

**Scene on Radio: Capitalism**  
**Episode 8: The People's Pushback**  
**Transcript**

**Lilly Clark, interviewer on the street:** Um, how do you feel about your own future? Like, do you feel hopeful or confident that you'll have a financially secure life?

Music

**Jo, Brooklyn:** Um ... (pause), I think yes. I think that's the way you have to think about it in order to move forward.

**Brittany, Durham, NC:** Uh, no, I don't! And I think a lot of it is because the cost of living compared to what we make is, there's such a huge gap. Like, it makes me wonder when I'm, when my kids are taking care of me, where I'm actually going to be no matter how hard I work today.

**Espartaco, Brooklyn:** I've been lucky in the past. I've been lucky now. So, I have no doubt that I'll be lucky tomorrow.

**Michelle, Durham, NC:** Yes, because I have privilege from, like, my parents and like their jobs. And also I have a job right now, so.

**Emmy, Oregon:** No.

**Brady, Durham, NC:** Yes. But I don't think that, like, our current system is sustainable.

**Jackie, Brooklyn:** I calculated, I was like, if I do, if I go to college, I can get a good job. If I get a good job, I can be financially secure. If I can be financially secure, I can buy a house. If I can buy a house, then I can have a family. And like, now more than ever I'm like those things are uncertain to me. The world around us is really scary. The world around us is really uncertain and I'm okay with that. Like, I'm hopeful but we'll see.

**Adam, Tucson:** (Laughs.) It's laughter. I don't know if I'll be able to retire. If I'm honest, like, capitalism has literally f\*\*\*\*d everyone.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** In 2008 I lived in this apartment in Chicago where the trains would go by the window so close you could see what books people were reading. It was loud and bright. I always had the radio on in the evenings. I'd listen to my public radio station after I got back from college or from the cafe where I worked. It was usually kinda soothing. But one day...

**Kai Ryssdal, host of Marketplace, September, 15, 2008:** This is gonna be one of those days that lingers in the mind for a while. That's gonna come up in those conversations that start, "you remember when...?"

**John Biewen::** 2008, Lewis? That sounds ominous.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Yeah. I had no way of knowing just how momentous that day was gonna be.

**Kai Ryssdal, Marketplace:** I'm Kai Ryssdal, it is Monday today, the 15th of September, good to have you here...

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Like, do you remember this at all? The wild news broadcasts?

**Ellen McGirt:** I do. I remember distinctly standing in the newsroom and thinking,ok, this is sounding bad. Not short-term recession bad, really bad.

**John Biewen:** Yes, of course, I do too. Though I guess I remember it as a rolling crisis that unfolded over days or a few weeks, not so much a single bombshell.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Totally, and the 15th of September happens to be my younger brother's birthday, so I actually did commit the specific date to memory. That morning Lehman Brothers, the investment firm, had filed for bankruptcy. The federal government had also just taken over a couple of other big lenders, Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac. Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac before then were NOT household names...

**Ellen McGirt:** But they totally became them.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Right, because those were just a few dominoes falling. And the global financial system was about to follow. Hence this uncomfortable laughter on that same radio broadcast.

**Treasury Secretary Henry Paulson, Marketplace, September, 15, 2008:**

Good afternoon everyone, and I hope you all had an enjoyable weekend

(Paulson and reporters laugh)

**John Biewen:** Haha, haha? It was all very funny, wasn't it.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Yeah. That was a press conference with Henry Paulson, who was the treasury secretary at the time, one of the guys who had called the faltering financial institutions simply "Too big to fail." He was kinda sorta trying to reassure people that the floor wasn't going to fall out from under them. But within days of Monday September 15, the economy was pretty much in complete collapse.

Music

**John Biewen:** Lewis Raven Wallace, you're an independent journalist, audio producer and author. You made terrific episodes for Scene on Radio, in Seasons 3 and 4, so we asked you to make this one. You're a millennial, which no longer means you're super young! But you were very young in 2008, and as soon as we started talking about this project you shared these memories.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Yeah, because I was at such a key point of life in 2008. I was just starting to be an adult or what have you, and figuring out my career and where I was gonna live. In Chicago, there was a building boom going on all around us that just suddenly froze. These half-finished condo projects sat empty, as lending and financing came to a near complete halt. Tens of thousands of homes were foreclosed, massive

numbers of people evicted. And all over the country, the chasm between regular people and the rich got wider.

