# Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness & Kim Kelly

**JVN** [00:00:00] Welcome to Getting Curious. I'm Jonathan Van Ness and every week I sit down for a gorgeous conversation with a brilliant expert to learn all about something that makes me curious. On today's episode, I'm joined by Kim Kelly, where I ask her: Do we care enough about labor organizing? Welcome to Getting Curious. This is Jonathan Van Ness. I'm so excited for this episode. Our guest is incredible. Her name is Kim Kelly. She is a journalist, author, and organizer based in Philadelphia. Her new book *Fight Like Hell: The Untold History of American Labor*, is an intersectional history of labor movements in the US that centers women, people of color, LGBTQIA+ people, disabled people, sex workers, prisoners and the poor. Hi, Kim, how are you?

**KIM KELLY** [00:00:50] Hi! I'm so excited to talk to you and to tell your listeners about the incredible history of this country that they might not know about but totally deserve to.

**JVN** [00:00:58] Okay, we really want to know about that, and also my guiding question is, not only what is the history of, like, US labor organizing, but more, like, do we care enough about labor organizing? And I think that's a really interesting question because it's, like, I feel like I don't understand it enough. I feel like I don't care about it enough. I feel like it's because I started off as an independent contractor, so I was always just, like, you know, "I'm a hairdresser. I'm like, what am I like, what are we going to do? Like, I don't get it, you know?" And your work, like, really flies in the face of that assumption. So first of all, to just, like, set the scene, in the book, you note that pro-union sentiment in September 2021 was at 68%, the highest it's been since 1965. I think that's really interesting because we saw all of these corporations, like, quintupling their income as people were losing all of their livelihoods and, and, like, having such a hard time encountering jobs. And I think that it was a real awakening for people that were, like, "What gives? What is going on?" So what makes this moment so significant for labor organizing?

**KIM KELLY** [00:02:14] We're living through such a historic moment in working class history in this country, labor history in this country, in good ways and in bad ways. Right? Like, public support is super high and union density is pretty low. And there are a lot of reasons for that. But I love that you mentioned you didn't necessarily think about how unions applied to you or thought that it was something that kind of mattered to your existence as a worker, as an independent contractor. I'm an independent contractor, too. It's a nightmare. There are a lot of different ways to be a worker in this country. Right? And there are a lot of ways in which workers who have been the most marginalized, have been the most vulnerable, have had to fight the hardest just to get anywhere, let alone get towards where they need to be. Those have always been the folks that have worked the hardest and really pushed us in the right direction. And we're in a moment where people are interested in unions. They're thinking about them a little bit more because, as you said, something's got to give. We're living through this pandemic. Essential workers who have always been essential for a brief couple months in 2020, they got paid a little bit more, got a little bit of appreciation. That all went

away. And they still went to work and people still kept dying and people still kept getting sick. And the tech oligarchs that rule us all kept getting richer.

There's this common phrase: “Thank the unions for the weekend, the eight-hour day, for ending child labor,” for these big jumps forward. And there's still a lot of work to be done on those fronts. But I think when people understand more about unions, then they're gonna be more interested, and they’re gonna wanna get involved, because unions really are one of the best tools that working-class people in this country have to fight for one another. Because, you know, one person on their own, it can be a little tough to get, to get what you deserve, to go stand up against your boss, to stand up against the government. But a whole bunch of people who are standing in solidarity with one another and fighting together, that can move mountains. That's what a revolution looks like.

**JVN** [00:03:59] So a few years ago, we got to record an episode with Professor Rebecca Givan, who we're obsessed with.

**KIM KELLY** [00:04:03] Love her!

**JVN** [00:04:05] It was all about, like, trade unions, but just like for us to refresh, maybe we have new listeners since then which like, you know, just reminding those folks, honey, we do have a backlog of all these fabulous episodes you can [SINGING] go back through and listen to if you want, but that's not the point. The point is, can you remind us what unions are.

**KIM KELLY** [00:04:23] So most basic sense? A labor union is an organization of workers dedicated to improving wages, hours and working conditions within their workplace via. Collective bargaining. In a lot of cases, they're trying to win a union contract, which is a legal document solidifying those gains and those demands in a, you know, in a contract that the bosses can't mess with. You get it down on paper. And other types of unions, like the Industrial Workers of the World, IWW, there are solidarity unions. So they concentrate on building worker power and basically getting to a point where the boss is too afraid to mess with you so you don't even need a contract. There's a bunch of different ways to do it right. But essentially a union is a group of workers fighting for one another and trying to make things better.

**JVN** [00:05:05] And then how do they work again?

**KIM KELLY** [00:05:08] There's a whole bunch that goes into making a union do what it’s able to do. Right. It's a collective. Not a single, single person running everything. And one of the parts of being a union member is that you pay dues, pay a little bit from your paycheck, and that goes to the union so they can keep organizing and providing these services and doing all the stuff you want them to do. The whole thing about dues is unions are able generally to help you negotiate raises, a higher salary. So if you have to give them a little bit of money, it doesn't hurt that much because they already helped you get a raise. Again, there's a lot of

different unions, a lot of ways to be a union. And there are a lot of established national unions that have offices and field reps and organizers and legal people. But basically, you have a group of people looking out for you and in return you just kind of gotta show up for your coworkers and give 'em a couple bucks out of your paycheck to keep the lights on.

**JVN** [00:05:59] So it seems like unions would benefit workers. Is there anyone else who unions benefit, like, I mean, like, their families?

**KIM KELLY** [00:06:08] Yes! I'm from a union family. I'm third generation, shout out to the steelworkers and operating engineers, my dad, my granddad. And one of the things that unions do that is very helpful and life-saving is that a lot of them provide health care. Like when I was in high school, my mother got very sick and her hospital bills were, like, over a quarter of a million dollars. Like, we could not have afforded that. My dad worked construction. She worked in a kitchen. But he had good union health insurance. So we made it through. My mom made it through. Without the union, I don't like to think about what would have happened. So unions have massive benefits for union members' families and for their communities, right. Because a good union job pays pretty well, in the best case. And, you know, you take those dollars and support local businesses, support local artisans. Like, it's all, it's all a big community good, right? Being a union lifts up everybody who is in that community. And that's why it's such a good thing that we have some, and I wish we had more, but we can get to that.

**JVN** [00:07:05] So with all, like, the good that unions can do, like, who might not support or recognize a union drive?

**KIM KELLY** [00:07:13] Well, a lot of big corporations and the people that run those are not fans of unions at all because they give workers power and they require those bosses, whether, whether it's a corporation or just a smaller business, like, you know, when there's someone who's in charge and then people that are working for them and making them all their money, collective bargaining requires them to sit down across the table and hammer out a deal, and listen to what the workers need and what they think, and kind of just deal with them person to person without that hierarchy, without that, that wall that gets thrown up. And some people in power don't like that. And unions make workers more powerful. And unions generally make companies and corporations, like, pay better benefits and pay higher wages and, like, put in, you know, real efforts for diversity and for supporting the workers. Like, they make the bosses pay up, and bosses don't like that.

