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Praxis Radio 2020 Podcast

Episode 6: Ratha Lai // Ethan Buckner, Richmond, CA

<orchestral music intro, “Praxis Theme” by Jason Cross continues to play under narration>

Taylor, the host of the show: “Welcome listeners—to a new installment of the 2020 season of Praxis. If this is your first episode, you can check out the trailer or previous episodes for more context on the show. The easiest way to find those, including show notes and full transcripts, is by subscribing. You can do that anywhere you listen to podcasts or by going directly to [praxisradio.com](#) and clicking on Praxis.

This season is a revisitation of a radio show road trip I took in the summer of 2015. I wanted to come back to those I met and interviewed then in the light of the past five years—not only because of the Trump administration, but because of the patterns that challenged our movements—to address climate change and systemic racism, specifically— that already loomed large in our minds back then and that will continue in a different form during a Biden administration, too. I’m recording this introduction on Sunday, November 8th, and while I’m relieved, the exhausting week of election uncertainty has reminded me, more than anything, of the importance of deep, community-based, long-haul organizing like what we’re going to hear about today, and really on the rest of the show.

<music fades out>

Being from the west, I started this journey driving down the coast, from Portland to the Bay Area. I connected with a bunch of rad folks all through California, but am going to spend this week somewhere I only spent a couple of hours, as I passed through on my way south, at an oil train protest in Richmond. I recorded some speeches, took some photos and schmoozed, with no time to fully interview any of the great squad of hundreds assembled that day. Five years later, I did some deep internet prowling to find as many of the rally speakers as I could.”

<rally audio fades in>

Stephanie, the emcee: “...one of our environmental justice warriors that works in communities of color and bands different people of all cultures, ages, together for this cause, please welcome Ratha from the Sierra Club!”

<loud applause>

Ratha Lai (RL): “Good afternoon everybody! Thank you for coming out on this march and let’s give a round of applause for Megan, APEN [Asian Pacific Environmental Network] who helped organize this and also, give a round of applause to yourself for coming out here and showing what activism is. Um, my name is Ratha, I’m a community organizer for Sierra Club’s San Francisco Bay chapter. I feel really privileged to be out here with all the... with all you people out here to stop these oil trains. When I first—I live in Richmond and when I first started hearing about these oil trains I was just absolutely dumbfounded. Like, is this really happening? And to dive more deeper and deeper into it, it’s like falling through Alice’s in Wonderland’s rabbit hole. You find out it’s fracking, that it’s coming out, it’s tar sands that’s coming in and there’s all these different intersections of where it is. And the intersection that we’re finding out is, it’s right here in the Bay area.

We have so much agency to stop so much global pollution and global environmental injustice. One of the other things that’s been happening in Richmond is coal. Coal has been coming in here since 2012. It’s one of the biggest polluters, the GHGs and the coal gets shipped to third world countries, like Mex—not third world countries, countries that don’t have regulations that require better air quality like California does. Something that I heard Eduardo Martinez say, Richmond city council member, say, is, ‘why are we shipping this stuff out to other places that we wouldn’t burn ourselves?’

Person in crowd: Exactly!

RL: And that’s something that’s really stuck with me and it’s really, it’s all of it, it’s the oil trains and the coal and it’s right here, it’s right now, it starts with you. It starts with intention, with the intentionality that this— that we have to go into a just transition, into a new world. And that’s it. You know, that’s really it. It’s about being intentional, about reaching out to others that you talk to and just growing this movement. Once more, thank you very much, I’m going to pass this back to Stephanie and if you haven’t signed one of my petitions, come through.”

<applause fades out under narration>

TRW: “I want to shout out to Ratha Lai, who you just heard, for being super patient. Our first interview taken this summer ended up being unusable, and he agreed just today, during a stressful election week, to rerecord. He was amazing, thank you again Ratha, and here is what he had to say.”

Ratha Lai (RL): “Alright, uh do you wanna cue me in?”

Taylor Roseweeds (TRW): “Yeah, sure, so when I—I didn’t meet you, but we were at... you were giving a speech and you were with the Sierra Club at the time at this rally against oil trains in Richmond. And yeah, I guess I’m just curious—what have you been up to since then *<laughs>* in the last five years, in a condensed form? And yeah, where are you now?”

RL: Yeah, Taylor, thank you so much for having me on your podcast. Yeah, so my name is Ratha Lai and I'm currently the founder and executive director of Critical Impact Consulting and my journey since that speech has been pretty eventful and been— at least with my professional journey— it has led me through a lot of different coalitions and stuff like that. So like, during that speech I was an organizer with the Sierra Club and that was during 2015. And so right before that speech was the 2014 elections where Chevron poured in like, over four million dollars into Richmond because progressives had rose up to challenge Chevron because of this massive fire that happened two years ago. So that massive fire is known as the 2012 Chevron fire, it sent over 15,000 people to the hospital. Where I was at that time, in 2012 was, I recently just graduated from UC Berkeley, I was uh, I had transferred from my community college, Cerritos College, so go Falcons and go Bears...

<laughter>

RL: And I landed a job with The Greenlining Institute at that time, which was a racial justice policy institute. So that big fire happened and I had just moved, had just moved in with my partner at the time into Richmond and yeah, it was huge. It was like, the most enormous fire ever. Fast forward to about two years later, I found myself looking for work and the Sierra Club was hiring for an organizer position and I took the job and the job was basically go to Richmond and organize against Chevron, join this crazy coalition of the Richmond Progressive Alliance. And I like, was able to really step in and help out Eduardo Martinez, who's currently on the city council member now, Jovanka Beckles, who just won a seat to be the AC Transit Board director, and Gayle McLaughlin who also just won right now, city council for Richmond again.