**Ellen McGirt:** The collapse was real and that's a good point. It led a lot of people to a similar conclusion, especially young people: Capitalism wasn't working. It hadn't been working.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** And it possibly wasn't ever going to work.

Music: Theme

**John Biewen:** From the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio Season 7: *Capitalism*. Episode 8. I'm John Biewen.

**Ellen McGirt:** And I'm John's co-host for the season, Ellen McGirt. We're telling the story of Capitalism and how people shaped it over time. In coming episodes, we'll explore how to remake the system now that a lot of people are asking whether capitalism does more harm than good.

**John Biewen:** In this episode: The pushback against capitalism in its current form, which has built gradually over the last few decades. Lewis Wallace, you're our reporter for this episode. The failings of capitalism as we know it have really become a central

narrative for lots of people in your generation, right? For millennials and those coming up behind you.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Yeah, this era of pushback brought us Occupy Wall Street, Bernie Sanders, the Democratic Socialists...

**John Biewen:** Some would say it also helped to bring us the Tea Party movement and Trumpism.

**Lewis Wallace Raven Wallace:** We'll get to all that in this episode.

**Ellen McGirt:** But the origins of this shifting sentiment go back way before 2008, right?

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** For sure, the financial collapse was an avalanche, but the buildup had been happening for a long time.

**John Biewen:** OK, Lewis. Take it away, and we'll talk a bit more later.

**Esteban Kelly:** First time I bought a Bad Religion CD and my parents were like, literally what is happening? (Laughing) I was just like, this isn't like a satanic thing, this is an anti-capitalist thing. Like, I don't know how to explain this to you.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** This is a friend, Esteban, someone I've known since we were both kinda anarchist-y young people. He's also a leader in the worker co-op movement.

**Esteban Kelly:** My name is Esteban Kelly, and I use he/him pronouns. I am with a worker cooperative called AORTA, and I'm also the executive director for the U.S. Federation of Worker Cooperatives.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** His politicization around capitalism started through punk rock.

**Esteban Kelly:** I mean, in the punk community, people would, bands would play and they would stop in between songs, and then you would get like a mini-lecture about all kinds of issues happening in the world, you know, the Redwoods or COINTELPRO or the Zapatistas.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** He was 13 when he learned about the Mexican revolutionaries, the Zapatistas, in 1994. They were also anti-capitalist, and against hierarchies. Punk at that time was very political.



**Lewis Raven Wallace, in interview:** I love the nerdiness of that, like that you're like at a show listening to music and people are like, "Nafta." It's the North American Free Trade Agreement.

**Esteban Kelly:** Absolutely. I mean, that's absolutely what was happening. I learned about the IMF and World Bank when I was in like eighth grade listening to Propagandhi and having them break down – and again, sometimes it was audio excerpts, and they weren't always quoting their heroes. Sometimes they were quoting their villains, or reading, you know, one of their records has a clip where they're reading a letter from the PR department from Shell Petroleum Company or BP or one of those.

**Music, PropaGandhi, "Nation States":** "Publicly subsidized! Privately profitable!" The anthem of the upper-tier, puppeteer untouchable...

**Esteban Kelly:** And I did have my own sense of, well, if someone's saying this dam is devastating these communities in Bangladesh or whatever part of the global south, I did have a sense of having never traveled there, what that meant.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** There was a throughline from the capitalists who were destroying communities on the other side of the world to the situation at home where capitalism has already basically taken over everything.

**Esteban Kelly:** Here I am growing up in the suburban wasteland of Long Island, being like, this whole place is ruined. I can't, I don't even have a sidewalk. I can't walk to a store to get orange juice if we're out of it. I literally was just trapped on my street until I was 17 years old and able to drive and liberate myself – and was supposed to feel good about that or something.

