

Transcript

2062 - Ep.2 - Lighting Up the Economy

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Ausma Malik: The world is on fire. When survival starts to feel like an accomplishment, you know it's time to go to higher ground. To get off dangerous roads and on paths that lead to a new destination, to a place where we can see what's going wrong and fix it -- or better yet, build something new.

I'm Ausma Malik with the Atkinson Foundation. This is 2062: Beyond a Cartoon Future for Millennial Workers -- our third series on our Just Work It platform for podcast and live events about decent work, for and by, millennials.

In the heat of this moment, I'm listening to people who are showing us what's possible. They're lighting up the economy and restructuring it to generate more opportunity and wealth for whole communities, not just a few individuals.

If you can't get your head around the idea of a better economy yet, wait until you meet Ted.

Ted Howard: I'm Ted Howard. I'm the co-founder and president of the Democracy Collaborative. We like to think of ourselves as a kind of action oriented think tank, doing a lot of research and theory and policy, but also a lot of on-the-ground work around the question of "how do we build a more democratic and resilient local economy in communities all across the United States, and indeed around the world?"

Ausma Malik: Ted has been working for decades on ways to make the economy work better for everyone. He says, equity is the superior growth model. This conclusion drives what he does in the U.S., but that's not where he first came to see economic growth in this way.

Ted Howard: I guess where I really tapped into the impact of local economies on the livelihoods and the lives of people was not the United States, my home country. But in the 1980s, I worked in an international NGO, non-governmental organization, and lived in India for about two years in what was called Bombay at the time, Mumbai.

Seeing the innovation and courage, you know, if you think about cooperatives in the United States, if you have a cooperative with a couple hundred members, it's a big deal. In India, you have cooperatives with hundreds of thousands of members. So to see this, how to build a new kind of economy at scale and that way really had a big impact.

And when I was done with international development, I decided to come back to the United States and bring some of those lessons back into our economy. And in some ways is the genesis of my organization, the Democracy Collaborative. What I learned outside the United States. You know, one of the unfortunate characteristics of my fellow citizens is we like to think we know everything about how the world should work. And if the world would just listen to us, we'd all be better off.

I think there's such wisdom out in the world that if we can open ourselves up to, whether it's from India or the Basque cooperatives, worker cooperatives in Spain, or Native, Indigenous people in countries, whether it's Canada or the US and bring it into our home economy and our policy and politics, we'd all be a lot better off.

Ausma Malik: Getting the economy to be more democratic and inclusive instead of extractive and exploitative means a massive shift in power. That's not lost on Ted. He's watched how power works up close and has analyzed who has it, what it looks like, how it operates, and how to share it fairly.

Ted Howard: If you look at power and let's take the United States in a kind of hyper capitalist economy, that sort, where power really resides is in who owns and controls the assets or capital of a society. That is what leads to political power -- is the ownership of assets and capital. And as you start to grapple with that lesson and then you see things like in the United States, three men, Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and Jeff Bezos own more wealth than the bottom 50 percent of Americans. That is an extraordinary amount of power, not just for those three, but for the general one percent that owns and really controls the United States economy and therefore controls its politics.

So I'm all for good people being elected over others. I was a pretty big fan of President Obama, can't stand President Trump. And yet wealth inequality continue to go up under both of them. So it's not simply electing people. And we can have better policies, but it's not simply that because the concentrations of wealth and power push back against those, even if you can get a reform passed, they gut it and it doesn't have any impact.

Ultimately, the lesson I've learned is we need to talk about who owns the economy and that's at the very heart of our system. So if we want different outcomes, if we don't want more wealth inequality, if we don't want more racism, if we don't want more climate change, we have got to look at how the economy is structured, who owns it, and and go in and design it at the very heart of it, not along the peripheral edges.

Ausma Malik: The economy can seem frightening and mysterious, moved by an invisible hand that rewards self-interest and consumption. What if we thought of ourselves as the economy's owners? Would we tolerate a system that produces benefits for a few at the expense of many? Or would we change it?