And so I had got on that campaign and the Sierra Club— everyone won in that campaign. That was a huge community effort, it wasn't just the Sierra Club, it was also like every organization in Richmond. Like, I got a really great firsthand look at what a grassroots organizing campaign, what a community can do when they're fed up with the system that they're in and they want change. And what happens is like, the communities get fed up, people rise up, leaders step up, and the community starts supporting them and then you start getting leaders that are from the community and for the community. So that speech that happened was, you know, with the oil trains, we had oil trains coming in to Richmond at that time. Yeah, so I was organizing against the oil trains and was starting to be more involved in the environmental justice movement in Richmond.

Before that, with Greenlining, I had done a lot of different stuff, I was like looking at the education system, I was also looking at voting rights actually which is really interesting too— plays into a whole other aspect now which back in 2012, we were looking, we were starting to research all the different types of voter suppression tactics and strategies that were getting ready to get mounted on. And now, what is it, eight years later, definitely seeing that full effect...

TRW: Cha!

RL: And still seeing like, the resilience in that, you know. So, I think that, you know that doesn't really get covered much *<laughs>* the fact that the voter suppression in this country is ridiculous...

TRW: Mmhmm

RL: And yeah, so anyway, after that speech I started working for basically everybody else. I think I kept myself as a community organizer, my hat kind of changed around but I was always in Richmond. And so I went from the Sierra Club and I worked on the refinery caps campaign. And so the refinery caps campaign was a campaign to cap refinery pollution at today's level, right? Simple ask. Like, can we not make the pollution get worse? This was back in 2014, so we're like, climate change *<audio glitches and distorts the phrase>* is real, pollution sucks, our people are dying, people get ten years or more shaved off their life at the tail end of their life, people's quality of life suffers, people have to deal with asthma or respiratory illnesses, our vulnerable are subject to one constant— a constant level of sub-healthy air quality. And then on top of that, you know, whenever the refinery has an incident or an event like a flaring issue, which it flares very, very often, all those chemicals get release into the air and they don't get tracked by the air district. There are loopholes in terms of where flaring is a necessity for refineries because if they don't flare, they'll blow up, basically.

TRW: ...that seems safe and fine

RL: Yeah, so on the outset of the need to be able to preserve the refinery structure, they will have to flare. So if there's too much stuff in there, they will have to just burn it all out. And that's—flaring is when you see those huge columns of fire, of smoke into the air. And then it burns a whole bunch of stuff. I would—for anyone listening, I would look into the Communities for a Better Environment (CBE). They have, for those years they were able to, they had a great scientist Greg Karras, who kept track and was able to provide tons and tons of reports. They have a great flaring report in terms of how...all the different chemicals that don't get tracked. So, a lot, a lot of cool stuff. A lot of frightening stuff too.

TRW: Well, yeah.

RL: About how invisible, but...

TRW: I have, I have a—sorry to interrupt the linear nature of this, but I have a question. Just thinking about this last summer and you know, the summers before too with the wildfires in California...what's the increased risk, I mean having all this oil sitting around and all these refineries and all that infrastructure, is there anything? I mean, that's scary right? I'm not....

RL: Yeah, absolutely. What we're looking at I think is— we're looking at our entire infrastructure going through a change. Whether we like it or not, there's enough external circumstances between climate change, the supply of oil, the demand, the political

demand of communities becoming more organized to transition ourselves. For the existing infrastructure right now to be what it is, what you're saying, is really risky and really vulnerable to a whole bunch of threats in a number of ways. And those ways are like, one: if there is an earthquake or something that happens near a refinery or anything like that, what happens to the spills? What happens, like who's on the hook for the cleanup? There's issues like that. There's also other issues in terms of, with the wildfire, when the wildfire was out and it was completely blanketed, we were getting reports from... or I was talking with my neighbors and other community members about Chevron pouring more excessive pollution out into the air because it can't really be seen.

TRW: Hmm...

RL: And so I think regardless of all of that, we're still looking at an infrastructure that is not equipped with the changing environment that we're dealing with, and these wildfires are getting worse. We're about to enter into the winter season where our mudslides and things are going to be our next priority issues. And so we're in a state of a situation where we're going to have to constantly respond to our next different climate crisis and climate scenario. And industry for California and especially for, you know, what I would say for communities in the pathway of profit for the oil industry, it's really imperative because this is where all of their major infrastructure pieces are in terms of how the oil industry is laid out, right? California has thirteen refineries in California and it's designed that way, right? So like, when I used to talk to people they'd like, 'why didn't they put the refineries in the desert where it wouldn't pollute anybody?'. It would cost way too much money to, to move that oil to the desert where all their money is made in terms of export and import, right? Import the oil from outside, you export it, you refine it and you export it. There's a whole oil market for it. And California is in that pathway of profit.

TRW: Mmhmm

RL: And that's why we see so much strategic political pressure by oil industries and other industries abroad to squash down frontline communities, you know. And that plays into like, my next part was when I transferred from the Sierra Club into the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, I was able to still work on that campaign cause that campaign was a coalition effort. So just being able to bring in community members who were refugees who settled into Richmond and are like, suffering because of the poor impacts, the quality impacts. And I think one of the hardest things is like, being able to talk to elders and community members and < sigh > trying to explain to them why the government is recommending more studying and data collection as they can witness and see community members die.

TRW: Hmm...