Music

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** I remember this feeling. Coming of age in the 1980s and 1990s was an immersion in Reaganomics and then Clintonomics. If you lived in an urban area, you saw unemployment and wage stagnation, divestment from neighborhoods and communities, mass criminalization and incarceration. If you lived in the suburbs, or in a college town, like I did, you saw the aggressive spread of development. In all of the places, you saw the globalization of trade. All this was supposed to be *great*. Hopeful. But it was confusing. As governments made these new so-called “free trade” agreements like Nafta, that Esteban learned about at a punk show, it had real world effects: American factories moved to Mexico and China, where they could pay people less; the middle class was shrinking; the whole economy was being reorganized, often at the expense of the most vulnerable people.

**Esteban Kelly:** But this was the beginning of it. It was like there's so much that could be sold off. There's so many, you know, companies that can be shut down, reopened overseas, offshored, automated. And what better way to break

the backs of worker power and labor solidarity than to simply move to a different jurisdiction where the workers are not organized, where you don't need to have this balanced contract with labor.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** So, Esteban was learning about all this, but he was also living it, in his own way. He says even the fact that his family is in the U.S. is because of racial capitalism – first the British colonizing the Caribbean and enslaving people and bringing them there, and ultimately the effects of globalization driving many of those same people further north.

**Esteban Kelly:** My own story in the ways that my family in the Caribbean has been the product of capitalism under the British Empire, and then that struggle for independence. And then the ravages of the IMF, what it has done through debt restructuring and policies on places like Jamaica...

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Here he's talking about the International Monetary Fund, the IMF, which started after World War II but really extended its global control over so-called developing countries in the '80s and '90s. Basically, the IMF operated like a pro-globalization, pro-capitalist bank. It would make loans to poor countries to cover their debts, but these loans came with requirements on how they ran the country, austerity and budget and even policy requirements that often took away social safety nets and union protections. All this wasn't an abstraction to him.

**Esteban Kelly:** So, no, it's not that we all have these different abstract stories and we're just entitled our feel–, like, this is how the systems work, the system works. Anyone with the courage to look at that in a clear-eyed way can see that it is rapacious, it is unsustainable. It is what racism is. Like, that is what racism is, is capitalism. That is what patriarchy in the last 500 years has looked like. And so it takes some courage to come out and say, yes, and with all of that, I am anti-capitalist. But it's because I have a clear understanding of how the system works, of what it is doing, of what it requires, and that it is not sustainable to do that.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** So, that's what Esteban came to, along with a small but growing number of disaffected millennials, long before the financial crisis of 2008. By the time he went to college at UC Berkeley it was the late '90s, basically the pinnacle of the neoliberal movement for globalization. The World Trade Organization, which is kind of a cousin of the IMF, was founded in 1995 to better facilitate these agreements between countries, agreements that would allow for the free movement of capital and allow companies to offshore more and more of their functions to the cheapest places. When people learned the WTO was planning a meeting in Seattle, right after Esteban started at college, a lot of folks planned to go and protest. He was 19 and this was his first big demonstration.

**Esteban Kelly:** I knew it was a thing that we were against. I had a sense about why. We didn't know how big it was going to be.

**Lewis Raven Wallace, in interview:** How big the protest was gonna be?

**Esteban Kelly:** How big the protest was gonna be, in terms of how global it was, that's something I learned when I arrived there.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** This protest in 1999 represented not just the punk and anarchist strain of anti-capitalism, but also a growing movement by labor organizers to push back against the local impacts of globalization. These agreements made trade more free for owners of companies, but often allowed them to more easily squash union efforts, exploit people's labor, and destroy the environment. And more and more people saw economic globalization as fundamentally flawed. Esteban and a bunch of college kids drove up to Seattle...

**Esteban Kelly:** And then when we got there and discovered that Labor had really thrown down and mobilized, and that there was this, you know, historic alliance between the environmental movement – I mean, the, all the headlines were like “Turtles and Teamsters together.”

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Turtles, the environmentalists, and Teamsters, the unions, plus student protesters, became a united front.

**Esteban Kelly:** You know, to have a hundred thousand people marching on the streets of Seattle was not nothing. I mean, that in and of itself would have shut things down. But guess what? As part of this coalition, you had people from a pretty radical environmental movement who understood direct action. You had anarchists who understood mutual aid and direct action. So, we're feeding each other. We are training each other in jail solidarity, you know, if anyone gets arrested for putting their bodies on the line...

