 under something called Public Act 72. Yeah, I think it was Public Act 72 is where I'm getting that number. The evolution of that from emergency financial management to this all-encompassing emergency management where they just completely cut off your rights to any meaningful participation in the political life of your community. You know, some people say the right to the city--David Harvey, I think it is, says the right to the city is probably the most under-appreciated. The most significant right that we have, you know, is the right to participate in the continuing evolution of our urban community. If you live in a city, it's crucial. And, this said no, you don't have that anymore.

Well, and surprise, surprise, they do that, and within two or three years, they're cutting us off from the means of life. We can't get water, or if we're in Flint, we're poisoned by the water because of decisions they made. Well, you know, what's wrong with this picture? Even Snyder's own hand-picked commission that looked at what happened in Flint said, "Well, this is partly because of the emergency manager, largely because of emergency management." And they still haven't amended the damn statute! So, you know, that's the best answer I can give you to that question. You know, there is just a raw power play here based on, you know, racial and class domination and the role of capital in what's often called late capitalism and the crisis and the contradictions that it's bringing to all of our lives at this point, and I don't what's gonna turn them around, but it can't go on for very long. It's just gonna get uglier and uglier until it is turned around, and that's where we sit right now. I mean, jeez, look at Washington DC. Look at the mess that we're in.

[0:52:40]

**PB:** Did you have any role in the referendum part of this?

**TS:** Not much. I mean, I signed it, I think. I didn't do too much as far as circulating it. I remember when the idea was first suggested, and there was a fairly high

power meeting at the city council table, not an official meeting. JoAnn Watson was there. I don't think any other Council members were there, but a bunch of lawyers were there. And, I remember, you know, enthusiastically endorsing the referendum. Yes, let's go ahead and do this. This is a great idea. But, I don't think it was just because I said that that they did [laughs]. But, I remember that it was discussed at that time, and I was glad they did it, and it was certainly more successful than what I expected it to be. But, you know, again, just a brutal lesson in power that they could turn around and pass another one, and that one was clearly targeting Detroit. There was a whole--most people don't talk about this very much, but there was a whole subsection about bankruptcy in that one which wasn't in Public Act Four. They clearly had their eyes on Detroit by that time.

[0:53:44]

**PB:** So, what--we were talking about P.A. 436--what's the... Can you describe, like, what the atmosphere is in the city, like, amongst organizers, amongst the population, like, once lame duck passes that?

**TS:** At that time? Oh God, the anger and the frustration, and I think it opened a lot of people's eyes, and it just crushed a lot of people. I mean, I think one aspect of it, one really important aspect of it that isn't discussed very often, is its power as voter suppression, right? I mean, after--you know, I've periodically gone door-to-door for, you know, whatever things, often Michigan Supreme Court candidates or whatever. After 436, pretty much everybody you talked to was like, "Well, what does it matter?" You know, yeah, we vote for stuff, but they don't care what we vote for.

You know who Yanis Varoufakis is, right? He was the finance minister in Greece under the Syriza government until the troika forced them to basically continue with their own version of the so-called consent agreement. And during his tenure, one of the muckety-mucks in Europe, I forget who, just came out and said to him, "Look, no vote is going to be allowed to disturb this policy." I mean, he's now saying that what happened to Greece was the equivalent--he calls it "fiscal waterboarding." I saw that in an article I think last week, and I thought, "Well, yeah, if that isn't it..."--especially given we haven't gotten into the water board yet

and the water system, but yeah, it was fiscal waterboarding. I mean, it's like they tie you down, and you're helpless, you know? You think you can do something about this? You can't do anything about this. The power of the state says the emergency manager is your mayor, he's your city council, he's the head of the DPW [Department of Public Works] and head of the police. He can hire and fire the police chief, you know. You do what he says. He happens to be a partner in the law firm that's restructuring counsel in your city, you know.

When some people represented by the Sugar Law Center, which is headquartered in this building, were finally able to lift the bankruptcy stay and have a hearing on 436, its constitutionality in federal court, anything and everything about what happened in Detroit was excised from that. All the Detroit plaintiffs were cut off because it would interfere with the bankruptcy. So--and then, I always thought that was just horrible because, yeah, you know, emergency financial management was problematic. It was subject to abuse. Emergency management was one step too far. But then, emergency management of Detroit under the auspices of Jones Day that has existing attorney-client relationships with our biggest creditors was another step, and it was like this is crazy. You can't allow this. That was never even allowed to be heard outside of Rhodes' court, and I already covered what Rhodes' court was about. It was a kangaroo court.

And, by the way, Judge Rhodes is now working in the extremely lucrative capacity of what, you know, lawyers call a "rent-a-judge" alternative dispute resolution, together with former Chief Judge [Gerald] Rosen. They've been rewarded very handsomely for the services they provided to capital white supremacy in Detroit.

[0:57:02]

**PB:** And they've taken it to Puerto Rico, right?

**TS:** Puerto Rico and everybody else. They... You know, mostly what they do is dispute resolution. You know, there's high-stakes litigation. Nobody wants to either win or lose it because it's just too expensive. You've gotta settle it, so you hire somebody like that to sit with you, and you shuttle diplomacy back and forth

and come up with a settlement. Lots of retired judges make a lot of money that way when they retire. Some of it's legitimate. This particular thing, I'm pretty disgusted by it, obviously.

[0:57:32]

**PB:** Who at NLG [National Lawyers Guild] and Sugar was leading these legal challenges?

**TS:** John Philo primarily. Also--what is his name? The fellow who's the general counsel for the AFL-CIO? I can see his face, but his--I'll think of his name. I'm terrible with names. They were the two primary lawyers. I just can't remember his name right now.

**PB:** Was that Herb Sanders?

**TS:** Herb Sanders. That's it. Right.

[0:57:56]

**PB:** So, could you--I think it would be helpful just for the historic record if you gave us kind of just the narrative of what happened once Kevyn Orr became emergency manager, like what the impacts were on the city and then like maybe starting from when he assumed the emergency manager up to the plan of adjustment.

**TS:** Well, remember I was not actually working for the city starting in the end of the fiscal year June 2013 until, like, July or August 2014. So for most of his tenure, I was not an employee, but I was living in the city, and I was working under the auspices of Detroiters Resisting Emergency Management to do everything we could to try to oppose it, which ultimately was not very much other than sort of exposing it. There was an initial round of cutbacks, which was why I was laid off

for a year. Orr initiated conversations with creditors, which included both bond holders, bond holders' insurers. The bond holders' insurers were the real adversary because the bonds were all fully insured, and in bankruptcy they weren't gonna get paid in full, so the insurers were on the hook. So, what the ultimate settlement would be would be an agreement under bankruptcy between the bond insurers and the city.