RL: And we have literally seen an institution weather itself and rather... see its constituents and people that it's supposed to support slowly die from air quality and air pollution and still try to uphold their.... And I think— the agency at play is the Bay Area

Air Quality Management District— and I do have colleagues and friends and people I do like at the agency and at the district, but at the same time I think I still have to call out the agency for its process in terms of holding that rule up and holding the refinery caps rule up in terms of how that rule played out. So that rule lasted about, that campaign lasted about four years. It spanned from, I don't know, it even spanned from my time, it was a really long time and I think it went into near 2017 and 2018 and that is when Jerry Brown was still in office for California. He was about to leave. So when politicians are about to leave, they are usually looking to make a mark, do something, right?

TRW: Mmhmm

RL: Every politician, you know, when they're out they like to think of themselves as being able to ride off into the sunset.

TRW: Mmhmm

RL: The problem with Jerry Brown was, in this campaign we in the Bay Area had, I don't know, I think we had well over fifty organizations, we spanned across nine counties, we had countless signatures, yeah, we had everybody from doctors and nurses to refinery experts, we even had one of the local refinery worker's union, all in support of capping refinery pollution so that way we can start the path to a just transition. And this was back in 2014, 2015, around the time of that speech and so now that we're in 2020, to recognize and see that communities had always been asking for this type of change and for us to really have to face against the crisis that we're in now, really shows like where our politicians priorities have been all these times, you know?

TRW: Yeah

RL: And I think, yeah, so I think that's something where a lot of community members are really bitter. Because at the end of that rule, that rule actually got passed. And I will give credit to the agency because the board members at that time, we had a lot of amazing allies, a lot of amazing board allies, allies like Eric Marr, John Avalos, yeah, twenty, there was like twenty-four board members and I apologize I won't be able to...

TRW: No, it's all good

RL: ...remember all the allies, like Katie Rice in Marin and then John [unconfirmed] is a great ally too. For all of them to be able to rally around and get this out, like, I really saw this play out in terms of how the oil industry will really protect their profit immensely. So, long story short, how that campaign came to an end was we got that campaign passed—two step process, two weeks in between—first step passed, everybody celebrated. The next process was the executive director staff Jeff Broadbent would have to stamp it and approve it. And then in that process, the oil industry went to Governor Brown and as part of Governor Brown's 'riding off to the sunset' with his new cap and trade renewal deal, 8398, part of that was this ten point plan where the oil industry would get a list of

ten favors essentially that would ride off. On one of those lists was that local air districts would not be able to regulate greenhouse gas emissions.

TRW: Pfshehh...

RL: Which is...which is, basically destroyed our whole campaign and put that rule on ice. It basically said, 'oh this is out of our agency's jurisdiction we can no longer rule on this'. Now, mind you, that greenhouse gas is a key word for, you know everyone understands greenhouse gasses and its impact on climate change and its global impact, but also— and you know, I'll encourage folks to look into Communities for a Better Environment again— greenhouse—there's co-pollutants that are not tracked. Co-pollutants that cause cancers like benzene and a whole list of things that would make a very funny video if I try to pronounce it right now

<laughter>

TRW: Sure, yeah

RL: My daughter would love to see that...

TRW: See you try to pronounce all the chemicals? Yeah....so, I mean I think that's a pattern that people all around the country are going to be familiar with if they've had to go up against any major industry especially the polluters. One thing I wanted to touch on—you talked about the coalition work and um, also you know, moving to work with APEN, the Asian Pacific Environmental Network, and then you know, the other folks I've talked to from down there talk about the fact that Richmond itself is about— like is a very like multiracial, like, cross-class, working class, organized place. Can you just talk about— I guess I'm curious, what do you think other movements in other places can learn from y'all's... from your wins and from your challenges? Especially in terms of that like multiracial, like, cross-class coalition work?

RL: Yeah, I think... within APEN, I was a Richmond Our Power Coalition coordinator from 2016-2019. What our intention was for there was, was let's take a look at our— who's in our community? Who's being harmed by the extractive economy? And I would encourage your folks who aren't familiar with the Just Transition framework to check out Movement Generation. They have a great website, they have awesome amazing stuff, they have an incredible amount of teaching materials, really great videos that you can learn about Just Transition. In a nutshell, the extractive economy impacts and harms a lot of folks. So how this played out in Richmond from an environmental justice perspective that needed to build a coalition to one: address Chevron, but still build real power for the community. And one of the things was, how do we look at our community and what's harming our community?

So a great example I'll bring in was we had the Safe Return Project. So the Safe Return Project is an organization that works to end mass incarceration in our era and they are based out of Richmond and Contra Costa and they focus on recruiting formerly

incarcerated individuals to be part of their program and organizing, and organize public policy and campaigns. And we brought them into the coalition to work and they're actually one of my current clients I work with right now. And also shout out to Tamisha Walker who's the executive director for Safe Return Project and is also running for Antioch [City Council] District One, and we had a chance to work together for the campaign and results are still coming in, they're still about 3,000 votes in and it's a super, super close race. There's only fifty votes that are closing between her and...

TRW: Gosh

RL: ...the incumbent. Incredible, amazing woman. And so, yeah I think what we really were intentional about was like, let's look at our community and let's bring everybody together. Let's bring everybody together and let's talk about the issues. So we didn't have everybody at first and so we had to do a series of just getting the word out, you know, providing information, going to different communities and doing community presentations on a Just Transition. And the Just Transition framework was really, really allowed us to bring in others into our movement and others into understanding like, ok let's do— let's come together for a Just Transition because it can be a broad coalition that impacts everybody, right? And like I said, the Just Transition framework targets, there's a lot to it, but in a nutshell, it targets past harms that have been done into the community, so how do we repair past harms and how do we move away from the systems that caused those harms? And those are called extractive economies and how do we move away from those into a regenerative economy? Into an economy where our relationships with each other are sustainable and supportive and not extractive, right? Where it doesn't really take, where it doesn't take from each other but instead it helps and supports each other. And so, that was something that everybody was able to um, really see themselves in.