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** The goal of the direct action, putting their bodies on the line, was to prevent the delegates, who were the global financial leadership, from entering the meeting – creating human blockades.

**Esteban Kelly:** I was part of a human chain, you know, linking arm in arm. And I did prevent delegates from entering. You know, part of how this meeting was shut down is, you know, people like Madeleine Albright, the Secretary of State at the time under Bill Clinton, weren't able to enter the convention center. And we did that.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** The capitalists were, um, surprised. So, the whole thing started making headlines pretty fast. Even faster when activists who weren't affiliated with any one group started breaking windows, and the cops came for the protesters with tear gas and the whole nine. These protests became widely known as the Battle in Seattle, and it was a major inflection point at the end of the hyper-capitalist '90s. Sure, global

capitalism was building a lot of power. But so were the people, pushing back. The turtles, Teamsters, and masked anarchists were setting the stage for a new anti-capitalist movement.

Those cross-sections of labor, environmentalism, and ideological activists who were socialist or anarchist were also popping up all over the world. Everywhere the World Trade Organization or the IMF went, there was a big, colorful protest. But the forward march of capital in the 21st century was too strong. The 2000s brought a whole new era, with 9/11, the George W. Bush administration, then the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, which helped to bolster the economy at home temporarily, as wars often do. And then in 2006 to 2008, the disintegration of the U.S. economy, and the crash, the Great Recession. I remember this period as momentous, and also exhausting. There was so much loss and suffering and fear. Esteban again.

**Esteban Kelly:** Even if you weren't someone who lost their house or their job and you were white and middle class, it was your brother, it was your sister-in-law, it was your cousin. Like, everyone was touched in some way by that moment.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** And that spread of suffering – particularly inside the U.S., where in many ways the suffering of globalized capitalism had been kind of cordoned off to the poorest people and the Rust Belt – that led to a whole new, somewhat surprising, uprising.

**Sound: Occupy Wall St. chant, New York City:** All day, all week, Occupy Wall street!

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** One day in 2011, a group of activists declared that they'd had enough, and took to Wall Street to take over one of its major public parks in an act of protest.

**Sound: Occupy Wall St. protesters chanting:** We are the 99 percent! We are the 99 percent!

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** The clarion call was, we are the 99 percent – the 99 percent of people who share a much smaller percentage of the wealth in the richest country in the world. The 1 percent, they were accused of being hoarders.

**Esteban Kelly:** And, by the way, there was a *pent-up* audience because it was three years after a huge financial crisis where there was very little accountability. There was not significant recovery, despite how much hanging handwringing had happened.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** The thing is, after the 2008 crash, incoming president Barack Obama, who took office just a few months later, led a significant bailout of banks and investment firms. There was some financial reform, championed by people like



Senators Elizabeth Warren and Bernie Sanders, but not a lot. And there was some aid to regular people in the U.S., but also not a lot. A lot of people who were middle class found themselves in surprisingly precarious situations because they'd lost jobs or lost all the wealth in their homes. The remaining wealth was concentrated among fewer and fewer people.

In 2009, the wealthiest 1 percent of households had 225 times more wealth than the median household in the U.S. – and wealth was growing for the 1-percenters and shrinking or stagnating for almost everyone else. The frustration about that exploded into the streets. Suddenly Occupy was everywhere. It was this major national movement demanding fundamental changes in financial systems.

Music

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** But that period of time, the Obama years, are still puzzling to me when it comes to capitalism. Obama was full of promises about addressing inequality, I remember that. But after he was elected, things got worse before they got better, and they were just kind of weird for a long time, that Occupy time. To get a grip on the Occupy era, I went to Josh Bivens, chief economist at the Economic Policy Institute.

**Josh Bivens:** Basically, the Obama administration inherited an economy in freefall.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** The short-term bailouts kinda slowed the free fall. But literally millions lost their homes and jobs.

**Josh Bivens:** Then from 2008 to 2016, we just had this really agonizingly slow recovery. Unemployment dropped a little bit every year. And it was just this incredibly extended period of time with a very impaired labor market. It was just really hard for people.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** He explains, it started with the bust up of the housing market in 2008 – but that was just a beginning.