They were playing coy for a long time saying they weren't gonna file for bankruptcy. Like I say, once we saw that contract with Jones Day, we knew they were gonna file for bankruptcy, and they did. That was where, you know, the ideological control mechanism kicked in. Even though the...the...the line I'm thinking of right now is a line from a sort of obscure but absolutely wonderful Bruce Springsteen song called The Promise where he says, "It's like when the truth is spoken and it don't make no difference." That's what happened. Even though somebody as prestigious as the former Democratic treasurer of the State of Michigan, a guy named [Bob] Bowman who I never even heard of before, wrote a very eloquent op ed in the Free Press that said, "Look, this balance sheet restructuring for the City of Detroit is not going to address the City of Detroit's problems at all." It provided a lucrative windfall for [Mike] Duggan or whoever the next mayor was gonna be because if you're the mayor and you no longer have to deal with such a level of debt, you now have a little bit of flexibility to make it look like you're doing good things for the city, and that was its whole objective. In terms of the structural issues of unemployment and racism and, you know, lack of opportunity and blight and crime and educational deficits and all the things that, you know, that are the problems that we struggle with in Detroit, it wasn't gonna do a damn thing about those things [laughs].

And, that became very clear. That was...that was clear while I was still working for the city when we were talking to them. You know, like my boss would say, "So, what's the plan after bankruptcy?" "Oh, well, that's up to you guys. We don't know." So, this whole--and it wasn't only Bowman who said that. Of course, we said that in the DREM website. It was all over the place. That fellow Wallace Turbeville who did an analysis, pretty damn good analysis from a capitalist perspective, of the whole bankruptcy, and he laid out a really nice report that explained it. And although the truth was out there, you know, Rhodes had a job to do. Orr had a job to do. They were gonna do that job, and they did, and nobody was gonna stop them.

Up at the Sixth Circuit, it's real clear. It's pretty clear if you read the transcripts of the arguments that have held by various lawyers that have been up there on bankruptcy-related matters and emergency management-related matters, they don't want to do a damn thing to affect Detroit. This was restructuring decision made at the very highest level of policy making and political and social and racial power in the country that--remember we talked a little while ago about how the auto companies had been pulling capital out of Detroit since World War II, and the elites and the neoliberal turn said, "Alright. We're gonna make an example of these people and turn it over to Coleman. You've got the keys. It's your problem."

You realize, well, now it's the time to come back. That was... Gee, this is 139 square miles of relatively cheap, very valuable, underpriced urban land, and it's on one of the busiest border crossings in North America, and look at the water resources. This is an incredibly lucrative opportunity. And so, that's what they were gonna do, and that's what they did was reassert their control of the 139 square miles that constitute Detroit proper in order to benefit this little 7.2 square mile investment area with white capital in downtown and the areas outside Detroit that are also part of Detroit. You know, back in the day when you were traveling around the country and they'd say, "Where are you from?" And although I was from Trenton, nobody'd ever heard of Trenton, and you'd say you were from Detroit. If you were from Oakland County [Michigan], you were from Detroit. Reconfigure this 139 square miles and everything that goes on it, all the opportunities that exist with...for trade with Canada and access to the water--we still haven't talked about the water and sewer system--and restructure them and get control of them and reorient them and govern them for the benefit of the people who count, the elites, the, you know, the white, suburban, free-riding communities that have been flushing their toilets for 50 or 60 years and sending the waste down to Detroit to be processed and saying, "Oh, those people in Detroit, they're wasteful and corrupt and dirty and incompetent and stupid." You know, do a service for them. That was what they did.

And, there were a whole bunch of flowery things about, you know, the benefits of bankruptcy for a debtor. It was funny, on that day that I appeared in front of Rhodes when he had opened up the court for people from Detroit who wanted to appear to tell him what we thought about it, the guy who really did a great job



there was Sam Riddle. You know Sam? He's like the political director now of the National Action Center [National Action Network]. Is that what they call it? In Detroit. You know, I'm not a big fan of Sam Riddle. He's been an irritant in the council thing, and he went to jail for facilitating bribes for Monica Conyers. But on that day, he was absolutely great. He said, "Judge Rhodes, this is more than just bankruptcy. This is about democracy. It's about the rule of law. It's about race. It's about who gets to have the right to the city." I don't think those are the words he used, but he did, he made a wonderful speech to him, and Rhodes didn't even respond.

I did get Rhodes to respond to me because I said to him at that hearing, "You know, I read in the paper today that somebody said you're going to give us the appearance of due process." [laughs] And he said, "Yeah, I read that too. I was disturbed by that." And I said, "So, here I am, and I've been given three minutes to speak, and the yellow light is already flashing. I haven't even said a word yet. I think they put you in a pretty bad position, too." Well, he was happy. He was happy to be in the position he was in, but, you know, we did have a little dialogue about that, and I remember he asked me, "What would you say about the suffering and the uncertainty and the tension that people are feeling because of the conditions in Detroit?" And I said, "Well, that's an easy question, Judge. Suffering, that's life for us in Detroit. It's the uncertainty and the suffering and danger that's being presented by what you're doing and what Governor Snyder is doing that people are worried about." So what. He said it. It doesn't make any difference.

[1:05:35]

**PB:** That seems like that was a constant from what we've been hearing about how Judge Rhodes interacted with...

**TS:** It was a total setup. It's been said--probably the people who said it the best were--you read *Against the Current*? You know, socialist journal that's a quarterly that's published by some of our friends here in Detroit who are really, really, really, really well-informed about all this stuff. And, they said it right away, and it was absolutely true. This is a complete setup. This thing is already...the outcome of this

is already determined. And, Jerry Goldberg said it too. I remember people were saying, “Well how can he do this?” and “How can he do that?” And Jerry just said, “Look, he’s gonna listen to what we say, and he’s gonna do what do he’s gonna do,” and he was absolutely right.

[1:06:12]

**PB:** Which is no different than just, like, all of the community forums that are mandated by law for land seizure and for development, right? It’s a formality.

**TS:** Yeah, it’s really become that. Yeah, I told the story earlier about the incinerator and the Michigan Air Pollution Control Commission. There isn’t a Michigan Air Pollution Control Commission anymore. After they denied the operating permit for the incinerator and they got into another dispute up in Flint about the Genesee Power Station--which is another environmental justice war story--[John] Engler eliminated the Air Pollution Control Commission. To hell with that, you know. We’re not gonna let people come in and argue about this kind of thing in front of a permit-granting, law-wielding, public forum. We’re not gonna do that. And now, you know, those kinds of permits decisions are made by a single bureaucrat who serves at the pleasure of the governor, and there’s no...there’s a--you just mentioned it. There’s ostensibly a public process, but it’s totally meaningless.