And so that's how we were able to bring a coalition, and have an organization that ends mass incarceration join a coalition for environmental justice. And I would say that for other communities in America, every community is different, right? And I think our process that we did that can be helpful for folks is not... like, I think what would *not* be good is to uh, have a diversity checklist.

TRW: Mmhmm

RL: So, no offense, I'm just speaking to white allies out there, if you have a diversity checklist, put it down, throw it away, that's not the way to go.

<laughter>

TRW: You mean as in like, 'we need someone from this group, and someone from this group' that's what you mean?

RL: Yes

TRW: Just clarifying, yeah

RL: Yeah. Don't do that. A lot of people will think having a multiracial coalition you know, 'having this, having this', no. Go into the community, do the canvassing, do the organizing work, be humble, have the conversations, find people who are doing the work and start building the coalition that way. It takes time, it takes effort, all coalitions are messy, but that's ok. Um, I think as people support each other and understand, it builds collective power and people, people will understand and respect that. And I think, I think that's how coalitions can get formed, and I think it's a willingness to... I think it's a great combination for people who are starting coalitions. Cause I think people will get stuck into creating meetings, like monthly meetings, biweekly meetings and then all of the sudden they'll just be this like, rag tag group of individuals who have been super hyper-focused working on a campaign, which is super awesome, and at the same time it's... there's a missing element of community organizing, right?

TRW: Yeah

RL: And so being able to really have events. So, for the coalition it was great because the coalition was formed by several other community organizations. So community organizations like Urban Tilth that does like, farming in Richmond, and they do a uh... CSA— community sourced agriculture— so they actually grow food in Richmond. They, their story is incredible in terms of how they took over land and they, you know, worked in partnerships and they now transformed land that was un-usable into land that's farmed and are giving out, it's through their community sourced agriculture program so people can pay into it, they get fresh fruits and vegetables, there's a sliding scale, so our community starts to get fed that's in a food desert.

TRW: Mmhmm

RL: And other organizations like Rich City Rides that does bike rides on Sundays for communities so to create peace, safety and a place for children. And a lot of other organizations so...

TRW: But just actually being like, present out there, visible?

RL: Yeah, exactly. So don't be like, a rag tag group of individuals. Really try to find organizations that are there and create a space. And so, I think this is the harder part because a lot of coalitions are really hard to form because they aren't necessarily resourced or funded. So I think a lot of non profits and organizations get funded specifically to do their work. So if you have funders who are listening, you know, I have a whole...we could do a whole other...

<laughter>

TRW: Yeah...

RL: ...on their problems...

TRW: Where Ratha sends the money...

RL: <laughs> Yeah, well yeah, but I mean for the fact that most coalitions, there's not very much resources into coalition building...

TRW: Mmhmm

RL: ...trying to build something without screws. Yeah?

TRW: Uh, the other thing I wanted to just make sure that I ask you, you know, you talked about your kid, you talked about being a parent. And I wonder if, I'm always curious like, you know, people who are involved in social justice work, it's tiring and it's hard and I like to ask people about what gives them hope and— without that being trite — so I wonder like, if in the context of being a parent doing this kind of work, especially around climate change, like how does that relationship drive your work? And also what makes you hopeful or inspires you to kind of stay involved in this?

RL: Yeah...um...good question. I think it's a mix between inspiring and maddening. <laughs> And yeah...in terms of like, looking at— cause I think as parent I'm hyper-aware that my daughter... or I'm gonna model after my daughter, right? Cause that's— kids learn through situational learning, they'll learn in their situation, in their environments. And they'll learn from the people around them and so my daughter has really been a driving force to make me a better person and looking at myself and um, where I have to grow. And you know, I also appreciate other places in my life where I've had that as well. But my daughter has definitely challenged me to grow and constantly look at myself and to find parts where you know, I have to grow. And I think part of the hardest thing is really having a healthy mindset, an outlook.

And part of that I believe is being able to dream and being able to dream about your future I think is really... a real privilege and is really hard to do. Especially for people who are in— when we are in an era where so many people are suffering and so many people are in a state of survival, it becomes really hard for children to have a dream. And I think for— for children who are then even exposed to like, say, violence or trauma, it can have a real impact, right? And so when I was doing some organizing with the Sunrise Movement, and looking at their youth, I think I was speaking at a rally or something, the youth were really hopeless. They couldn't dream about living past twenty, twenty-one. And these were nine, ten, eleven year olds? And I can't remember if my daughter was at that protest and rally or not, but it broke my heart. It literally broke my heart. I mean, I had to go speak after these kids and so, the kids spoke and then I think they wanted me to be, like, an inspiring, the inspiring speaker or something like that?

TRW: Mmhmm

RL: But that...<laughs> that totally didn't happen. It was like balloon deflating...

TRW: Mmhmm

RL: And so that's— I think that's something that I kind of work with now is like, how do I model myself and look at the world different situations that I'm in? And how do I face those challenges in a way that I can be proud of that, you know, if my daughter were in my shoes, how would I want her to kind of handle these situations, you know? So as easy as it can be to fall into despair, for me, I feel like I have to keep trying. And so even now in my role as a consultant, I'm still kind of doing the same work as a community organizer, to be honest, I just sort of do it at a different level and I do it with more people and have more of my friends and in different type of settings and stuff. So, I think that's just something I've been really mindful of is how do we...how do I help my daughter grow up in this era and be conscious and be mindful and yet, still have her not, like, feel the anxiety that I have?