**Josh Bivens:** And so as soon as you start to have that deflation of the housing price bubble, you just get this cascade of horrible effects. I mean, one is, people realize I'm nowhere near as wealthy as I thought I was, and so they stop spending money. And when you stop spending money, everyone at once, that's when a recession happens.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** And the Recession had real life consequences. I remember walking around Chicago in 2010 the year I graduated college, trying to find a job in food service, and getting turned away over and over.

**Josh Bivens:** There was high unemployment. Wages were down. Demand for everything was down because there just wasn't a lot of income flowing around.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** There was also growing political polarization surrounding all of it. On one hand you had the Occupiers, unhappy and calling for more aggressive regulation of capitalism, higher taxes on the rich, higher minimum wages, mostly on the left. Obama for them was not a great figure. He hadn't really stood up to Wall Street. But then on the other side, you had the new conservative movement called the Tea Party, whose line was all about reducing the presence of government. And they painted Obama in almost the opposite way.

**Josh Bivens:** There's the caricature of people like Tea Party members and stuff like that, that he had, was a mammoth activist, big government expansion sort of president. He was often called a socialist.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** He was often called a socialist, which is funny, because socialists really were not happy with Obama. Anyhow, Bivens says the reality of Obama was, shocker, somewhere in the middle.

**Josh Bivens:** What he managed to do was, you know, much more modest, I think, a mix of political constraints and his own – he was pretty moderate. He was not a transformative figure in the sense of really fundamentally changing how capitalism works.

Music

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** And that's the thing. People on the far right and the far left were demanding a change – with a little more racism mixed in on the right and a little more socialism mixed in on the left. But this disgruntledness about the economy wasn't truly an Obama-era issue. Josh says by the time of that 2000s recession, inequality had been growing not for years, but for decades.

**Josh Bivens:** The entire, like, post 1979 period in American economic life is really unsatisfactory on a ton of levels. That's where you see inequality just explode. You see incomes and wages at the very top of the scale rise enormously fast, and almost everyone else loses. And so I've always sort of thought that was eventually going to condition how people thought about the economy. And I think it's finally happened.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** So, the scene was set for mass dissatisfaction. And here we are. People born after the early '80s have never really known a time of hopeful, prosperous growth. And they are, cumulatively, pissed.

[BREAK]

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Occupy Wall Street, which seemed so momentous at the time, fizzled after a few years, thanks in part to police crackdowns and media backlash. Capitalism also didn't really change much as a result. And the younger generations, well, they're definitely still lit up about it all. Here we have college student Trevor Hill asking House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi, in a 2017 Town Hall, about Democrats' views on capitalism

**Town Hall audio, Trevor Hill:** What I've seen on NYU's campus, and what I've seen in polls, all over in CNN even – a Harvard university poll last May showed that people between the ages of 18 and 29, not just Democrats, not just leftists, 51 percent of people between 18 and 29 no longer support the system of capitalism. That's not me asking you to make a radical statement on capitalism. I'm just telling you that my experience is that the younger generation is moving left on economic issues, and I've been so excited to see how Democrats have moved left on social issues. As a gay man I've been very proud to see you fighting for our rights and for many Democratic leaders fighting for our rights. But I wonder if there's anywhere you feel that the Democrats could move farther left to a more populist message, the way the alt-right has sort of captured this populist strain on the right wing. If you think we could make a more stark contrast to right wing economics.

**Town Hall audio, Nancy Pelosi:** Well, I thank you for your question, but I have to say, we're capitalists [laughs]. That's just the way it is. However, we do think that capitalism...

**Malaika Jabali:** I was so pissed off. I actually wrote a long piece on that.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** This is Malaika Jabali, the author of a new book called *It's Not You, It's Capitalism: Why It's Time to Break Up and How to Move On*. She's a young millennial like Trevor Hill from the town hall, and she's a journalist. And after witnessing this moment, she wrote about how the Democrats were so interested in the economic anxiety of white people following the Trump election, but working-class people and poor people who are disproportionately Black and brown had been pretty much ignored by the actual policies of the Obama era and the Clinton era, if not the rhetoric. And Pelosi wasn't listening.