[1:07:07]

**PB:** I want to get into the water, but before that I just want to ask about DREM [Detroit’s Resisting Emergency Management]. Can you walk us through like how you got involved in DREM and maybe if there’s some memorable actions?

**TS:** Oh, yeah. That’s a good story. I know exactly what you’re asking, and that is a good story. The way DREM came about started on the first day of Kevyn Orr’s tenure as emergency manager. A demonstration was called. It ended up being a halfway decent demonstration, you know, but people showed up late. And so, it

started out there were like 35 people out there at the Spirit of Detroit, and that was what was covered in the press, you know, that there was no real response or anything. It ended up being well over a hundred people, but, you know, it started late, and the press didn't even cover that.

So as that was breaking up, I found myself in a conversation with Debra Taylor, who is one of my colleagues, on the corner of Woodward and Jefferson about how, you know, we should be doing better than this. We should be doing better organizing. And to my left, there was a conversation between Reverend Bill Wylie-Kellermann and Reverend Ed Rowe, now retired--well, both of them are retired now, you know--the two leading people's pastors in the city. And to my right, there was another conversation between Sarah Coffey and--I forget who Sarah was talking to--and they were having the same conversation. All six of us were having the exact same conversation, and what we decided to do was call a meeting at Bill's church, Bill Wylie-Kellermann's church, St. Peter's [Episcopal Church] at the corner of Michigan and Trumbull, and call everybody together and say, "Alright, let's get together. Now, we're facing emergency management. Let's organize," and that first meeting was really well attended. It was a great meeting. A whole bunch of people showed up. I mean, Reverend [David] Bullock was there and the AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations] and AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] were both represented and the [National Lawyers] Guild had their people there. There were like 50 people in the room, and everybody went around and everybody had some things to say, and the continuing theme was communication, communication, communication, communication. We need better communication.

So, it was at that time that myself and Gregg Newsom volunteered to coordinate the communication committee, and that became my primary activity for--let's see, that was 2013, and DREM continued right until, what? For about four years. Yeah. It was 2017 when we stopped actively doing DREM and started doing the Freedom Schools primarily, and others are doing Riverwise Magazine, and other people are doing other things. DREM no longer meets formally, but it's just sort of morphed. The group got smaller and smaller, and the activity became communication and media, both criticizing corporate media, producing our own media, and providing whatever people requested to the extent we could in terms

of analysis, research, you know, doing press releases, coordinating press conferences.

I remember we drafted a people's plan of adjustment that was at one point held up by a local TV news anchor saying, "They've got this people's plan of adjustment." [laughs] That was never repeated again. It was like you could not see the people's plan of adjustment on corporate media after he did that. But, it was out. It was out on the web, of course, and we coordinated petition activities. You know, we drafted the documents and coordinated them. And, I filed--we filed stuff that I drafted as the primary lawyer on the activity in formal interventions in bankruptcy, making arguments that were accepted and then ignored.

And, you know, we all--for me, it was a huge learning exercise because working on a--I had known Shea Howell for a couple decades. Working on a day-to-day basis with her, you know, a professor of communications, I learned a lot. Kim Hunter, again, the poet who's a media expert, I learned a lot from him. Gloria House, Aneb Kgositsile, you know, a veteran of the SNCC [Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee] activities in Mississippi in the 1960s. You know, and Bill Wylie-Kellermann and on and on and on. I remember looking at the videos. I remember at one point Kate Levy--you know who Kate Levy is? You know, she showed up at one of the meetings, and there's about eight of us talking, and she's walking around with her camera, and I'm thinking, "Who the hell is this?" It was an astonishing series of experiences, and as the bankruptcy heated up, you know, we were doing interviews. You'd be doing an interview with the French one day and then with the German--what's the word I'm thinking of? Documentary filmmaker the next day. People were constantly coming to us, and when...when scholars who were influential around the country on this, people like Jamie Peck and--what's her name?--Michelle Wilde Anderson at Stanford and John Powell, you know, they would confirm that, yes, they were checking on our website as a source of information for this. So, we felt justified in what we were doing.

It wasn't particularly effective in terms of the larger political and legal arena, similar to the Evergreen Alliance and the incinerator, but it was something that was worth doing because it was something we could do within our resources, and at least we were making a record of what happened. Of course, they wiped that out now on the internet, but it still exists in various forms.

So, it was a really dynamic and exciting process, in spite of how frustrating it was and how angry it all made us. Again, as with the incinerator, none of this was in isolation. It was all part of larger global trends. You know, you see during this timeframe the second term of Barack Obama when, “Oh, well, now that he’s being re-elected he can finally do the thing.” Do what? You know? Dismember Libya? You know, no accountability for torture. No accountability for invading Iraq based on lies. No accountability for Wall Street. And, jeez, surprise, surprise, now we’re virtually ruled by a neo-fascist, you know. How did that happen? Surprise, surprise, you know. What we were always trying to do was organize a local communications, education, political mobilization node, you know, part of a larger movement to try to take that on as best we could. And, we’re still doing that, just in different ways.

[1:13:18]

**PB:** DREM was up against...

**TS:** We were getting our asses kicked, you know? It’s like being a one-legged man in an ass-kicking contest [laughs], which is pretty much the whole thing, you know?

**PB:** Right, and like to that point, right, DREM as a coalition was up against extraordinary odds, almost--we could probably say like insurmountable odds.

**TS:** Yeah.

**PB:** Was there anything, like, from the vantage point of history that could have been done differently to make the coalition more effective or what...

**TS:** I think that where the... I think the failure was--remember I told you the origin story of DREM. I think the failure was before that, the fact that Kevyn Orr could come in and sit in his office, and there was no big uprising in the streets. At that point, we were already so far behind the eight-ball we could never make it up, not against...not against state power and with federal authority not being willing to step in. I mean, remember at that point people were saying, "Well, Obama will do something about this. Eric Holder, the attorney general, will do something about it." They were never going to do anything about it.

I mean, there were meetings during the consent agreement phase of the takeover where--I remember one in particular at a big church on the West Side where there were 18 speakers. Now, three of the speakers were JoAnn Watson, Wendell Anthony, and Al Garrett, and they gave great speeches, and why you need 15 more speeches after that...those three, I have no idea. There was no follow-up. There was no organizing strategy. There was no, you know, if you want to get involved with this part, talk to this person. No follow-up whatsoever. You know, our leaders have made speeches, and now go home.