TRW: Mmhmm

RL: So I don't know, I think that's tricky so I'm still working.

TRW: Well, I think that's a good framework for everybody, you know? Like I said, we're going to get kicked off of here. Do you have any final parting words?

RL: Yeah, I definitely would encourage people to look up the It Takes Roots Alliance, um, I did this "Solidarity to Solutions" week of action, so a lot of great stuff came out of that, plays into this conversation, Indigenous Environmental Network, Climate Justice Alliance, Right To The City Alliance, and the Grassroots Global Justice Alliance.

TRW: Cool

RL: Yea, and if you want to check out Our Power Richmond, that's ourpowerrichmond.org and yeah, if you want to reach me, you can check out criticalimpactconsulting.com

TRW: Cool

RL: And my email is ratha, r-a-t-h-a at criticalimpactconsulting.com

TRW: Awesome. Well, thank you so much for...

RL: You're welcome, Taylor.

TRW: For taking the time.

RL: Yeah

TRW: And good luck down there watching your local elections which sound more nail biting than even the national one...

RL: Yes, and shoutout to my local election colleagues, you know Melvin Willis, Claudia Jimenez, Gayle McLaughlin, they all won in Richmond. Jovanka Beckles I mentioned earlier, Lateefah Simon for BART Board, Taylor Sims who won in Pittsburg, Luz Gomez who won in San Ramon city council, and then I might be missing a couple of more...

<laughter>

RL: But I think one of the coolest things was like, in this election, was seeing so many people who have been community organizers and have been part of the community standing up to be elected officials and winning elections. That was dope.

<laughter>

RL: So being able to look at my local ballot....oh! Carroll Fife, too, in Oakland who just won city council, too. A shoutout to all my Oakland colleagues out there. I'm in nearby Contra Costa, yeah, but so, so many awesome folks. I think when folks are getting organized, yo, like looking at your local elections, it makes the elections way better...

<laughter>

RL: ...way way better than...

TRW: To see your friends, yes

RL: Yeah, than the options given with the national elections.

TRW: Yea, word. Well, thank you again

<music fades in>

RL: Ok, awesome

TRW: Ok, thanks again

RL: Bye”

TRW: Bye”

TRW: “Big thanks again to Ratha. After being so sick of election season and so frustrated with the pathetic failures of the democratic party these last years, it's been reassuring to see that grassroots candidates, like that huge list he just named, are winning because of their radical platforms and because of their integrity and genuine

connections to their communities. At the same rally, where on a hot day a few hundred people had gathered in a park in view of one of the refineries, Ethan Buckner also spoke. He was then working with a group called Forest Ethics.”

<music fades out>

<radio static bursts>

Stephanie, the emcee of the rally: “...I want to introduce has been organizing actions against the coal trains, against all the environmental injustice, um, things that we have to worry about here in Richmond as well as up along the west coast. And I’ve seen him in New York, I’ve seen him different places, his name is Ethan Buckner with the Forest Ethics.”

<Applause and cheering>

Ethan Buckner (EB): “What’s going on everybody? Um, my name is Ethan Buckner, I’m with Forest Ethics and um, you know, we’ve talked a lot today about the dangers of oil trains, right? We know that oil trains are a disaster for public health, we heard from the nurses. We know that oil trains are a disaster for public safety, we’ve heard from our friends in Atchison Village and all the way down to Parchester Village and Martinez, folks who live along the rail lines who are at risk for a derailment or disaster. We’ve also heard about how oil trains are a disaster for our climate and about how this oil, this extreme oil, the tar sands, this Bakken crude from North Dakota needs to stay in the ground. But also, what I’m here to talk about today is the power of this movement and the organizing that’s happening today across this state and across the nation. This event today is part of a national week of action to stop oil trains. There are over ninety events that have happened this week across the US and Canada...”

<cheering>

EB: ...and here today there are over a dozen communities in California that are all, right now, taking action to stop oil trains and the reason why? Because we know that this movement when led from the grassroots, led by the folks who are most impacted by the oil trains that are coming in to these communities, that we can win. I want to give a shoutout to folks here from Benicia, California— if you’re here from Benicia, been fighting like hell for the past two years against a proposed oil train facility in Benicia from the Valero refinery and has that been built yet?

Crowd: No!

EB: Because this community has fought back time and time again to stop that project and we’re going to continue to do so until it’s done. Here in Richmond, here in Richmond, there are no oil trains coming in right now and a big part of that is because of the organizing that’s been happening thanks to APEN [Asian Pacific Environmental Network] and CBE [Communities for a Better Environment] and all the other leaders in this community.

<cheering>

EB: In Pittsburg, they proposed to build the biggest oil facility on the west coast. Has that been built?

Crowd: No!

EB: If you go to Westpac's website, the company that proposed to build that project, it still reads 'construction will end by the end of 2013'. Not a single shovel in the ground and that is thanks to this movement.

<cheering>

EB: And in San Luis Obispo, the company Phillips 66 has been trying to build another big oil train facility that would bring oil trains all the way from Alberta, Canada, the tar sands, down through the Bay Area and along the central coast. Has that been built yet?

Voice in crowd: "Hell no!"

EB: Are we gonna let them do it?"

Crowd: No!

<rally audio fades out under narration>

TRW: "So now in our conversation from August 20, 2020, Ethan let me know the fate of those projects five years later, of the broader movement against moving dangerous fuel on American rail lines, and much more. Here's that interview."