**JVN** [00:08:04] So I feel like what I do know about unions and I feel like the, like, movie depictions of them, it's, like, a lot of, like, all white men that are, like, you know, a little older, but one amazing thing that you do in Fight Like Hell, your new book—which, available everyone, for purchase, so get that—but in Fight Like Hell you you work really hard to dispel that and you shine a light on, on the history of diversity within unions. Can you kind of briefly give us a little, like, peek at some of the labor leaders in your book?

**KIM KELLY** [00:08:39] Oh, there are so many! I was really excited to write about Bayard Rustin, who is a queer Black man who was basically the architect behind the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. He did all the logistics and organizing because he had that background. But because he was an out, queer man, even within his circles, some of the people he worked with were uncomfortable with that and they kind of pushed him to the side and they even debated whether or not to get him involved at all, even though he knew the most about what was happening. I think it was actually Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who stood up for him and was, like, "Look, he knows what he's doing. We need him." And he's the reason that it was such a big success and such a historically massive moment.

I think about Lucy Parsons, one of my favorites. She's, she's, what, more well known in, like, radical circles because she was definitely a radical. In late 1880s, in Chicago. She was this anarchist firebrand who also was a seamstress by trade and organized dress makers and helped found the IWW, the Industrial Workers of the World. So she crossed a couple of different, different streams there. And in terms of organizing the workers. And she was so, like, feared and revered that the Chicago police described her as "more dangerous than a thousand rioters," that is, like, how can you beat that? Maria Marino, an Indigenous and Latina farm worker in California, who was one of the first, I think she was the first, woman to be hired as an organizer for the precursor to the United Farm Workers.

Or even I talk about Marsha P. Johnson, who obviously an icon in the LGBTQIA space, as you know, a trans icon. But she also was involved in sex work and she supported other sex workers in her community and she provided mutual aid. And resources, like, that is work, that is labor. She was a labor leader, too. And being able to show those intersections and talk about these folks and pull them all together under this umbrella and show, like, "Okay, these folks are also part of other movements. They have other identities, other intersections happening there, but they're also part of the labor movement, and they're part of this history. And it's really important that we understand that." The labor movement has never been just the white guy in the hardhat or holding a baton. But, and he's there, and, you know, he's done a lot of good work except the ones with batons. But so many other people have been here since the very beginning. And the only reason we've gotten this far is because of their sacrifice and their struggle.

**JVN** [00:11:00] That first person that you mentioned, that nice Bayard, the queer Black man who was friends with Martin Luther King. So I'm guessing that he was, like, doing his work in, like, the fifties and sixties?

**KIM KELLY** [00:11:13] Oh, yeah, he had such an interesting history because there's another labor leader, A. Philip Randolph, who formed the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, incredibly important, early all-Black union. And when Bayard Rustin was younger he had gone to visit A. Philip Randolph and was, like, "Hey, I want to, I want to help out." And that was in, like, the forties. But at that time Bayard was also involved with the Communist Party. Like, he

was a young, like, firebrand. He was involved in really radical things. And A. Philip Randolph was, like, "I'm not really down with that. Maybe come back later when you've calmed down a little bit." He became more involved in the civil rights movement. He was involved in the Congress for Racial Equality. He was part of the Freedom Rides, like, he organized against, you know, segregationist policies in prison. And he defended Japanese-Americans who had been interned by the US government in the late forties, like, around World War II. Like, he was very involved in a lot of different struggles that he saw as interconnected because they were. He became very involved with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, they're the ones that organized the March on Washington. They came up with the idea. And Bayard, he had all that experience. He had all of that prior understanding of how these intersections worked, how to plan a big event, how to make sure the porta potties are there, you know, like, that nitty gritty organizing stuff that not, like, a lot of people are good at big picture, but you need the small picture to really get stuff done. And yeah, he had a really fascinating life. There's a lot of really great books about him, and I was really glad I got to include him because, like, he is just such a fascinating figure that everybody should know. We should have Bayard Rustin Day and we don't, but maybe somebody important will read this and make it happen.

**JVN** [00:12:54] And when was the March on Washington? When did that happen?

**KIM KELLY** [00:12:56] 1963, the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.

**JVN** [00:13:00] So in some of those examples, Lucy Parsons is I think the earliest one of the examples that you gave, like, late 1880s. What were some of the most pivotal moments, like, in history for, like, labor unions?

**KIM KELLY** [00:13:13] One of the big ones, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, that was in 1911. That was one of just the most awful tragedies in labor history. 146 people died because the owners of this factory, which manufactured shirtwaists, which was very common women's garments in that period, they, there was a fire. It caught fire. There's lots of dust and fabric scraps. It was not ventilated. It was not a safe working environment by any, any stretch of the imagination. And the factory owners locked the doors because they were afraid that workers would steal fabric scraps, because, God forbid, someone comes home with a little bit of cotton in their pocket. I'm in New York City right now, and I went and visited the site. It's right by Washington Square Park. There's a plaque. You can see it.

That's an interesting one to talk about, too, because it was one of the first ones that really got public attention in a really visceral way because we had photography. There were reporters on the scene, it was in the middle of New York, so people saw what was happening. And most of the victims were young women, predominantly immigrant women, Jewish Eastern European and Italian women, some as young as 14. So there are kids there, too. And that pulled at the public's heartstrings in the way that perhaps mining disasters or other factory mishaps hadn't. And one of the most important things that came out of that horrible tragedy was the fact that Frances Perkins, this young woman, who was about my age at the time, she was working for

the Consumer Protection Agency kind of thing, as a secretary. And that totally just shook her to her core. She decided, like, "Okay, I need to spend the rest of my life fighting for workers rights." And she did. She became the first, the first female cabinet member ever and definitely the first female labor secretary under FDR.

She was a big reason that we got the New Deal. She is behind Social Security. She, like, she was just incredible. She did so much important work. And it was because she was there and she heard those screams and she smelled that burning flesh and she said, "Okay, this cannot stand. Something needs to happen." And there were a lot of moments like that throughout history. But that one really, like, I'm feeling that because I just saw the plaque and just, like, it's so visceral, you know, like our history is so bloody and beautiful and brutal. And that's what I tried to get across in the book. Like, it's not just facts and figures, it's not just, you know, research. It's not just whatever acronym, whatever union did this, it's, like, it's the people that struggled and died and bled to get us here. And I'm kind of going off an emotional tangent at this point because, like, I feel this stuff so much. But yeah, the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire, I hope everybody well, anybody who hadn't heard about that, I hope that they can learn more about it in the book and learn more about it on their own, because that was really a catalyst for so much.