So, I think with that kind of a background, I mean, it goes back to what Kim [Hunter] said. I think I said this earlier. I'll just repeat it and try to--you know, Detroit as a political community in the grassroots is something that decades ago was based in the Black church and in the unions, and they were effective. They were representatives of the community's interests and human rights and all the rest of it, which is why capital decided to make an example of Detroit. But by the time of emergency management, neither the Black church nor the UAW [United Auto Workers] or any other unions has much in the way of real contact of a real interest of the people of Detroit. They just don't. They're... You know, they've become in the neoliberal era like little sort of like non-profits on the quote unquote "Left." Is there even a Left anymore? There's people like me and my friends who, you know, analyze and talk and try to strategize and try to organize towards it, but if I look at American society structurally, at this point I don't see where there really is a Left if, you know, some kind of influence and power is part of being a Left. I don't think we even have one.

And, that was the situation we were in, and it was very clear that, you know, the only thing that could've stopped this was mass unrest in the streets, and that's

considered wrong for various reasons. Because of the way they've sliced and diced the issues and sliced the different sectors of society, nobody is willing to go to take those risks. You know, what's happening in France today was not going to happen in Detroit during that time. And, Peter Hammer has written eloquently about this, that the irony of this was that in Detroit, a place that was part of the heart of the uprising in the 1930s and the 1940s and the 1950s and [19]60s, they were doing things that in other parts of the world lead to rioting in the streets, and in Detroit there was virtually no popular response. And Kevyn Orr said as he left, "I've been a success. I was able to do all this without riots in the streets." [laughs]

You know, it comes down to the contradictions of capitalism and whether or not we're prepared to meet the brutal necessity of organizing a better way to live because the contradictions of capitalism are killing us, and we were not there and we still aren't there, although we're getting there. You know, it's--what did Arundhati Roy say the other day, or somebody said? It's a race between conscience and catastrophe, right? That's where we're at.

[1:17:19]

**PB:** So, tell us how water got brought--how the DWSD [Detroit Water and Sewerage Department] got brought in.

**TS:** Yeah, we're really reached the point where we gotta talk about that, don't we? I mean, everybody who knew anything about the process knew for a dead solid certainty that as part of restructuring Detroit--and I use the word "restructuring" in the technical sense, in the multiple technical senses that it applies to this--there was gonna be some restructuring of the water and sewer system. Because what's the water and sewer system? Well, it's...you know, Peter Hammer says it's the archeological evidence of white supremacy. It's that. It's also the basic bones and circulatory system of Southeastern Michigan's human communities. If Detroit doesn't undertake the debt and the expense and the time and trouble of building out the sewers and the water transmission mains to Northville [Michigan] and to Trenton and to Mount Clemens [Michigan], I mean, Flint, everywhere else, those places don't exist because you can't have an urban community or even a suburban community or even an--well, these days in a rural community, you can dig wells

and have outhouses if you want, but you can't have urban development and all the investment it brings and all the profit that it brings without water and sewer.

So, the evolution of this system in the context of the--jeez, even going back to the nineteenth century. You know, the first time the state tried to take over Detroit's water and sewer system was 1870. Went up to the Supreme Court, and a split decision denied them the power to do that. The state's been trying to take over this water and sewer system for over a decade--over a century, sorry. And this... You know, by the time bankruptcy and emergency management come around, this system has been under the jurisdiction of the federal district court and Judge [John] Feikens, who passed away shortly before this, and it succeeded to Judge [Sean] Cox in the same court, for 37 years since 1977, and that that case was dismissed the day before Kevyn Orr came in as emergency manager.

So, the orchestration of the long-sought white takeover of the water and sewer system was part and parcel of the bankruptcy and emergency management. Now that, you know, the irrationality of all that is patent because if you think about it because meanwhile some operators in Genesee County [Michigan] wanted to form their own water and sewer system instead of relying on DWSD, and although they were under emergency management too, they were given the power to do that. Now, if the emergency manager is really efficiently managing our water resources in our communities, why is he giving them the OK to go ahead with fantastically expensive duplicative infrastructure development that they don't need just because they're complaining and whining about the fact that they have to pay DWSD?

It's--and of course, it led to what we all know happened in Flint. It led directly to what we know what happened in Flint, including, as Peter Hammer has pointed out so well, soaking Flint for way more money for way more water than they actually needed, using them as a cash cow to fund that thing. So, it was all very irrational, but it was all very irrational from an overview of social planning and meeting human needs. From the perspective of the operators who planned to make money off of it and use it for the social power that you get when you control the water and sewer system in an area because you control all development, nobody can do any development without coming to you and making a deal, getting your approval, from that perspective, it was very rational and very evil.



And, we now know that the consequences of it were, you know, in Flint unimaginably horrible, and we're still dealing with these mass shutoffs here in Detroit. Right now, we're still on how it fit. I think we've answered that, but, you know, how it evolved is actually even more interesting because anybody that understood the first thing about it knew that this was gonna happen, and it did.

But as the bankruptcy gained momentum and came towards its denouement, right? My French is terrible, so maybe I shouldn't even say that. As the bankruptcy came to its finalization, those who were meeting separately with Judge Cox--not as a judge but as a facilitator, secretly, everything covered by confidentiality orders. Nobody who's not a party to this is allowed to know any details of these discussions. Kevyn Orr and his investment banker Kenneth Buckfire had a decision to make. They could take this water and sewer system and sell it to somebody, privatize it--somebody being Veolia, the French water giant--or they could do what was ultimately what was done, form a regional authority with the state and the three suburban counties represented on it and create an authority that is governed, you know, by the actual southeastern Michigan communities that, you know, are served by these systems, which is ultimately what they decided to do, which is in the abstract better than selling to Veolia.

In the meantime, what people have to realize is that Veolia had like--I forget--it was 20 or 30 top engineers and executives working right next to the DWSD people [laughs] learning everything about the system to prepare to take it over. And when Duggan and the county executives stepped in and said, "No, we don't want to sell this to Veolia," they had to throw Veolia a bone. So, they paid them to write a big report about the status of the system, which is sort of an interesting report. Although as was pointed out by the board members at the time, if you actually had been following this, there's nothing new in it at all. It's just a useful documentation of what those that were governing the system knew about its challenges and its assets and how it functions and where it needed to go.