<radio static bursts>

Taylor Roseweeds (TRW): "Since you're kind of a unique case since I didn't actually interview you in 2015 when I was on this trip, I just ended up at that rally and kind of like tucked away all these speeches and then tracked people down, so... So in 2015, we didn't meet, but I was in Richmond, California on this road trip and I only spent about— I was only able to spend like six hours there and it happened to be a six hours that there was an oil trains rally. And I recorded speeches there, I talked to a handful of people, grabbed some business cards and then had to get back on the road. So um, you were one of those people and at the time you were working with Forest Ethics so I'm wondering if you can just start by introducing yourself? Talking about what you were doing that day at this oil trains rally and what has happened since and what you're doing now?"

Ethan Buckner (EB): “Wonderful, my name is Ethan Buckner. I... in 2015, was sort of the height of a multi year campaign to push back against an effort by the oil industry to expand their ability to receive some of the dirtiest and more volatile crude oil on the planet and enable the expansion of extraction in those places in North America. One of those places being the tar sands in Canada, this heavy sulfur crude that um, is part of the largest industrial project in the history of the earth. People might be more familiar with the Keystone XL pipeline and a long effort led by First Nations people to prevent further destruction of boreal forest and the extraction of this incredibly energy intensive and water intensive and destructive form of oil extraction.

And then the second place is the Bakken in North Dakota. This is a shale formation that was really in, you know, in the early 2010s sort of extraction there exploded due to sort of advances in technology with fracking. And as these places expanded extraction, they needed ways to get oil to the shoreline where refineries and export terminals would help both process this oil and also move it to global markets. In Canada, successful campaigns to fight against massive pipelines like Keystone or Energy East or Enbridge pipeline you know, limited it, you know, has continued to limit the industry’s ability to expand. And in North Dakota, they also struggled to build pipeline capacity and so the solution for industry was to try to move massive, massive amounts of oil on railways via these mile-long oil trains.

And you know, this process in 2013 really shed light on how dangerous this was when one of these oil trains like, derailed and exploded in a small town [Lac-Mégantic, QC] in Canada and killed forty-seven people and burned half a downtown, that small town, to the ground. I actually finally after many years had a chance to visit that town in the summer of 2019 actually and see some, an old friend who I had worked with during this campaign, and it’s still a ghost of what it was. And so in California, there were about eleven or twelve of these facilities proposed at the time and we, you know, of the grassroots environmental organizations and ally groups like Forest Ethics, now since that organization has changed its name to Stand.Earth, we realized you know that the way we were going to be able to defeat these facilities is by organizing communities to work together up and down the rail lines and put pressure on local governments that have land use authority over the decision on whether or not to build the facilities themselves. Um, knowing that once those facilities are built, because rail traffic was regulated federally, there would be no way for communities most impacted by these oil trains to actually have a say in whether or not they actually traveled through densely populated areas.

And our research about who is most impacted revealed unsurprisingly that low income and communities of color are most directly impacted by the pollution and public health and safety risk from this form of oil transport. So that day in 2015 was part of a, you know, on the anniversary of this major disaster in the town of Lac-Mégantic, Quebec, we organized you know, for a number of years sort of a national week of action. Not only in California, but other parts of the country were dealing with similar efforts out of the oil industry to move oil by rail up to the Gulf Coast, to the east coast, to the west coast, and many places in between. So that rally was a part of this national week of action. I think

the next day me and a few others tried to hang a 2400 square foot banner off a highway bridge um...<laughs> had a lovely night in the Martinez County jail for that one.

<laughter>

EB: You know, continued our efforts and really I am so grateful to have had the chance to work on that campaign. You know, we really... because of just the way that where the railroads, you know, connect, all sorts of different communities have the chance to work with, you know, incredible, these incredible organizers who have built the environmental justice movement in California, in Richmond. Like the folks at Communities for a Better Environment or Asian Pacific Environmental Network and these incredible legacy organizers, to folks in communities who had never dealt with the fossil fuel industry before, small towns, working class communities, and even in some cases, more conservative places that were— you know, folks may not have shared political views with us, but didn't want their kids going to a school right next to, you know, a potentially explosive...

TRW: Mmhmm

EB: ...oil train.

TRW: No one wants a giant bomb to derail in their town, it turns out?

EB: Yeah, exactly. And these disasters like, continued to happen. There were seven or eight like, high profile explosions and thankfully none of them as devastating in terms of loss of life as the one in Canada, but you know definitely like, at that point the sense of urgency around it was pretty high. And amazingly, over the next year and a half after that, after that rally, you know, we were able to, you know, pass dozens of resolutions in impacted towns, organize residents across the state to show up at hearings, leverage all those impacts to throw, you know, legal and regulatory challenges against these facilities and um... we stopped all of them.

The Benicia Planning Commission and city council unanimously voted to— against granting you know, Valero their land use permit, same...and shortly after, the San Luis Obispo County board of supervisors, which was a Republican-controlled body, faced so much pressure from locals that they did the same and they shot down the facility there. And the, you know, the Westpac, the company in Pittsburg, California, pulled out and didn't even, you know, follow through on their plan. And so we were really able to push back and prevent this flood of oil from coming in to California and it was a pretty amazing to be a part of sort of people-powered series of campaigns that led to all of these victories.

TRW: Yeah, and it's honestly— as someone who is both an organizer and has covered organizing— it's sadly rare? I wouldn't say it's never, but to have like, a cut and dry 'we did this and we won', I mean would you say that you won? I mean, what has happened

overall with kind of, that fuel export side of the environmental movement since then? At a more macro scale?