**JVN** [00:16:03] And so it sounds like in the 1700s, like, 1800s, it's about, like, workplace safety and wages, but it's, like, I mean, I feel like you don't hear about nowadays, like, 140 people, like, burning to death in a, you know, in a factory. Or is it that we've always been fighting for, like, safer working conditions, better wages, like, it's just in different forms?

**KIM KELLY** [00:16:26] That's the thing. We have made so many advances. Technology has improved. We have, like, we have safety regulations, we have OSHA, we have–, progress has been made. But there are still garment factory workers in Los Angeles, for example, who are predominantly Asian and Latina immigrants, who are working in these dusty, fabric filled, poorly ventilated, sometimes locked buildings. And it's almost, like, "Have we learned nothing?" And I don't think it's that people haven't learned anything. I think it's they're the people in power still just don't really care because, you know, to some people, workers' lives don't matter that much when there's profit to be had. I mean, that's why Jeff Bezos can go to space and Amazon workers are coming home with carpal tunnel or dying on the job. It's– everything old is new again, right? Like, we're living through a new Gilded Age. And even as much progress has been made, thanks to the efforts of the working class and to these incredible organizers and fighters and revolutionaries, we still have so much further to go.

**JVN** [00:17:30] It's, like, a two steps forward, five steps back, three steps forward, five steps back. Because it's, like, as the working class and unions, like, work to get more it's like that upper, like, Elon Musk-y, Jeff Bezos, like, upper 1% keeps working to like raise the ceiling too. So it's like that gap kind of stays quite gappy because it's not like that upper echelon is, like, stop progressing in their, like, never ending like, you know, quest for more. Like, when you

really get into that, like, billions and billions of billions, like, when you can have, like, two private 747s, like, Kardashians times two money. How do you like–

**KIM KELLY** [00:18:06] Yacht for your yacht.

**JVN** [00:18:08] Yeah, yeah, yeah. Like it's like it's like I don't even mean, like. Cause I feel like Kardashians are, like, rich as fuck, but then them compared to someone who has, like, that Musk money, like, you know, 44 billion.

**KIM KELLY** [00:18:20] That's not even real! That's just fake!

**JVN** [00:18:22] Like, 44 billion. Like, you can literally, like, there is no, like, you can buy fucking Twitter.

**KIM KELLY** [00:18:28] You could end world hunger!

**JVN** [00:18:29] That too, that too, which is even more important! But I'm just saying–but, shit, like, that's fucking crazy that someone has so much money, because think of all the people that work for Twitter, honey.

**KIM KELLY** [00:18:40] Who desperately need a union. I can take you all up if you know anybody, but, like, yeah, the people, they, the people create that value. The people create that profit for them. Elon Musk sits around and, like, tweets all day and does, like, nefarious shit. Who knows where he gets up to.

**JVN** [00:18:55] Yeah, does he even know how to, like, fucking, like, hardwire a computer.

**KIM KELLY** [00:18:59] I bet he can't change a tire. I bet he–

**JVN** [00:19:02] I can! I can change a tire.

**KIM KELLY** [00:19:03] I believe you.

**JVN** [00:19:05] But I can't do a computer. Like, I couldn't, like, I mean, I don't even know how to like, I mean, I couldn't. It's, like, I mean, I could maybe if I really had, but that's not the point! So, wait! So, but basically, like, so as someone who has, like, researched the history of labor unions and you're, like, a labor journalist, like, and so you've done a lot of research on this, like is there any, like, main definitive, like, three eras of labor organizing that we need to know about just as people who, like, haven't been researching it, or like if you're trying to explain this to your parent later, you're, like, "Oh, there was, like, the Industrial Revolution union age. And then there was the, like, mid-1900s phase, of course. And now there's the new Gilded Age, of course, darling." Or is it not really like that? It's kind of just, like, the literal same struggle in different variances for, like, 300 years.

**KIM KELLY** [00:19:51] There have definitely been ebbs and flows, like, when union power has been higher, when there's been more wild shit going on. Like, early 1900s. We saw these gigantic general strikes and this massive organizing and a lot of violence. And that's when the uprising of the 20,000 happened in New York City, which was a bunch of immigrant garment workers, young women who shut down New York.

**JVN** [00:20:11] In a violent way? Did they all go beat the hell out of everybody?

**KIM KELLY** [00:20:15] They didn't. The cops the hell out of them. Speaking of history repeating itself.

**JVN** [00:20:19] God damn.

**KIM KELLY** [00:20:21] Yeah, they love that, they've been out here the whole time. The cops love breaking strikes and breaking workers. But yeah, that's a constant.

**JVN** [00:20:30] Which is interesting because they love their own union.

**KIM KELLY** [00:20:33] Right. Yeah. Hard quotes around "their" unions. Really throughout the book, so many, like, important struggles and important strikes and important organizers have been stymied or cut down or straight up murdered by the police. Like, there's people in this book, like, there is one person that I hope more people learn about because he was really wonderful, he gave everything. A young man who's a Yemeni immigrant named Nagi Mohsin Daifullah, 24 years old, he got involved with the United Farm Workers during the Salad Bowl strike in the seventies, right after the massive Delano grape boycott and strike that happened on there in the sixties. And he was, he was so excited to help. He was an organizer. He worked as a translator because there were a lot of Yemeni farm workers in the area, as well as Latino farm workers. And, you know, had to keep everybody posted.

One day during that strike, he and a group of striking workers were hanging out, I think, in front of a convenience store or something like that. And the cops came by, started hassling them. And Nagi stood up for them. He said, you know, "Leave him alone, not doing anything," what you would do for your friends. And the cops responded by cracking his skull and dragging him across the concrete and leaving him to bleed out. And he was 24 years old, and he was sticking up for his friends. And just, stories like that, they make me–, they make me so mad. They make me see red. And I want more people to know about things like that, too, because really, the government, the state, the long arm of the law, has generally not been on our side. They've been on the side of capital and property. And, you know, in terms of class war, they're definitely not on our side. And it's, it's important for us to know the uglier parts of this, too, and the more violent parts, too, because there is a lot at stake. And some people have already given everything to get us where we're at now.

**JVN** [00:22:18] Which is interesting, and it leads me to my next question because we've talked about, like, civil asset forfeiture on here, quite a few times. I'm really passionate about that, for instance, it's affected, like, friends of mine. And I just think it's, like, such an interesting, like, "un-American" thing that happens all day, every day in all 50 states. And, like, it's just, like, if you get pulled over and a cop says they smell weed or thinks that you're on something, they can just, like, take everything from you and just say that it came from drugs. And it's, like, if you get pulled over at, like, the wrong time of day and you're just, like, moving or whatever, like, that cop just doesn't like you. Like, they just have so much broad discretion to, like, fuck up your life. And then Republicans historically are so pro-police. But it's interesting to me that Republicans seem really anti-union, but then a lot of the conservative conservative ones say they're pro-union, but I feel like their voting record doesn't support that. What's the history of that dynamic? Reagan was the only president who was in union, wasn't he?