**Malaika Jabali:** And the fact that you have at the time the highest-ranking Democratic leader, who can't see the connections between race and class and who is staunchly capitalist, will make anybody feel like there's nowhere to turn politically.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** And that kinda is what happened. That moment with Trevor Hill in a way was the culmination of all the economic shifts that Josh Bivens described

starting the late '70s. *It's not You, It's Capitalism* traces some of this history, the history we millennials grew up into.

**Malaika Jabali:** The counterbalance to capitalism began to disintegrate in the '70s. And without that counterbalance, and with the rise of Reaganism, trickle-down economics, neoliberalism, we all had worse conditions, but we were told to suck it up more, that we're crybabies for complaining about student loan debt and crybabies because we can get college educations, we can get college degrees. And the reality is that the cost of living is just not keeping up with wages.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Malaika Jabali got into anticapitalism after college. She graduated during the Great Recession and even though she had this fancy degree, it was hard to get work. The years trickled by, Occupy came and went. And then finally in 2016 you had this moment of possibility, as the Obama administration came to an end, and like a lot of people of her generation, she was stoked on Bernie Sanders.

**Bernie Sanders Speech, Audience:** Bernie! Bernie!

**Bernie Sanders:** You know what people are saying? They're saying ENOUGH IS ENOUGH!

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Bernie tapped into that young, populist energy that Trevor Hill and Malaika Jabali were both trying to push the Democrats on. And in that he had a leg up on Hillary Clinton, who ultimately was nominated to run against Donald Trump. Jabali at the time was reporting in Milwaukee, in the Rust Belt, and so she also saw the weird phenomenon of folks who were into Bernie and then, when he lost the primary, went to Trump – which one study showed was a full twelve percent of Bernie primary voters. That’s kind of what Trevor Hill was getting at: folks were so fed up with Democrats that they preferred Trump’s performative populism. Pelosi and Clinton had come to represent this very pro-capitalist strain of Democrats, and some people just *would not* vote for Hillary.

**Malaika Jabali:** So, people associate her with Bill Clinton's neoliberalism. They associate the Clintons overall with being friendly to corporations and jobs leaving the Midwest. Milwaukee was a huge manufacturing center, and whether you want to believe that's the full story or not, it's at least a part of it. And people saw that the jobs were getting replaced with prison sentences, that there was more and more incarceration and less economic opportunity.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** And Bernie talked about all that stuff. He had voted against the Iraq war, he stood up for gay rights on the Senate floor, and he actually talked about how capitalism and racism worked together.



**Bernie Sanders, in speech:** We are sick and tired of systemic racism in America. We're tired of the wealth gap, with white families having ten times the wealth of Black families...

**Malaika Jabali:** I think what was propelling a good amount of it was disillusionment and frustration with just the status quo.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** And yet, and yet. Hilary Clinton squeezed out Bernie in 2016, and then Trump won – certainly not by a landslide. But he won on some of the same attitude Bernie took, that America was in a bad place, that people deserved better, that the establishment was not on your side. Though Trump's campaign was also about racial dog-whistling and the racism that he stoked and encouraged in his base. And of course, Trump is really nothing like Bernie Sanders. In many ways the image of this New York, owning-class, child of wealth TV star stands for everything wrong with capitalism, right? Millennials, and the upcoming next generation, Gen Z – those who are unhappy about capitalism as we know it – really came to feel like they had nowhere to turn.

**Evan Caldwell:** If society was better in providing for people, people would not in large part be drawn to these reactionary ideologies nearly as much.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** This is Evan Caldwell, our Gen Z-er in this episode. He's a co-chair of the Young Democratic Socialists of America. He was only eight when the Great Recession started.

**Evan Caldwell:** I know the recession was really hard for a lot of families, and many people we knew had it worse. But being an eight-year-old kid, that really was like the time I thought my parents had everything under control. And when my mom came home and had been laid off and she'd be out of work for a year, year and a half, I didn't really get it until I was staying up way past my bedtime listening to my parents talk pretty quietly in the room, and I could hear them crying. And especially hearing my dad cry was something that kind of shattered some illusions, you know? And the big thing that stuck with me, hearing this, was hearing my father say, you know, "It was so easy for our parents. It's been so hard for us. I can't imagine how hard it's going to be for him."

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** "Him," meaning Evan, his parents' only child.