EB: Yeah, I mean, on a more macro scale it's interesting. So after those campaigns wrapped actually, I switched jobs. I decided to go work for a group called Earthworks and that's where I still work as a campaigner and go from, you know, organizing in California where there, certainly there are very long, long standing oil interests that play a very significant role in sort of the political landscape in California, but there's also a lot of progressive communities, there's a lot of... California environmental law is fairly strong compared to a lot of the rest of the country. And I went from there to working on fighting, you know, oil and gas, petrochemical facilities and pipelines in America's heartland in the wake of a Trump victory and found myself you know, working with Black, indigenous communities, working class communities, in Louisiana, Texas, and Pennsylvania and Ohio in hostile political environments. And trying to *<laughs>* organize, you know, in... in places that also have been sort of historically under-resourced by the environmental movement, not only in places that also have been hardest hit by environmental injustice and industry. And I'm still doing that work.

Most of my work now is focused on preventing, trying to prevent, the expansion of what is now the largest oil field on the planet in the Permian Basin in West Texas and Southeast New Mexico. And try to work with communities on the Gulf Coast who are now fighting seven or eight massive proposed oil export terminals and another dozen or so natural gas or LNG export facilities and another half dozen or more, you know, massive petrochemical plants in places like Cancer Alley which is, in Louisiana, which has been hit so hard by industry for a long, long time and are also dealing with massive inequities in terms of covid and other things. So it's an issue in terms of like, in terms of export, that is where the industry sees its future in terms of expansion, and I think that in terms of California, that the door so far is still closed and we've been able to at least wall off access to to the west coast, although I know there are still ongoing battles in the Pacific Northwest...

TRW: Mmhmm

EB: ...around those issues, but I know there's also a lot of success there too.

TRW: Yeah. Yeah, it's... yeah, it's interesting to see the way it's kind of morphed and changed and, tragically, the fossil fuel industry has not crumbled since then, but just kind of changing gears a little bit. In the speech that, you know, I heard there and, you know, it was echoed by a lot of people and I think folks who are, you know, in the movement know this— that the important thing is to stay involved once you get involved. So I guess just, how for you on a personal level and then also in the communities that you're entering as an organizer and becoming part of in that sense, how do you sustain yourself over time doing this pretty draining, intense work and what would you share with other people who are maybe newer or who are maybe facing burnout during these uh, very rough years?

EB: This is a really wonderful and *<laughs>* good question to reflect on. How do I sustain myself? I mean, I, outside of my work as an activist, am a musician. I write, perform like, indie folk songs. And keeping sort of that space for creative reflection and having that outlet has been absolutely crucial for me over the years and is still an enormous part of my life. I think when I first became really, you know, politicized, in high school and college and when I first started in my work afterwards, you know, the sense of like, urgency, 'everything is going to collapse and I have to be part of everything', you know, was really, really strong and I think it can be conducive to like, you know, running yourself into the ground. Not that I've by any means mastered the, like, art of balance, but I think that it's important you know, in getting involved to... to recognize that we're building a movement and we need to create space for so many people to take on leadership to get involved and you can't be everything all of the time. And so, you know, caring for, practicing care and care as also a political act is really important. Caring for those around you, caring for yourself, caring for communities that you're a part of is really, really an important piece to that.

TRW: Yeah, absolutely. And I think that's a really common thing as I've interviewed people over the years. There's a lot of artists who also do, you know, the art of organizing. It's kind of a social practice in some ways, but there's a lot of folks who do exactly that, like make music and make visual art and everything. So something I would have asked if I interviewed you in 2015, I was asking everyone these same three questions so I'll just ask them now instead because maybe your answers are similar? But the first one is what makes you the most frustrated?

EB: What makes me the most frustrated? Oh my goodness. *<laughs>* Let me just think on that one...

TRW: Yeah

EB: I think there's an extent to which, on the left, folks can be really focused on... ideological or sort of performative victory over moving and building real material power and sort of create, sort of, an echo chamber where it's more important to be, sort of, ideologically right than it is to win.

TRW: Mmhmm

EB: And I think that one of the things that we have to craft and learn as a movement is how to be true to our principles and our vision for the world that we know we need and deserve while creating space to move other people into action. People who don't necessarily like, at first glance, have like, the... you know, a really in depth critical political analysis that we might have developed over time. And I think that the responsibility that especially among, like, white folks, is really, really strong. Like, you know, I think that it's... I would encourage other white folks to not unfriend the person who's saying problematic things in your Facebook feed and maybe take some time to have some difficult conversations and work to try and move people. Cause we're going to need to do that, we're going to need to do that difficult work of engaging with people

and building a broad-based movement if we were going to defeat, you know, fascism <laughs> and authoritarianism which threatens to, you know, erode the very sort of fabric of the already extremely weak democracy that we have in this country.

TRW: Yeah...

EB: So I think we just need to be really real with ourselves about that as we, you know, continue to push for the world that we need.

TRW: Yeah, and then so the flip side of that is what gives you the most hope?

EB: The uprisings for racial justice right now have given me a tremendous amount of hope as I've seen so many people who like, previously maybe would have never shown up at a march or never considered themselves like a quote unquote 'activist' just like become completely activated by this political moment. And how it's, you know, pushed for a radical reckoning of systemic racism and police violence in this country. The energy that's there and the potential that exists within that capacity to mobilize, to me is profoundly hopeful and is really sustaining me right now.