And instead of--like I say, once Duggan came in and as he started to gradually negotiate a greater role for himself and was recognized as a safe pair of hands by these emergency manager takeovers--EMFs as I call them, and we won't say what that means 'cause it has "MF" in it. As Duggan came in and was able to convince Snyder and [Mark] Hackel and--not [L. Brooks?] Patterson--but [Robert] Daddow,

his brain in Oakland County, or what's left of his brain, and whoever was running Wayne County at the time, [Bob] Ficano, I think, that a public authority would be better, they moved in that direction, and they formed the Great Lakes Water Authority.

And, the only problem, or the biggest problem with that from my perspective, is that, sure, a public authority is better than out and out privatization and selling it to a corporation. Everybody recognizes that. But if you're gonna run the authority on the same principals where the only thing that really matters is getting the approval of Wall Street banks and bond holders to do what you need to do to get money from them to run it without regard to how it affects the people in the city, it's gonna be a problem. And, that's what happened. As they were facing this decision of whether to sell or whether to regionalize, they said, "Oh, well in either case, one of the problems with this system, it's got too much bad debt. There's a bunch of people who haven't paid their water, and we're still giving them water, and the bad debt is always going on. They're flushing their toilets, and they're turning on their sinks and showers, and more bad debt is building up. We need to shut these people's water off."

So in the spring of 2014, Orr announced that they were going to start--I think it was Orr--announced they were going to start sending out five thousand water shutoffs a week. A month? A week or a--I think a week. This huge number. Now, ironically, the first person to react to it was Charity Hicks, who's passed on since. I remember getting an email from Charity just like she was the first one to send an email about the guy who immolated himself in Algeria and set off the Arab Spring. It's a true story. I got an email from Charity linking to the Free Press story announcing the imposing shutoffs, and I said, "Shit! This is me and my whole street." I mean, everybody's gonna--that was the email, you know.

[1:25:29]

And within a week, somebody had come out to her street in a truck, Homrich I suppose. I think it was Homrich. She still had two days to pay her bill, but they were gonna shut off her water. [laughs] And, she went out and--barefoot--and she said, "What are you shutting off my water for? You shouldn't shut off my water!"

“Nah, we’re gonna shut off your water. Not only you, but up and down the street.” And so, she starts running up and down the street telling, “They’re shutting off your water! You should probably fill your bathtub.” You know. “Run water now, put it in jugs and put it in the fridge.” She’s doing that, and she’s complaining to the guy, and he’s being really rude to her, so she calls the cops. This was her mistake, calling the cops. He drives away, drives over her foot injuring her foot. The cops come, and they arrest her, and they basically disappear her. Her husband comes back from work and finds her cell phone on the lawn in front of the house. She’s nowhere around to be seen, and they took her to--this is another one of the great aspects of the restructuring. Anybody who’s arrested in Detroit now is taken to the Detroit Detention Center, a state-run facility out on Mound that looks like a concentration camp. It looks like a concentration camp. It’s, you know, barbed wire and everything. And, she’s being held there in a holding cell with about 50 or 60 other women with all kinds of bodily fluids on the floor, barefoot with an injured foot. She’s held there for about three days, and as her diabetes starts to spike, they say, “Get out of here,” and they send her home, and she walks home. I think she got picked up by Alice Jennings or somebody.

And, of course, Charity was the... You know, on the People’s Water Board, she was really the biggest link on the People’s Water Board to all the different constituencies. And she, a few days after she was released, she spoke about the...she told the story that I just told you at Bill’s [Wylie Kellermann’s] church [St. Peter’s Episcopal Church], and everybody there was just [laughs] kinda like, “Whoa. This is kind of--the rubber’s really meeting the road here, isn’t it?” It’s like Mississippi in 1873 or 1833, right? And she said, you know, she just completed the speech by saying, “I don’t know, we just need to wage love.” Nobody that was there will ever forget that meeting. We had people in from North Carolina at that time, Bill’s friends who are real active in the North Carolina Rising movement, a man and woman who are both pastors [Joyce and Nelson Johnson]. Can’t remember their names, but they immediately said, “You know what’s happening here? Deal with this,” and we’re like, yeah, we see it.

We had a lot of talk about it, and the cool thing was that in that same timeframe--I guess it was spring of 2014--there was a meeting over at the engineering school where Maude Barlow spoke and Jim Olson of the For Love of Water, the leading water lawyer not only in the state but in the whole country, also spoke on that panel, and Charity was the emcee, and that was where Maude--well, the last thing

she said--and it's in my notes, and it's actually on my laptop on the screen--she said, "If we pay attention to what's happening with our water and we deal with it appropriately, it will help us solve all our other problems," which has sort of been my whole approach to life since then, but it was at that meeting where she advised us. She said, "You should file a complaint with the United Nations that this is a violation of human rights." I thought, sure. Sounds good to me. Didn't really have the expectation that it would be the single most successful political tactic that I ever participated in in my whole life by, like, orders of magnitude, 'cause we...

You know, they wrote that letter. I had to sort of force myself into the writing process because there's a lot of tensions among nonprofits and stuff, but some of the people were aware of, you know, my role and my history and stuff, so they said, "Oh yeah, you ought to see that." So, I--it was in good shape when I got it, but it had clearly been written by people unlike me who don't have, you know, a front row seat to what's going on. So, I just punched it up a little bit, and they sent it to the UN [United Nations]. And within two or three weeks, the UN sent out a press release with all kinds of quotes from the special rapporteurs for housing and water that said, "Yeah, if you're shutting off water to people who can't afford it, that's a violation of their human rights." There's a thing that the UN passed called the Convention on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation, and if you're shutting off people from water just because they can't afford to pay this bill--nobody does that! I mean, Catarina de Albuquerque, the special rapporteur for water, came here a few months later and said, "There is--I've seen water situations all over the world. There's no place in the world with an advanced system like this that has regressed like this. This is absolutely unique that thousands of people would just be suddenly cut off from access to water. It's just not done, and it shouldn't be done."