**KIM KELLY** [00:23:16] Right, Reagan! This–, may he continue to burn in hell. Reagan is the only president who has been a union member. He was the president of his union at one time, SAG-AFTRA, which represents actors and screen folk, mostly in Hollywood. And Reagan is a huge reason why organized labor has been in a downswing since before I was born. That going back to 1981, when there was an air traffic controllers strike, PATCO strike, and he basically busted the hell out of it. He fired everyone, he blackballed them, he ruined these people's lives. And that has such a massive impact on the movement and on what companies thought they were able to get away with. Because up until that point, you know, unions were such an established part of just the fabric of American life and the workplace that, you know, the corporations, the bosses didn't really *like* them, but the relationship, like, modern relationship. We're not talking about the Battle of Blair Mountain. It wasn't necessarily as, like, viciously adversarial as it has become. But when Reagan did that, he kind of "cleared the runway," if you will, for companies to crack down even harder and hire replacement workers. That wasn't really as much of a thing in the modern sense at that point, like usually when the striking workers came back to work, their jobs were there. So they were risking a lot, but they weren't risking everything.

But after that, companies started bringing in tons of scabs and really just adopted a very anti-union posture. And the GOP, the Republicans, they've held that close to their little bosoms and they've tried every trick they can come up with to break unions and weaken the labor movement and move more power and capital to the capitalist class, to the bosses, to the corporations, to the people that they get along with, that support them, that do what they want. I mean, one of the reasons it's so hard to join a union in this country, there's these, ugh, they're called "Right To Work" laws, which is already a misnomer. It's more, like, "Right To Get Screwed. But these Right To Work laws, they make it much–, they weaken unions. They make it harder for unions to grow power. They, they've been passed all over the country. There's like especially in the Midwest and the Deep South, and the Republicans are all over that. That's their favorite thing. Killing off labor, killing off unions. But then at the same time, they talk out of the other side of their mouth by saying, "Oh, we're here for the workers, we're here for the working class. We're blue collar."

**JVN** [00:25:40] What are the Right To Work laws?

**KIM KELLY** [00:25:43] So Right To Work laws basically make it so that in a unionized shop, workers can opt out of paying dues and that makes it harder for unions to, you know, to build power and to represent people fully. Because the unions will still represent those workers, but they're kind of just getting a free ride, and in places where union density is kind of lower, if you can enjoy the benefits of a union without paying anything in, that's not really fair and it makes it harder for you to keep afloat and to stay strong. And if unions aren't strong, they aren't able to effectively bargain with the employers and get good contracts for the workers. It's, it's kind of turned into a political thing too, like, Republicans and people who are kind of on that side of the fence hating unions and loving the protections, but not wanting to support them. Because there's this idea that unions are all these, like, magical progressive bastions and that it's a "fully lefty thing." It's, like, all Democrats. And that's not really the case. Unions are not a monolith. The labor movement's not a monolith. There's a lot of conservative union folks and conservative unions, if you're kind of looking around the building, trades or, like, the border guards or even the police like that. It doesn't get much more conservative than that. So it's, there's a lot going on there. But one thing that always grinds my gears is when Republicans try to say that they're for workers and the working class and for blue collar people while doing everything in their power to screw us over.

**JVN** [00:27:06] How have Democrats fallen short of protecting workers?

**KIM KELLY** [00:27:10] Mmm. There, I mean, the fact that the federal minimum wage is still $7.25, that is just, that is just a crime. The fact that when, even when Democrats are in power, they seem well, a lot of them seem very incapable of pushing legislation that actually helps workers. One of the biggest disappointments in a legislative sense that we've seen in, probably in my lifetime is the PRO Act. That was something that labor was really excited about, it would have made it easier to unionize. It would have done a lot of good for workers in this country and cleared out a lot of red tape and really, really helped out. And it seemed like for a second we might have gotten there. And then a couple Democratic senators were, like, "No, we're not going to vote for this."

**JVN** [00:27:57] When was that?

**KIM KELLY** [00:27:59] I think that was last year, right, the PRO Act, because it was part of the Build Back Better Act. So I think it's still kind of in limbo. It's still, like, the Joe Manchin, Kyrsten Sinema, like, gruesome twosome situation, keeping working people from getting anything good in this country. And I mean, I'm not a big fan of either political party. I'm not, like, an electoral guy. I don't think we're ever going to get anywhere depending on those kinds of people. I think any power and any progress that we get is going to come from the grassroots, it's going to come from the rank and file, from the people, because that's how it's always been. You know, the government has been useful in some cases by passing labor laws and regulations and, you know, creating the National Labor Relations Board or OSHA. But it's

also screwed us over a whole lot, like, a whole lot. There's a lot of historical precedents, whether it's, you know, important labor laws leaving out groups of workers or the government sending in troops to bust up strikes, right? There's, there's a lot of ugly history there, too, and you can't trust them.

**JVN** [00:28:59] Yeah, as an HIV positive queer person, I have, like, a lot of reason to, like, distrust the government. And at the same time, even in 2020, we had, like, 50 something percent turnout. It was, like, 175 million turned out, out of, like, 330. And if more people understood the power of unions, for instance, or, like, the PRO Act, we would have, I think that workers would send a stronger mandate to Washington, DC, than a tied senate with one tie-breaking vote, like, really we need 60 senators and, like, how do we get there? We just need to figure out how to coalesce because it really is workers, it's working class, it's queer people. We do need to figure out, like, a way for us to work better and, like, find our hope. And I know that we can because it's, like, our past doesn't have to dictate our future, but we have to, like, find a way for us to, like, come together. It's just, it's just so stressful. I'm like, she's worried about midterms, it's coming out.

**KIM KELLY** [00:29:56] It is stressful! That's why I wrote this book to show people, like, "Look at all the cool shit we've done and all the incredible victories we've notched in all these difficult fights that we've fought, like, we are so powerful and we're made to feel like we aren't." And that is, that's just the biggest trick of all, right. That's the greatest trick the devil ever pulled, trying to convince the working people that we don't have any power and that we just have to pull ourselves up by our bootstraps and get ours. Like, it's–, whenever people follow that kind of thinking. Like, that's how you fail. That's how we get ourselves into these terrible situations. When people come together and embrace solidarity, that's how, that's how we win. I wish we had more labor education in schools. Like, when I was growing up. I grew up in the middle of nowhere, so I didn't really, I didn't learn that much in general, I was a nerdy kid who went to the library. And that's kind of how I ended up here. But I feel like if kids in schools learned about people, like, like, Dolores Huerta or Mother Jones or Bayard Rustin, Marsha P. Johnson, Maria Marino, like, all of the incredible people that I write about and so many more out there that, you know, brilliant scholars and archivists and historians have unearthed and preserved. Like, if we knew who we were and who we are, I feel like we would have so much of an easier time grabbing hold of that power and really just understanding, like, "Oh, wow, like, the working class has so much potential and power and there's so many more of us than there are them. Like, maybe we actually can get some shit done."