**Evan Caldwell:** I feel like a lot of Gen Z just are accepting of the fact that things are broken, you know, and it's a lot less of like a keystone event. I was barely alive during 9/11, you know, a couple of months. And many people I work with and organize with weren't, you know, folks don't remember the Iraq war. But what we do remember is decades of the same bad things just being a constant,

you know. Like, our entire childhood was shaped by a kind of recession and two wars in the background getting worse.

Music

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Plus climate change, which has also been an imminent threat for their entire lives.

**Evan Caldwell:** It's the backdrop of everything, right? It's that existential dread of not only are things getting worse, I can see a ticking clock.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Like a lot of people in his generation, he was raised on social media and got his ideas about anti-capitalism pretty early – not necessarily from the people directly around him.

**Evan Caldwell:** So I grew up in a pretty right wing town. Brevard County, Florida is like defense contractor town on one side and then like kind of very quickly devolves into rural eastern Florida. So, very red, like 70% Republican district. And it's kind of both halves, the very wealthy red and the very poor red. And so I basically learned about Bernie and what like democratic socialism or like this idea of even just being a progressive was almost entirely through the Internet. Just kind of out of interest, I watched a few debates. I saw some political commentators on YouTube, listened to a few podcasts, and that got me

hooked. Because so many of the things I was worried about, here is someone like speaking directly to those things.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Eventually, he wanted to take it beyond the Internet, this whole idea of socialism, so he campaigned for Bernie in 2020. And now, just a few years later, he's a union organizer on the campus of University of Central Florida and he's running all these initiatives in YDSA, the Young Democratic Socialists of America.

**Evan Caldwell:** And so YDSA, we've never been stronger. And that's like a really proud thing to say. You know, we have well over 100 chapters at colleges, high schools, community college, trade schools, across the country, thousands of members. But more importantly, we're winning real victories and not just reforms or statements, but material change. Comrades at UO...

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** University of Oregon, that is...

**Evan Caldwell:** ...unionized 4000 workers all under like an independent union with YDSA members, as like some of the really lead organizers in that union drive. Folks at the University of California in Santa Barbara are just unionized. They're dining hall workers or at least just filed for unionization. Dartmouth Unionized and countless other schools are working on it.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** As he sees, there's a whole new union movement driven by his generation's anti-capitalist bent. They want to elect socialists to Congress, to socialize healthcare, to unionize and cooperative-ize workplaces. To hold capitalists accountable.

But all this still leaves me with a bit of a feeling of, what now? Global capitalism is still moving apace, the stock market keeps hitting new record highs, the wealth gap is growing, climate change is on the march. What has changed as a result of all the people's pushback? But let's go back to my old friend Esteban – who I don't generally think of as a big optimist. He says actually, a lot has changed.

**Evan Caldwell:** So, I started seeing an uptick in interest on things like workplace democracy and a curiosity for that. Suddenly people Googling about worker co-ops or emailing me and the people I work with about how do I start one, how do I find one? People who had no idea what they even were. And suddenly we were getting legislation passed at the municipal level and then at the state level and then at the federal level. And it's like, oh my God, finally, this is starting to pick up.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** There has been a major shift in tone, a shift in what feels possible, and in just how big anti-capitalist movements can be, at least in this country.

**Esteban Kelly:** And, you know, it really has only been in this last ten or twelve years that we're seeing the popularity of socialism outstrip the popularity of

capitalism; the popularity of unions and the support for unions, for the first time in my life, being not just a majority but now a super-majority of Americans supporting unions. We haven't seen this in my lifetime.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** He's right. As of 2024, union membership is up. Anti-capitalist sentiment is high. Surveys show that a majority of Gen Z have a more positive view of socialism than capitalism, whatever people understand those to be.

**Esteban Kelly:** Those things I think should leave people with a tremendous amount of hope. We don't know what this is going to lead to. And I do think it means that there can finally be a space to hope that communities, that workers can shape our economy democratically with their voice, with their participation and with their ownership, rather than relegating ourselves to the margins of these things and hoping that some benevolent business owner, manager, landlord, capitalist or politician is going to give them a helping hand out of the goodness of their heart. That is not happening. Those heroes are not coming to save us. But we have each other, we have numbers, and we have a growing consciousness that we can have a people's economy where we control the things that shape our everyday lives.