So, the day that the UN--or maybe the day after, but within a day at most--that the UN released that press release, we found ourselves at a meeting of the Board of Water Commissions, and one of the people on the People's Water Board--I spoke, and some other people spoke. I wasn't a city employee, remember, at this point. I spoke, and some other people spoke, and this little nun, Sister Canice [Johnson], who has since passed on, said, "Well, I'd like to read this letter from the UN," and this is kind of the way she spoke. She was just the meekest, mildest--she was about this big, you know, and she's meek and mild, very literate. She said, "I'd just

like to read this statement from the UN,” and she started to read it, [laughs] and she’s reading what they’re saying, and you’re looking at the Water Board and all the water officials, and you’re sitting around them, and the steam is coming out of their ears, and their heads are blowing up, and they’ve all got these looks on their face, you know, and she gets to a certain point in the letter, and the chair--what the hell was his name? A lawyer from western Wayne County. Falzone (??). Jim Falzone (??). He’d been the chair of that. This was this little transitional sort of regional water board that’d been set up by Bing. He says, “Your time’s up,” he says. He said it almost that way. And she said, “Well, there’s one or two more paragraphs. Can I read the two more paragraphs?” He said, “No!” [laughs]

And, that was the beginning of it. It was clear that the UN by saying what they had said had really stung these people, and that, you know, this was, you know, this whole idea of human rights violations in the United States is for a lot of people who have sort of somewhat engagement with human rights and politics and race and stuff, it’s a real provocative idea. It goes back to Malcom X complaining to the UN and others. Even before Malcom X, Ralph Bunche, and others, this has been done before, and it gets a lot of attention.

And so, the bottom line was for three months or so from the time the UN issued that press release, I remember finding myself at the Concert of Colors in July, which at the time was outside Orchestra Hall, and I was listening to a jazz set, and I thought, “You know, this is the first time since the UN issued that thing that I’ve been away from computer for more than 20 minutes I think.” You know, because I’d go back to my computer, and there’d be 12 more messages from people about, “What’s happening in Detroit? What can we do? And what’s this? What’s that?” This was kind of the peak of DREM in other words.

[1:32:13]

**PB:** So, thank you for sharing that whole narrative. I keep coming back across the interviews we’ve done to that moment in St. Peter’s where Charity Hicks spoke.

**TS:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah.

**PB:** Because people mention that, and it's become clear that was like a really...

**TS:** It was one of those things where you just get the feeling over your whole body, you know, of what's happening here is important and significant, and I'll never be exactly the same as I was before I heard this. It's just, you know. And Bill was like, "Jeez, I gotta get arrested and get in there and check that out." [laughs] And, we tried. We tried to get arrested on May 1<sup>st</sup>. We were blocking the street out in front of--I hadn't been come back to the city yet. We were out in front of the City-County Building on May 1<sup>st</sup> blocking traffic, you know. 12 of us had planned it. We walked out into the street with a banner. The whole crowd followed us, and the street was blocked off. Some of our friends decided that they don't have the same emphasis on civil disobedience, that it was time to move on at some point, and we all kind of felt like that wasn't good.

[1:33:20]

**PB:** That kind of takes me to my next question which is--I've asked this of a lot of people so far--is this... As you're describing, there's this massive attention that's being--like, the eye of the world is on Detroit. There's mass mobilization. Like, celebrities are here taking part.

**TS:** Yeah, there's celebrities more than mass mobilization There wasn't enough mass mobilization, but go on.

**PB:** So, and that might be getting at my point, like, and yet despite this, all this attention, the water shutoffs are persisting to this day. So, what have we learned from this? What wasn't there that could have--and I guess this is a theme in some of the questions I'm asking. What can...what was missing there, and what can we learn from that to be more successful in our work?

**TS:** We need so much, you know. We need more resources. We need state-of-the-art organizing strategies. We need ways to overcome racial and class divisions, gender divisions, generational divisions. We need so much in terms of, you know, a coordinated, persistent, unbeatable, inside-outside strategy that both gets in their faces and makes their lives absolutely miserable and puts so much heat on them that they have to give concessions or else deal with worse pain for themselves, and we need, you know, people in the streets and education and mobilization and organization and confrontations, you know, outside the legal...the formal legal and political and administrative settings too. And, it has to constantly grow, right?

I mean... I think, I mean, the guy who I follow in terms of that whole question is the fellow who is the sort of theoretical genius behind Z Magazine and ZNet, Michael Albert, and, you know, he talks about how in the Vietnam era whenever any establishment figure finally came out and said, you know, "I'm no longer for this," it wasn't because they were killing millions of people with napalm and phoenix assassination programs and it was immoral, and it wasn't because of the lies that were being told and the fact that our democracy was being undermined at every step, the military industrial complex dominates. It wasn't because of any of that. It was, look, we're losing a generation. People are turning away from it. So, the movement dynamic of constantly getting bigger and constantly getting more confrontational and going deeper and going higher and also going lower [laughs] and undermining them, doing everything you can possibly do.

And, this--I screwed up earlier when you asked me about the lessons from the Evergreen Alliance and the incinerator. This was the lesson from the incinerator: that even if it's 12 unknown radicals from the Cass Corridor against the whole corporate elite of Detroit and Southeastern Michigan, if you just do everything that you can and you do it long enough, you're gonna make some progress. Where it'll all end up--it never ends up, right? That's the thing. It's a dialectical process that's continuing today, you know. The right-wing nut jobs, these dominating assholes, you know, in ALEC and in the Mackinac Center [for Public Policy] and all these so-called think tanks where they don't do any thinking but they propagate all kinds of bullshit to fuck people up, they figured out they don't need a majority to change the world.

I mean, I think people in the grassroots... If there's one message for the Freedom Schools, we don't need a majority to change the world. [laughs] We change ourselves, and then we change the people with us, and it goes out from there, and if the dynamic is that it keeps getting bigger and it keeps getting more confrontational and it keeps raising the stakes, capital will eventually have to say, "Okay, now you're..."--and this is really where Michael Albert has so eloquently said, "Look, now you're threatening something that's even more important to us than our continuing control over your lives and the little money we're making from that. Now, you're threatening our fundamental interests." And, you get concessions, and then there's the techniques and tricks of making the concessions not co-opt you but be, you know, revolutionary reforms that lead to even more confrontation.

We haven't figured that out yet, but all you gotta do is look around at the world and the crisis of capitalism especially that's been coming down on us since 2008 or so, and you see it happening everywhere. I mean, Egypt, Tunisia, the Indignados, the Occupy, the amazing Extinction Rebellion, Sunrise Movement. [laughs] What new names do they have this week, you know, for going in and occupying Nancy Pelosi's office and saying, "No, you will listen to us, and you will deal with us because you talk about our future. It may not be your future. You don't have a future anymore, but you're talking about our future, so you have to listen to us on this." You know, this rising tide of youth activism--most of it comes out of Black Lives Matter, I think really, or it's been hugely influenced by Black Lives Matter. Getting our minds around that, acting on it, and sustaining on it. That's our only hope. That's the lesson.

[1:38:11]

**PB:** I keep wanting to ask about the Freedom School too. We're starting to run low on time. It's about five to 11. But in the time we have left, I do want to ask about, like, how you got involved with Detroit Independent Freedom School...