**JVN** [00:31:27] So let's talk about how we've done that in the past. Can you tell us about how often workers advocating for themselves got protections passed and then the government came in and, like, made that status quo afterwards. So, like, the Black washerwoman in Atlanta leading their strike pre-voting rights, for instance.

**KIM KELLY** [00:31:46] If people are interested, an academic named Dr. Tera Hunter wrote a really great book about it called *To Enjoy My Freedom*. And she really goes into that history in

detail. But in the book I mention about how in 1881, which is less than a lifetime after emancipation, washerwomen in Atlanta, Georgia, who are doing this incredibly difficult, dirty, brutal work. Like, at that point, we didn't have washing machines. We didn't have, you know, the spin cycle. We had just this pummeling, day-long slog through other people's dirty clothes. And Black women had very few options at the time for, you know, to enter the workforce because of racism, misogynoir, pick a, pick an oppression, you know, and that's what these workers were dealing with. And they kind of had the market cornered on this particular business and they realized, like, "Okay, well, we're not making enough money or our labor isn't being appreciated. These white folks are exploiting us. We're, we need to standardize prices. We need to make a little bit more money because the city cannot run without us."

And it just so happened that there's this big event coming up, like, the Cotton Exposition. A bunch of northern businessmen and fancy people were going to come hang out in Atlanta and talk about the "future of the South." And one of the, one of the lines that the Southern businessmen were trying to trot out as a to, you know, bring in some more money and some interest was that, you know, the workers that they were dealing with, the Black folks, were, were "docile," were "easy to work with." And the washerwomen were, like, "Okay, you think so?" And basically they threatened a strike before this big event. And there are a lot of hotels and a lot of boarding houses, a lot of people, and a lot of sheets. And they could have totally just blown up the whole thing. And honestly, history is a little bit murky on what specifically happened, but them showing that power and them organizing and very publicly saying, like, "We're worth so much more than this. And I think you underestimate how powerful we are," that sort of really important precedent. And that was back in the 1880s. That was, that was a while ago.

**JVN** [00:33:48] Before voting rights.

**KIM KELLY** [00:33:50] Way before voting rights. I mean, one of, one of my other favorite people in the book, Dorothy Lee Bolden. She was organizing in the 1960s, also in Atlanta. She was a domestic worker. And I think she lived a few doors down from Dr. Martin Luther King, and he helped encourage her to get involved in organizing because she was, like, again, like, "Most of the domestic workers in this city are Black women. I've grown up in that community. This work is really hard, we're underpaid, we're treated poorly, like, our labor isn't really being treated, being treated as a profession, and we need to change that." So she organized the National Domestic Workers Union, and at its peak, they had about 10,000 members, which is a huge deal. She was an incredible organizer. And one of the, the stipulations for joining, you had to pay a dollar to, to join and you had to register to vote. You had to show, you had to show up with your voter registration, then you could join. And she later became, like, very involved in the fight for voting rights. She became, you know, a civil rights icon. She was part of that whole milieu. But I just think it was so, just, incredible that she just pulled together those two thoughts, like, "We need to be treated properly and we need to be able to vote.

We need to exercise our voice within the workplace and on a, you know, on a wider scale, too." Yeah, so shout-out to Dorothy Lee Bolden.

**JVN** [00:35:03] Love Dorothy Lee Bolden. And then because we love queer history so much, we're, like, huge fans of it on Getting Curious, obvs. There was a lot of cool intersections between how LGBTQIA+ labor advocacy intersected in this history. So can you tell us about, like, the Marine Cooks and Stewards Union and their drag shows and musicals, please?

**KIM KELLY** [00:35:22] Oh my God, they were so sick. They had this whole tagline. It was, like, "no red baiting, no race baiting, no queen baiting," because this was a union, the Marine Cooks and Stewards. It was folks who worked on cruise ships, like, taking care of guests and working the kitchen, you know, making, making things run. And at first it was a very white union and it didn't let Black or Asian workers join because racism, discrimination, all of those "fun" things that kind of ran the labor movement for a really long time. It wasn't till the thirties that they integrated. And it kind of–, something that happened that was really interesting was that the leaders realized, "Okay, like, this isn't this isn't going to work. Like, we're the assholes here." And they shook up their leadership, and it became, like, a predominantly Black and then Black and Asian Union, very radical, a lot of communists, a lot of lefty thought going on in there. And it was a very militant union and it was also just a really joyously queer union.

A lot of the men involved were gay, and one of the, one of the things they would do was to raise money for union benefits by putting on drag shows and musicals and bringing that creative part of themselves out in a way that benefitted their broader labor worker community. There was, there was this one person, Manuel Cabral, who worked as a janitor. And he went by the name, the Honolulu Queen, and he decorated the union hall with flowers and hung up curtains. You know, he, he was just one of those vibrant characters, like a militant union man. And also the Honolulu Queen, who both sides of himself and both sides of so many people were able to be present and accepted and valued in this union. And it's really there's a story that there's not a ton known about. There's this one person, Allan Berube. He was a pioneering social historian. He really did a lot of documenting of this union because they didn't really last that long. You know, the fact that so many, so many members were radicals or communists, like, that got a little tough later on and they didn't have a ton of support in the rest of the labor movement.

**JVN** [00:37:29] Can you tell us about the Coors thing, when all the gay bars stopped serving Coors!

**KIM KELLY** [00:37:33] That is a really interesting example of what can happen when a union is smart and reaches across different lines and, like, really interacts with different communities. So in the broadest strokes, there was, there was a dispute between the Teamsters and the local Teamsters, local eight, 888, and Coors, because, like, their contract negotiations had broken down. That's something that happens when you're trying to negotiate a contract. Sometimes the bosses don't want to play ball. Sometimes you gotta play a little hardball. And

so there's strikes breaking out and there's also this boycott. And the important thing about the boycott was that obviously it was the Teamsters and, like, the people in the labor movement that supported them were on board. But they also wanted to reach out to other communities because the Teamsters' members were pretty white at that point and their reputation wasn't great. They, I mean, the Teamsters have a very colorful history, as I'm sure most people know. But at that point, they were trying to reach out to, like, the Black and Chicano and Arab community and try to get some more support from them for the boycott, especially because a lot of the folks who owned the liquor stores and distributors were, you know, were not white people and were coming from those communities. So they wanted to get them to get involved.