If you're like me, once you see something in a new way, you can't unsee it. You have to do something about it. And when enough of us see things in a new way, history proves that we can make transformative changes.

Ted Howard: I think the big win in the United States would be, what I would call it, to democratize our economy.

Now, that's no small thing. Cause, you know, I mean, that's like living in pharaoh's Egypt and getting rid of that and having something new. You know, that's a huge system -- or the Middle Ages. Now we're living in a new kind of system and we need to move beyond that.

But you know, what we have in the United States, we have the middle class, the working class being hollowed out and falling behind. Let alone 50 million people in America who are trapped in intergenerational poverty.

And I'd love to give you a simple answer, like, well, if more people worked in cooperatives, that would be better for them. You know, I was involved in Cleveland, has something called the Evergreen Cooperatives, and we now have hundreds of people getting living wage jobs, benefits, profit sharing, they're owners of their companies. It's a fantastic thing for those people in their families and their neighbour. But I'll tell you, we could have a thousand evergreens all over the United States, and the trends would keep going the wrong way. We might hold back the tsunami that's coming a little bit, but it's still coming.

So the win is going to be that fundamental redesign. This historic, what Martin Luther King [Jr.] called, bending the arc of history toward social justice. I

believe that despair, or giving in, that's a luxury that we can't afford. Giving in to our critics, that's a luxury that we just can't give into.

Ausma Malik: I've never thought of despair as a luxury.

Some of us give in because we don't have the privilege to see or do things another way. That feeling of desperation is legitimate. Still, I've seen many people whose very existence is threatened by the economic system, staring down despair time and time again.

A favourite author of mine, Arundhati Roy, puts it plainly, "The people who created the crisis in the first place will not be the ones who come up with a solution."

Only when more of us band together have we ever been able to see things differently and build enough power to bend that arc. Ted says we start to move from feeling powerless to powerful when we get real about the status quo.

Ted Howard: First, we need to do our job to really be clear with people: what is the cost of this economy? Yes, the president says the stock market's up, although not today. The gross domestic product is up. Everything's booming. Except, look, it's really happening in the lives of our communities.

So people need to come to terms with -- it's like we need to de-legitimise the current system. We need to show the emperor has no clothes. So that's the first thing.

But that's not enough. Then we need to lift up the inspiring innovations and models are taking place in communities all over, I'll speak about my country, in the United States, where very courageous, innovative people are no longer waiting for someone to come save them. They're starting to do the things they need to build their own future.

Ausma Malik: We've met some pretty courageous and innovative people in Canada, too. They're putting corporations and extractive industries like Big Pharma and Big Oil on notice. These big players do not own the economy and can no longer operate as if they do.

Ted Howard: They will try to roadblock us at every step. But the greatest limitation we have is our own sense of who we are. We don't see that we're the actors who can make history. We don't see that. We need to get our

vision bigger, that we can really do something profound. And as someone once said, it's easier to imagine the end of the planet than it is to imagine the end of capitalism.

Ausma Malik: Well, that's a mic drop, Ted.

At Atkinson, we work with people who believe that inaction on income and wealth inequality is unimaginable. They're rewriting the rules of the economy where they live.

They're community coalitions, leveraging billions of public infrastructure dollars to create jobs and apprenticeships for those who don't usually benefit from capital projects.

They're municipal employees using their purchasing and hiring power to create economic opportunities for workers from historically excluded communities.

They're community and labour partners leading a just transition to a green economy for workers, and a low carbon future for all of us.

They're small business owners creating succession plans with their employees to establish co-ops and social enterprises when owners retire.

All of us are part of a growing movement that's taking ownership of our communities economic future and saying no to business as usual. You can be a part of it too. Check out the show notes for this episode to learn more, get connected, and start lighting up the economy where you live.

Thanks for listening!

This episode was hosted and produced by me, Ausma Malik, with production support by Eva Voinigescu and Nora Cole, and executive producer Pat Thompson.

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