**TS:** We started it because as DREM was winding down, there was no more emergency manager in Detroit. We were Detroiters Resisting the Emergency Manager, but there's no more emergency manager. And, even Snyder had



admitted that emergency management had not helped the Detroit Public Schools. We realized that we had to do something about education. It was very clear something--quote unquote "something"--was gonna happen with education. Well, Dr. [Nikolai] Vitti is what happened and the division in the old Detroit Public Schools and new Detroit Public Schools with the old one being responsible for the debt, the new one being responsible for running schools. All that stuff happened.

In the run up to that, we just thought, "We gotta do something. We gotta take on the educational issue directly, but how?" You know, I told you the story earlier about the state board of education, you know, going to these legislative committees that don't have a clue and don't care at all is not working. Asking them please will you stop, you know, fucking us--pardon me--you know, is not a good strategy, so what's a good strategy? So, we said, "What about organizing Freedom Schools? What about making education as a political activity and the political and social and racial and economic aspects of education the central focus of a self-organized, grassroots Freedom School movement?"

And, that's what it has been. It's been a struggle. I mean, we don't have the resources to do it the way we would like to do it. We did get some resources, and that's good, but, you know, it's all volunteer. Nobody's getting paid to do this. Its benefits to the children in particular involved in it, I think, are beyond measure. It's also been...it's developed an adult educational component. While the parents had their kids at the Freedom School at the Charles H. Wright Museum, we started doing an adult Freedom University, a series of events for people--what've you got? You've got pictures of the community that you want to share? Bring in the pictures, and let's look at them and have a discussion. That was a really interesting discussion. Or, you know, energy efficiency. Or, I mean, I know the class I led was--and that was not for adults. Well, that was both adults and children 'cause some of the parents participated. It was right after the election. We [laughed] organized one for the election thinking Hillary Clinton was gonna win, and then it was like, oh shit, you know. Now, we gotta deal with this, but we had a good conversation, and the kids came out and said, "You know the most important thing was they asked, 'What's your opinion? What do you think?'"

That's what's important here. It's all about creating agency. That's the basics. That's the key word to the whole--well, freedom, but freedom and agency, and

we're still at it, and it's... Even though the Detroit Independent Freedom School Movement as an organization is not growing very fast, the concept has caught on, and people are talking about it. I know that. Like, in my case, you end up doing a lot of discussions like this about all this stuff when you'd like to be doing organizing. I'm not a very good organizer. I'm a, you know, propagandist or whatever. A lawyer, people's lawyer.

[1:41:27]

**PB:** So, what do we--I guess that raised a good question in my mind. What do we do with these kinds of conversations with the analysis, the knowledge that comes out of that? How do we put that knowledge component into practice?

**TS:** I think we ask the kids [laughs] how we can help them. I mean, I'm gonna stop there [laughs] at this point. They're doing it, and, really, this generation is doing an incredible job. I mean, you know, the official leadership doesn't appear to have a clue. I mean, you've got Nancy Pelosi talking about how Trump is goading them into impeachment, and he's self-impeaching. Well, gee. What kind of political leader in their formulation of the problem continually gives agency to their political opponent? A bad political leader. You know, I've seen it all my life in this area. Meanwhile, the kids are out there [laughs] saying this shit is gonna stop, business as usual is off, it's an emergency, let's go out and strike, walk out and disrupt business as usual.

You know, like I said, the key is, well, not only do that once, but then do it again and have more people involved and have the demands escalate and the analysis and the alternatives further developed, and then after that, do it again. If you have to pack the jails, pack the jails. Do whatever you need to do, whatever you can do to get the word out and get as many people involved in transforming this disaster into a livable future that you can.

I should also mention something else because I don't want to be misunderstood in this. Detroit is an unholy mess for--in a lot of ways, and the stuff we're talking about is the guts of it, and it's ugly and horrible, but the thing about Detroit is--

don't want to be understood to be disrespecting or... I mean, I love Detroit, and the thing about Detroit is in the face of that and partly because of that, when you deal with people in Detroit who have been dealing with this for their whole lives, you--I mean, I just love these people. [laughs] They're amazing. You have people all over the place who you can turn to and say, "Well, what do you think of that?" And they say, "Well, wow. Really? Tell me more about that." I have family on the West Side of the state. I have friends all over the country. There's not many places--there's no place really like Detroit where--because it's been going on for so long.

You know, if you've seen the Grace Boggs movie, that incredible scene in the beginning where she's walking along in front of the Packard plant, she's like, "I feel sorry that anybody has to live in Detroit." Everybody cracks up. That's the essence of it, right? I mean, you have to realize that. What is a community? Is it the people in the community, or is it this bogus image that they feed us through the corporate media and the corporate-controlled educational system? Or, is it something that really we can discover and shape for ourselves? Like I say, the right to the city is something we need to fight for now. How many people say that, you know? It ought to be on everybody's lips all day, all week, all the time. We want the right to the city.

[1:44:36]

**PB:** I guess that's a good segue into what my last question is is what's your vision for the future of Detroit that guides your work?

**TS:** Yeah, that's a great question, and I've recently come up with a better answer. In May of 2008 when I was hired on at the City, my supervisor Dave Whitaker told me--I talk about the incinerator, but after I got my first incinerator report done--on the third day, he said to me, "Now I want you... You're gonna be responsible for our office's interactions with the Water Department. It's really important, and it's really huge, and don't be passive about it. I want you to go out and actively find out what's going on with the Water Department," and that was just in context an incredible gift, I mean, because that's...that's why I'm sitting here talking to you about it right now because it... I had a lot of background through the incinerator

and the Lawyers Guild and everything with organizing, but I had never seen anything like this, and I still haven't seen anything like it.

And, I've just reached the point where with that gift of the last 10 or 11 years, the fact that I've actually been paid to do this, even paid reasonably well to do it, you know, I'm going to do something about this water affordability challenge, or I'm gonna die trying. [laughs] That's just it for me. This whole idea that, you know, oh, just pay your bills and the way they're running the water and sewer system and the cutting off people from water in order to solve your bad debt problems is a rational prospect. That's gotta go, and we need the water affordability plan or some version of it, some way, some reasonable, workable, understandable, sustainable way to make sure that people have access to water, that half of our people or even a third of our people or a fourth of our people, anybody who's just poor is not living in constant insecurity that they're afraid their water is going to be turned off the next month. That's what we need to do. From my perspective, anything I can do about that.