And they realized, "Okay, we need to hire new organizers and really show these communities they can trust us and that we're not just trying to, you know, capitalize on this. We're not going to use them, like, we want them to help us make things better for everyone." Something about Coors is they had these really discriminatory hiring policies, like, super racist and they also had this whole this whole section in their kind of, like, questionnaire screening potential employees, where they wanted to screen out, quote unquote, "subversive elements," which in that point meant queer folks. So they're actively making sure that they wouldn't hire queer workers. And that's how the gay community got involved, because, first of all, fuck that. Like, that is a labor issue and a queer rights issue.

And it kind of became this bigger campaign for a couple of decades, like, once the gay community got on board. So Alan Baird, one of the organizers that was involved with the whole boycott, he was close with Harvey Milk, obviously iconic mayor of–, gay politician, at that point. I'm not sure he was mayor yet, but he got on board and the local gay bars, they got on board. And it was just this really beautiful moment of solidarity between all of these different types of workers in different communities. And I think, I mean, that boycott lasted for a really long time. I still, I don't know how many gay bars, at least in San Francisco, would sell Coors at this point just because of that history. And I mean, it's not great beer anyway, but yeah, that's a really interesting, like, kind of confluence between these different communities that might have felt like they were at odds or didn't have much in common, but realized, "Oh, okay, like, we're uniting against this common enemy, this racist, like, anti-gay, just discriminatory company that's making all this money. Okay, well, we're going to do something about that. We're going to try and hit that bottom line. We're going to do it together."

**JVN** [00:40:38] So in the book, you quote this agricultural organizer in California who said, "Better to go to hell with your family than to heaven by yourself." How have marginalized workers in history said "screw it" and organized anyways? And also, how have labor leaders fallen short of recognizing their power?

**KIM KELLY** [00:40:56] Hmm. Well, there's, there's so many examples I'm thinking of. In terms of labor leaders falling short. There is a really kind of ugly history there, too, because as much as we want the labor movement to be this progressive force and there are a lot of really great

progressive and radical people within it, earlier on, especially in the earlier days, that was not so much the case. I mean, I think about in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was this horribly racist, xenophobic law that was passed that essentially prevented Chinese workers from immigrating here. The American Federation of Labor, which was an earlier, like, labor group, they were all on board. They were big supporters, because they thought, "Oh, well, these workers are going to come here and take jobs from *our* members." And that sounds kind of familiar, right? Like, we've seen this rhetoric pop up over and over. Whether it was at that point Chinese workers or early on, it was Black workers.

**JVN** [00:41:51] Right. It still is now. Yeah, yeah.

**KIM KELLY** [00:41:53] Yeah, it's you know. Yeah, it's like the same rhetoric. And that is something that has popped up in the labor movement because there's this idea of, like, "new people coming and taking our members' jobs," instead of realizing, "Oh, like new people coming in that we can organize, they can become our members, like, duh." Like that is still kind of a mental leap for even some leaders today. It's ridiculous. But in terms of workers who kind of organized outside of, outside of and in, in spite of all this. 1866. The washerwomen of Jackson, one year post emancipation. They formed Mississippi's first labor organization by being, like, "Okay, like, we need higher wages. We need respect." They, they started that ball rolling and there weren't any labor unions there for them. It's like with the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, A. Philip Randolph's joint, like, that was at a time when Black workers were not welcome in the majority, if not all, white-led unions. It was kind of an anomaly for a big chunk of the early labor movement *for* unions to be integrated, for them to be interracial.

I mean, there are some outliers, like, in the 1910s, this incredible Black organizer named Ben Fletcher helped organize a union of dockworkers on the docks in Philly, where I live. That was made up of Black and Irish workers that were, like, they ran the show for almost a decade and they were really radical. And that was a great precedent too. But that was a little bit of an anomaly. And in terms of more modern organizing, I think about sex worker organizing because this is, again, workers in the labor movement who have not necessarily been welcomed into the more traditional or organized structures. And as a lot of sex workers are independent contractors, they're carved out of labor laws. And there's all of these different factors that are kind of making it more difficult for sex workers to organize already, let alone to survive and pay their bills and just get through the day.

But the fact that sex workers have been so ingenious and creative and militant in their organizing anyway, whether they're doing it with the traditional labor movement like we saw in the Lusty Lady in the 90s who organized, or even though folks with Strippers United right now on strike in North Hollywood—shout out to them, they've been out there for a couple of weeks, outside the Star Garden, show up and give them some love—like, this community of workers have had everything thrown at them in every part of the state against them, and they've still an organizing for, like, centuries. And they're going to keep doing it whether or not they're accepted or supported by the mainstream labor movement. But it is a huge flaw

and a huge mistake that the modern labor movement isn't all in 100% on supporting and advocating and organizing sex workers. Because if we're not organizing and supporting the most marginalized, the most vulnerable, then what are we even doing? Why are we even here, you know?

**JVN** [00:44:40] I was actually going to ask you about the sex work chapter, because it's fascinating. And part of that is, as you cite, is a "massive US worker misclassification problem." And that comes down to the whole, like, employees versus independent contractor thing. So can you explain to us, like, how that creates a gap from the Fair Labor Standards Act?

**KIM KELLY** [00:45:01] Yeah, so there are a couple of different types of workers excluded from that law, which is kind of, like, the big law in the states that, you know, enshrines workers' rights to collectively bargain. So independent contractors are cut out because I guess we technically count as small businesses, which is–, as someone who is a freelance journalist, business is not a way I would describe myself, especially when it comes to paying taxes. And also, domestic workers and agricultural workers were originally cut out and remain cut out of that law because at that time, those professors were predominantly Black women and Black men and the southern lawmakers who kind of needed to be persuaded to pass that law, they insisted on a carve out, cutting those workers out because, God forbid, they have the right to organize. But in terms of independent contractors and employee misclassification, we're at a moment where this whole idea of gig work has taken over so many different industries, and there are so many people who are doing jobs that clearly are employees of those companies, like, an Uber driver works for Uber, like, a delivery driver works for that app, that company.

Freelance writers that write consistently for certain outlets or work on contract in the media industry or video games or any of these different tech roles, like, you're clearly working for that company but because you're classified as an independent contractor, you don't have the right to organize. There's so many different rights that you're denied. And employers don't have to treat you as well. And you get hit harder with taxes and you're kind of left on your own, even though you're clearly doing this labor that should qualify. You should be getting that W-2. But because of this law, because of the way that employers have been able to exploit it, it's made it so much harder for folks because work itself has continued to evolve. There's a lot of different ways to have a job, a lot of different ways to be involved with the company, a lot of different ways to, you know, to make your daily bread. And our labor laws are kind of antiquated and they haven't caught up yet. And this is why, like, we've seen all of these massive fights, especially in California, with companies like Uber and Lyft and a couple of those other, like, big scary tech ones, like, pouring millions of dollars into legislation that makes it easier for them to keep the drivers and the people that work for them from organizing, from accessing those benefits, trying to keep them as independent contractors instead of employees. Because if someone is your employee, you, you owe them certain things. And if it's just some, some person you hired, you can get away with murder.