TRW: Yeah and I wonder, you touched on this a little bit, but I come from originally from an environmental activism background also. And that was kind of my first issue-based thing. And you, you talked about this talking about your current work, that it has historically been a very white space and...I don't know the other word, but it's been a very white space— the public facing, like outward looking, environmental movement as it has existed. So how do you think, how has climate work changed and how can climate activism kind of dovetail in with this racial justice uprising that's happening and where do you see those issues aligning?

EB: So I guess I would first say that, you know, indigenous communities, communities of color have been doing incredible quote unquote 'environmental work' for generations.

TRW: Mmhmm

EB: And the resourced quote unquote 'environmental movement' that comes from the legacy of, you know, the conservation movement, the John Muirs and the sort of, the legacy of sort of white supremacy and racism in the modern environmental movement is having a reckoning and has been for quite some time. And this particular moment has pushed that even further to understand that like the leadership, the vision, from BIPOC communities and folks who are most impacted by, you know, pollution, extractive industry is that leadership is necessary in order for us to build the world that we need. And the root causes of these, of the climate crisis, of plastic pollution, of all of the intertwined environmental crises that we face, are the same root causes of systemic, you know, systemic racism, it's extractive capitalism, it's heteropatriarchy, it's all of these things and we need to uplift and in a lot of cases, get out of the way so that those voices that have been at the forefront of this work for a long time can step in and lead us and

we can leverage the resources and capacity and privilege that we have towards a systemic change.

And I think within sort of the environmental, non-profit, you know, big NGO world, there's a lot of unraveling of what settler colonialism, that legacy, that is being challenged and is being confronted in I think a really positive and constructive way. And there's a lot of work to be done so that our movement is truly equitable and has the culture and the structure, you know, to give space for that leadership.

TRW: Mmhmm. I've really enjoyed kind of seeing, I've been just sort of sideline peeping at some of that that's going on publicly, especially just you know, the decolonial aspect of it. So many of the ways that I think we're taught, 'we' being like, liberal white folks, are taught to even think about like, ideas of nature and that... you know we... somehow humans are in a managerial role with the earth just is a very like, white supremacist concept?

EB: <laughs> yeah.

TRW: And what would it look like to have an environmental activism that isn't centered on humans as this separate thing? Like even just that little thread could unravel everything in a positive way. So I totally...

EB: Mmhmm

TRW: ...am glad to hear your take on that. And beyond that, I mean what—we touched on this, too, but I guess an opportunity to give specific shoutouts, who do you think is best articulating like where we're going? The left in general, we're really good at saying no, and don't always get around—especially when we're so embattled in times like this—don't always get around to saying yes. Like here's what we do want. Who do you think is articulating that vision really well right now? Like, what projects or people do you want to give a shoutout to?

EB: First and foremost, the Movement for Black Lives policy platform is an incredibly bold and intersectional vision for justice and equity in this country that would, you know, profoundly if implemented shift the balance of power and enable us to address climate change and racial injustice and economic inequality and it just—I just am blown away by that vision. I think there are, you know, the Green New Deal and specifically I think there's an articulation of the Green New Deal which is really cool called the Gulf South for a Green New Deal. It's a process that was anchored by a group that I deeply respect called the Gulf Coast Center for Law and Policy that brought frontline communities from the five kind of Gulf states together to articulate kind of what a Green New Deal would need to look like um, in order to reflect the culture and history and priorities of workers and communities in that region.

And uh, I think that these— this type of really, really deep articulation of a political vision for the future that is, that is kind of regionally specific, is really cool and really inspiring.

Um... and as I'm doing a lot of work in that region that's sort of what I look to for that inspiration, for that 'yes'. A lot of the work that I do is centered around fighting back the 'no' <laughs> so those two for me right now, I'm really feeling it.

TRW: Awesome, cool. Well, I think that's about all I wanted to cover for sure, but is there anything else you wanted to be sure to mention, anything I should have asked that I didn't, any plugs that you want to plug of your own work?

EB: Just encourage folks who are getting involved to stick with it. It's just, there's a really amazing quote by Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, who I am inspired by all the time, by her visionary leadership, and talking about hope as a practice. And as something that we— that we have to build and work on every day and... and working for justice in our communities and yeah, so that's something that we sort of can like, glean from elsewhere, that's something that we need to put into practice every day. These are— these are momentous and critical times that we're living in and there's no sitting on the sidelines.

TRW: Yeah, definitely. Well, thank you so much for sticking with it yourself and for being willing to talk to me and...

EB: Awesome well I appreciate you reaching out. This is really wonderful to reflect on, you know, five years ago and here, where things are, and definitely keep me posted on how your project is going, I'd love to hear...

<music fades in>

TRW: I will, yeah

EB: ...what you put together.

TRW: Cool, thank you so much."

EB: Yeah, thank you."

TRW: "Thanks for listening, and thanks to Ratha and Ethan for talking to a random person who stalked you online. And thanks to you all for listening. Making this season has been grounding for me during an election year, that's part of why I made it now. It helps me to remember that social movements and radical change happen outside of the boundaries of party politics and that they maintain across time and geography in ways that are far more lovely and interesting than voting alone could ever be.

You can find links to all of the projects and resources that both guests referenced today in the show notes below, along with a full transcript of the episode and more. If you like the show and want to hear more, the best way to do that is subscribe, which you can do by searching Praxis Radio anywhere you get your podcasts, or by going to

praxisradio.com that's p-r-a-x-i-s-r-a-d-i-o and clicking on Praxis. It would also be great if you shared it with a friend, rated it in the store, or just sent me some nice mail.

Next week, we are staying in California, and getting taken to church. See you then."

<music fades out>

<radio static bursts>

Ratha Lai, pitch-shifted: "Climate cha-a-a-a-a-nge is real."

<radio static bursts>

END