The most recent proposal is to do something like a Water Action Freedom School where everybody comes together and not only learns but acts because I'm sick of talking about it, frankly, outside the context of a room where everybody is saying, "Alright, we're talking about this because we're going to do something about it." Now, we've proposed that. We're starting to think about it. We've had an initial meeting in this room that was pretty well attended about three weeks ago. So much is happening that I haven't had time to do much. I keep talking to people about the water issue. [laughs] I've spoken on three or four panels since then and done three or four interviews like this. I did another one yesterday.

So, there's a lot going on, and the main reason it's a good time to address this is because the Great Lakes Water Authority--what I call the regional water mafia--the people, the officials who have actual hands on signing responsibility for funding and governing our water and sewer infrastructure, they're making all these decisions right now. You know, they set up the water authority back in 2014, 2015. It was formally started operating at the beginning of 2016. And now having done that, they now have to figure out, well, what are doing moving forward? You know, these decisions about how to run this thing, it's like steering an aircraft

carrier, you know. You make a decision today about your fundamental policies, and you live with it for 40 or 50 years.

Like back in...I think it was [19]79, [John] Feikens ordered the city to fund this system by pursuing maximum debt financing. And then by the time of the bankruptcy, everybody's looking at him and saying, "Why don't you do something about these water shutoffs?" And they say, "What can we do? 40 percent of our budget is just debt because we were ordered to do that." The feds, as part of the neoliberal turn, withdrew the money that had been used to build the system. It's still gotta be maintained. It's gotta be run. It's even gotta be expanded. But, we're not gonna pay for it anymore. So, Feikens said, "Borrow it. Go to Wall Street. Don't tax the rich to pay for your essential services. Borrow money from them and then pay it back in interest," and that's the model.

So, that's where they put us, and if there's a silver lining to it, it's that those who make the decisions, who have power to make the decisions and are making the decisions about this, those who run the Great Lakes Water Authority and their wholesale customers, the local officials that buy the water and pay and write the checks, they're very much conscious of this, and they're currently going through a process of it. So, if people get organized and they're reading that the right way, this is a good time to change their policy.

[1:48:50]

**PB:** Does anybody else have any questions that they wanted to ask?

**Herbert Taylor [HT]:** I do, about DREM's website. Have you been on the team--the communications team... I guess from your end of the organization, what...how is the website...

**TS:** Well, the website was taken down as part of--no, no. It was whoever Gregg Newsom was paying to provide the underlying infrastructure for it, there was some kind of mix-up about whether he had paid it or whatever, and they just took

it down. And, they've been trying to set it up again, and I think there might be some way to do some of that stuff, but I don't know what it is. None of us has really had the time in the crisis to focus on that. It probably would be worth trying to spend some time doing it, but after a few emails and a few discussions led to nothing and putting some money into it led to nothing, it was like how much effort should we put into resurrecting this thing that we did five years ago as opposed to what we're doing now? So, that's where it stands right now. I don't know. Some of that stuff is--I've been told that most of that stuff is probably retrievable in some form, but I don't know what the status of it is, and I'm not literate enough in terms of computer, technology, programming or any of those technical aspects of doing anything on the web to have a clue. I just work with word processors, you know. Email. I don't have a social media and I have no interest, so a lot of it is just foreign language to me.

**PB:** I know Gregg's waist deep in the FCA [Fiat Chrysler Automobiles] thing right now, so...

**TS:** Right. He's doing a ton of stuff in the development arena. I think the last thing we did that was--and I'm thinking about pulling it out and sending it over to Riverwise [Magazine] in response to Eric's [Campbell] latest email which I haven't read in full yet, but about the theme of the next Riverwise. We had done a pamphlet--which, God, I gave out hundreds of them to people. It was called Detroit 2016--that critiqued the whole concept of, well, what I call "the re-, re-, re-, re-message," with apologies to Aretha's [Franklin] backup singers. The revival, resurrection, restructuring, revitalization of Detroit, all the great things that supposedly came out of the bankruptcy. Well, it's kind of a strange re-, re-, re-, re-thing. Even resurrection. The guy called--Nathan Bomey, the Free Press reporter who wrote the book about it--called it Resurrection City. It's kind of strange that you've got a city that's in multiple cascading crises of water, housing, education, development, and democracy, among other things--I think we probably would've included transit except we're all middle-class people with our own cars--and you're saying this is being revived, you know. What the hell is really going on here?

That was kind of the last pamphlet we did, and I think it might be good. We thought about doing one for 2017, and I did a rough draft of it, but we never picked it up. Other things took precedent. So, I was thinking about revisiting that.

That's a typical example. It's not on the web right now, but I have it on my computer.

**HT:** Thanks for that. Thanks for answering that.

**TS:** You know, it would probably be good--through our friends at the Allied Media Project and whoever would be interested in it--to explore the possibility of recreating a communication node for the movement in Detroit at some point when the energy is there because it was, I think, valuable. I know--I remember Monica saying in particular--Monica Lewis-Patrick--at the time of the Plan of Adjustment and the People's Plan of Adjustment, that this is an incredible advantage to be able to come into a press conference and hold up a document and say, "Look, this is our plan." And, I think it was Shea [Howell] and Aneb [Kgositsile/Gloria House] and I basically did that. And so, having that kind of capacity is probably a good thing.

[1:52:52]

**PB:** That's kind of where we're trying to go with this project or part of it with DEAL [Detroit Equity Action Lab] is to have that kind of communications hub or platform where people can go to get all this kind of information.

**TS:** Yeah, and DEAL's predecessor, [Peter] Hammer and the [Damon J.] Keith Center [for Civil Rights] was very much involved in turning the DREM website from an initial...from its initial project into a clearing house, a conference clearinghouse. There was a lot of stuff on there. It saved me a lot of time. Since it went down, I have so much harder time finding stuff. The thing about it was it was word-searchable. We never figured out a good way to archive it to make it clear, but it was word-searchable. If you knew what you were looking for, you could plug that in, and, God, you'd find all kinds of stuff. I remember some people would say, "Yeah, I went on that website, and it's just unbelievable how much stuff is on there." People were doing--you know, Ph.D. people and all that.

**PB:** People would write about it. That's the most frequently cited source.

**TS:** Is it? That you see?

**PB:** Usually a DREM website link. Like, Scott Kurashige's book is like all...

**TS:** Yeah, yeah. Scott Kurashige's book, that was exactly the kind of thing. That's a great example. I'm glad you reminded me of that because that was the kind...that is basically what we were doing it for was to be able to support something like that. Because I love that book.

**PB:** It's an incredible resource.

**TS:** I couldn't believe how he was able to do that with 150 pages or so. I would've thought it took more like 300 pages. He just really boiled it down to--it was great.

**PB:** Well, thank you.

**TS:** Alright. Thank you.