**JVN** [00:47:29] Mmm. So, ah! And then also, like, how are incarcerated people excluded from the Fair Labor Standards Act?

**KIM KELLY** [00:47:38] So they didn't even get a chance. So my research in the chapter on incarcerated workers was so eye-opening to me, because even as someone who, you know, is very interested in that whole world and has friends who are incarcerated, is very, you know, very involved with abolitionist work and abolitionist theory. Like, I hadn't quite realized how much overlap there had been between incarcerated workers and the traditional labor movement, because at one time, especially in the 1970s, there were a bunch of unions within prisons popping up and some of them were affiliated with, like, existing unions, like, those relationships were being built. And it was a really interesting time, especially given the context of the Black Power Movement and the Brown Power movement, and the prisoners' rights movement. They were all kind of swirling around the same time. The North Carolina Prisoners Labor Union, was a big one. Really, they got the shaft in a really brutal way that impacted generations of other workers because the, the people that ran the prison did not think that the workers should be organizing. They didn't think they had the right. And they took, they took it to the courts. And a lot of different things happened. But essentially, in 1977, the Supreme Court ruled on the Jones v. North Carolina Prisoners' Labor Union. And essentially they said that incarcerated workers do not have the right to join or organize a union. They just, they just don't. Even though they're people in this country who are working jobs in and making money for other people and sometimes being paid a little bit, like, cents an hour or in a lot of other, a lot of states, like, nothing. They are not allowed. They don't count.

**JVN** [00:49:13] It's, like, it's crazy. It's, like, it's like. And because our justice system is, like, that, it is, it's, like, how many innocent people are incarcerated or incarcerated for some, like, bullshit weed or, like, crime of survival. Like, just, you know, it's just, it's, that is, that is, like, that is a really that's a really intense one. And it's, like, a way that, like, to dehumanize people so intensely.

**KIM KELLY** [00:49:35] It is. And prison labor is such big business, like, these workers generate so much profit.

**JVN** [00:49:39] They make so much money.

**KIM KELLY** [00:49:41] So much money, and they're paid like cents in the dollar. Or you think about the incarcerated firefighters in California who are risking their lives and then are barred from being firefighters afterwards. Like, I think there's some legislation that might be either in the works or very recently has tried to rectify some of that but, like, just, just….

**JVN** [00:50:00] But that's another way that we need to be smarter is, like, people or, like, for people to organize against, like, fucked up things because, like, why don't we boycott the fuckers who make the beds or, like, the metal or something? No New Metal 2022 or something! You know, like, who do we have to boycott to get those families? Who are those

fucking families that are having all of those incarcerated people do all that work and then they get rich as fuck? Like where are, like, the modern day Gilded Age fucks, because I mean, even as much as they love their outfits in the show, like, their outfits really aren't even that cute anymore, you know what I'm saying? Cause they're all, like, modern. Who are those fucks? Like, note to self, team Getting Curious we need to do an investigative report on who are these fucks investing in prisons.

**KIM KELLY** [00:50:42] Well, the government's a big one.

**JVN** [00:50:43] Cause they're the ones who are investing in, like, the hopeful downfall of people because, like, you have to hope that people are going to, like, do something fucked up to imprison them, you know what I'm saying?

**KIM KELLY** [00:50:53] Yeah. And it's such a direct continuation, like, one of the gnarliest things is that so many people are incarcerated now and they're working and they're generating profit. This goes, there's such a precedent for that. Like, in the book, I go into a little bit into this practice called convict leasing that–

**JVN** [00:51:06] And like slavery.

**KIM KELLY** [00:51:07] Yeah. Yeah. It's literally all this, like, 13th amendment. What's up? Like, it's, everything old is new again, like I said, like, it's–, prison slavery never ended. Right? And a lot of people make a lot of money off of it.

**JVN** [00:51:19] Yeah, because especially, like, the thing for me, it's like it's it's, like, it's, like, the crime of survival and or like that falsely and like the innocent that are incarcerated, which ends up being like a lot of people, like, a lot of people end up in there like and it's like–ah! This is me focusing.

**KIM KELLY** [00:51:35] Yeah, one of my best friends was in Rikers as I was writing the book, and he helped organize a strike because him and the men in his dorm were not getting any PPE or, like, soap or any basic necessities, in the very beginning, the worst of the pandemic. This stuff is so personal to so many people. He shouldn't have been there. Nobody should be there, honestly. But that's a, that's a bigger conversation.

**JVN** [00:51:55] Right.

**KIM KELLY** [00:51:56] But it just comes down to the whole thing of people being treated like robots or machines.

**JVN** [00:52:01] So we saw that fierce guy that worked for Amazon, successfully, like, unionize.

**KIM KELLY** [00:52:08] Chris Smalls.

**JVN** [00:52:09] Yes, Chris Smalls, we love him. So, like, what's, like, the current state of labor organizing in the U.S.? Like, I think that was a big win. Like, are people, like, more excited and fired up now?

**KIM KELLY** [00:52:17] They really are. It is so incredible to see this excitement and this optimism and the enthusiasm. I think there's a lot of factors that got it to this point. But even just talking about Amazon, Amazon Labor Union, Chris Smalls and Derrick Palmer and the fact that they, they were engaged in this David versus Goliath fight and they won. Yes, they're going to have to bargain a contract. It's going to keep getting harder. Like this is the first shot across the bow, but they're the first ones to take on this, like, gigantic company. Like Jeff Bezos is a little space cowboy. He's shaking in his little cowboy boots. And I think the fact that we're seeing organizing at Starbucks and even at the Apple Store at REI and with graduate student workers and media workers. And with Starbucks, Starbucks is a big one because much like we saw at the Amazon labor union in Staten Island, that's being led basically by the workers. And the workers are, on average, like, younger and, like, queer and trans and Black and brown. Like, it's these, these workers who are much more marginalized, who are coming from these backgrounds where they've kind of been knocked down and beaten up, and they're realizing, "Oh, well, if there's enough of us that do this and stand up against these giant corporations, like, we can get somewhere, like, we can win."

**JVN** [00:53:26] Yeah.

**KIM KELLY** [00:53:27] And that's I think, that's, that's fueling either energy, the enthusiasm, because like ever most people on Amazon, most people in the Starbucks, most people know they're this giant, like just, you know, octopi with their little tentacles all up in our lives. And seeing people successfully take them on, like, that makes you think, "Oh, well, why can't I talk to my boss? Why can't I talk to my coworkers? Like, if they can do it, maybe I can, too. And they totally can. We totally can."