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** A people's economy: sounds cool. The 21st century is still young. And, like Evan Caldwell said, it's been defined by such a consistent series of crises that folks really do seem to have less investment in business as usual, in keeping

systems working that aren't working. What's a viable alternative? Here's hoping the Zoomers are gonna hammer that out before the world ends. Or at least before the collapse of Social Security. Actually, honestly, I am really hoping the socialist utopia will have old people's homes that allow dogs. Is there, like, someplace I can put in a request with the next generation?

## Music

**Ellen McGirt:** I love the note you ended on there, Lewis, with those explicit and implicit questions. Will it take Gen Z – people now in their twenties – and the young people coming after them, to bring about deep change? And what will that change look like? What *is* a viable alternative?

**John Biewen:** And is it a socialist utopia? In fact I'm curious, Lewis Wallace, what do you think younger people mean when they say, in those surveys, that they would choose socialism over capitalism. Of course as you know, for a lot of Americans, the model when they hear "socialism" is the Soviet Union, or now maybe Venezuela. I assume you're talking about a democratic model, for starters ...?

**Lewis Raven Wallace:** Well, I don't want to speak for anyone else. But one thing that came up in a couple of my interviews was how my parents' generation, Boomers, a lot of them think about socialism in terms of specific places, countries where socialism or

communism were tried in some form, like China, the Soviet Union, and Cuba. And so, it's easy for them to say, this was tried, and from their perspective it failed, and it was undemocratic and it was bad in all these ways. But for folks born after the '80s, they were really not witnessing those examples, and they also weren't exposed to U.S. anti-communist propaganda in quite the same way. For a lot of folks my age and younger, I think socialism is assumed to mean democratic socialism, about creating a system of democracy in which the economy is structured around equity rather than profit. And then some people like Esteban are even trying to do that within capitalism, to use the structures we already have to establish pockets and practices of democratic or even collective decision making. Or advocating to fully socialize certain aspects of society, like health care or access to water and electricity, so that those things would be guaranteed to everyone. But ultimately yes, it would mean a totally different system of government and different agreements about economics, what they are for, how they work.

Music

**John Biewen:** Thank you, Lewis Raven Wallace.

**Ellen McGirt:** John, one problem I'm wrestling with, with trying to imagine a world after capitalism as we know it is our stunted public dialogue on the subject. We just don't know how to talk about it. Most Americans have heard all our lives that, as Margaret Thatcher, the former British Prime Minister, liked to say, "there is no alternative" to



capitalism. Well I suppose that's true for olds like you and me (laughing), that we've heard that all our lives. The only allowable debate has been, up to now, how do we tweak capitalism?

**John Biewen:** Yeah, if you just pay attention to the national political and economic discourse and the mainstream media, you get very little substantive discussion about any other model. Just the occasional dismissive reference to socialism – another paradigm that was first imagined a couple hundred years ago, and an economic philosophy that has not been well served, to say it nicely, by the societies that have actually practiced it, or claimed to. But quietly, in more marginalized spaces in society, a lot of people are talking about, and adopting, other ways of organizing their economic lives.

Music

**Ellen McGirt:** We're inching closer to the part of this season where we really turn to responses and solutions, ideas for fixing capitalism or doing something fundamentally different. But we're still not there yet.

**John Biewen:** Not quite. Next time: The problem with limitless, eternal growth, an imperative that seems to be wired into capitalism's DNA. Half a century ago, a group of young scientists explained what would happen if we kept pursuing infinite growth on a finite planet. But, yeah. I guess we know how humanity responded to that warning.

## Credits:

This episode was reported by Lewis Wallace Raven Wallace. Story editor: Loretta Williams. Music by Michelle Osis, Alex Symcox, Goodnight Lucas, and Lili Haydn. You also heard a song by PropaGhandi. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Person-on-the-street interviews by Arlene Arevalo, Lilly Clark, and Gabriela Glueck. We post transcripts at our website, [sceneonradio.org](http://sceneonradio.org). This season is produced in partnership with Imperative 21. The show is distributed by PRX. Scene on Radio comes to you from the Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke University.