**JVN** [00:53:56] I love that story. Okay, so, how did you get into becoming a labor reporter and writer?

**KIM KELLY** [00:54:01] So I had a–, definitely an unorthodox past and being a labor writer because I spent most of my life in the music industry as, like, a heavy metal journalist and promoter and touring merch person. Like, yeah, my life is heavy metal for basically the whole time. That's why I'm, like, covered in tattoos and stuff. But what changed that was that I was working at Vice as the Heavy Metal Editor, you know, in 2015 and we unionized the editorial employees like there's not any of us. We got together and we unionized with the Writers Guild of America East. And that changed everything, because I ended up in every meeting and every bargaining session, every committee, like it, it became kind of a second job, but one that I wanted to go to, like, I was going to way more union meetings than I was going to heavy metal shows. And I had always been interested in people's history and you know, and labor

stuff. And, cause, just, I'm a curious person. And I'm interested in people's history, but I, since I spent my whole life in the music world, I didn't think I really had any credibility to write about it. It was only after I got I kind of lived through it through that organizing process myself and learned more about the laws and learned from the organizers I was working with and just kind of drove and had. First I realized, like, "Wow, I think maybe this is what I want to write about now. And now that I've done it, I have a little bit of credibility there. Maybe I can let myself try." And I have to really shout out Teen Vogue for giving me a shot. They were one of the first places I wrote about labor for, and they gave me a column, like, four years ago, and they really gave me kind of a launchpad to, to try it out, try out my voice. And it's really just been the most incredible thing. And it's really cool to finally be writing about stuff that my dad understands, because when I was doing my death metal stuff, he was, like, "Okay, just don't ask me for money." But now I'm, like, "Hey, Dad, somebody from your union came to my book launch," and he's, like, "Oh, alright."

**JVN** [00:55:49] So what's been some of your, like, most stand-out moments from your reporting?

**KIM KELLY** [00:55:53] So I spent this past like two years, I guess, writing this book, but this whole past year I've been going back and forth to Alabama to cover this coal miners strike in Brookwood, and it's entering its second year. It hasn't gotten a ton of attention. And I've become so close and so invested with so many of the folks there in a way that I wasn't really expecting. I kind of stumbled upon the strike almost on accident because I was previously covering efforts to organize the Amazon Warehouse in Bessemer up the road. But these coal miners went out on strike in April 1st. And it's just such a classic case of the bosses not playing fair. Like, they're trying to organize a, bargain a new contract. Negotiations broke down and they went out on strike and they didn't expect to be out for so long. But they're still there. And they're there because they have really built this beautiful community that's really been kind of held together by the women and retirees of the auxiliary who have been feeding people and showing up to support other unions and doing interviews and really just doing everything they can.

And it's such an interesting story and there's so many different, you know, layers to it. Like, this is a very rural, blue collar, Deep South group of workers, pretty diverse and, you know, multiracial, multi-gender, a lot of different political views. And there's literally people that I met earlier on who would have told me, like, "Oh, I'm, like, a conservative Christian Republican, voted for Trump." I'm like, okay, "Well, okay, well, we'll talk about the other stuff for now." But now some of those exact same people are like socialists, like, tweeting about Eugene Debs. Like they've seen the way that people have changed their perspective because they've seen who showed up for them, who's writing stories about them, who's donating money. It's not, you know, Tommy Tuberville and Mo Brooks. It's, like, the DSA and, like, local progressive groups and labor people from around the country. I think there's a lot of lessons that can be learned there, and I just always got to shout out my boys in Alabama because, you know, even if no one else is paying attention, like, I'm not going to give up on them.

**JVN** [00:57:53] So in *Fight Like Hell* you quote a garment worker who participated in the Farah Manufacturing Company strike in the 1970s, and she said, "Why did I put up with it all these years? Why didn't I try for something else?" What's the power of this shift in that perspective?

**KIM KELLY** [00:58:08] It's utterly transformative to go from thinking, "You know, I don't have any power. I'm just here trying to make my paycheck, like, I can't make any waves, like, I'll just get fired." Going from that perspective, which a lot of people are kind of stuck in because why wouldn't they be, like, we've been placed in this position by people with much more power than we have, but going from me to we, going from thinking yourself as one little tiny cog in the machine to realizing, "Oh, me and my coworkers that the only reason this whole machine works." That shift in thinking of, "Oh, it's just me like I can't do anything," to "Oh, it's a whole bunch of us and we can do anything." Like, I remember that experience when I first became involved in the union at Vice. I never saw myself as someone who could do the union because I was like, "Well, I just write about heavy metal on the Internet. There's not, like, a union for that." But it turns out there was an in being able to really just understand and internalize my this, like, my identity as a worker, as someone who is part of this movement, as someone who can and deserves to fight for something better and a fight for my coworkers and to build something that will help people that come after me. There are a lot of ways that people talk about being empowered, but there is no more powerful feeling than sitting across from your boss and telling them, "Oh, that's not good enough, do better."

**JVN** [00:59:22] Hmm. Love that. And then where are you headed next? Like, what's next for you in your research? What's happening?

**KIM KELLY** [00:59:27] Oh, my God. I'm going to be promoting the book for a little while, and I want to write, like, 100 more books. And I really want to hopefully do something about the coal miners in Alabama, because Alabama is such a fascinating place with such a rich history, especially in labor. Like it pops up in the book a lot. But I think there are parts of the country that get written off by people that maybe don't know as much about it or they think about stereotypes or they had a bad experience. And, like, every place in this country, there is some kind of labor action happening, some kind of organizing happening. And I want to know about everything. I want to know about all of it. So I guess I'm just going to keep running around poking my nose into people's business and hopefully unearth more of these workers' stories because like, it is the greatest honor of my life to be able to act as a microphone for the workers because, you know, the workers are going to win. I'm not sure when I'm not entirely sure how, but I know they're going to win.

**JVN** [01:00:22] Kim Kelly, thank you so much for your work and for your time and your scholarship. We appreciate you so much and thank you for coming on Getting Curious.

**KIM KELLY** [01:00:28] Thank you so much. Honestly, just solidarity forever.

**JVN** [01:00:32] Yay! You've been listening to Getting Curious with me, Jonathan Van Ness. Our guest this week was Kim Kelly. You'll find links to her work in the episode description of whatever you're listening to the show on. Our theme music is "Freak" by Quiñ - thanks to her for letting us use it. If you enjoyed our show, introduce a friend honey - please show them how to subscribe. You can follow us on Instagram & Twitter @CuriousWithJVN. Our socials are run and curated by Middle Seat Digital. Our editor is Andrew Carson. Getting Curious is produced by me, Erica Getto, and Zahra Crim.