

Gaslit Nation Transcript

12 July 2023

“Americonned: Organize, Fight, Win”

<https://www.patreon.com/posts/americonned-win-85399801>

[intro - theme music]

Andrea Chalupa (00:10):

Welcome to *Gaslit Nation*. I am your host, Andrea Chalupa, a journalist and filmmaker and the writer and producer of the journalistic thriller, *Mr. Jones*, about Stalin's genocide famine in Ukraine: the film the Kremlin doesn't want you to see, so be sure to watch it. First, a couple announcements. We are running a very special summer series called “The Future of Dictatorship. What's Next? And Ways to Resist”. This series features leading voices on the front lines of understanding AI, corporate surveillance, Silicon Valley greed, and more, because the dictator's playbook remains the same, but the technology they have to oppress us keeps changing. You can learn more about the dictator's playbook in the *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel, *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*. You can join me for a special night out in New York City to talk all about the making of that book on Saturday, August 5th at 4:00 PM at the fun Lower East Side bar, Caveat, where I will be in discussion with thea comedian, Kevin Allison, of the hugely popular *Risk* storytelling podcast.

Andrea Chalupa (01:10):

If you're not in New York, you can join us by livestream. This is a huge deal for me because I hardly go out, so this will be like a *Gaslit Nation* prom night. Join me at Caveat on August 5th in New York. Signed copies of the *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel will be available for order at the event. For details on how to join us in person or livestream, go to gaslitnationpod.com and you'll see the link right on our homepage with more information about the event. Go to gaslitnationpod.com. That's gaslitnationpod.com. We'll be back with all new episodes of *Gaslit Nation* in September, including a live taping with Terrell Starr of the *Black Diplomats* podcast reporting from Ukraine. That's right, Terrell's gonna be in Ukraine, and we're gonna hear all about his summer, his reporting trips, what he is learning, who he's talking to, and what's next. That live taping will take place on Tuesday, September 12th at 12:00 PM Eastern for our supporters at the Truth-teller level and higher on Patreon. Come join us for that and drop questions in the chat and hope to see as many of our listeners as I can on August 5th in New York at Caveat for a fun night out. Before we get to this week's guest, here's a quick word from our sponsor, Judge Lackey, the wiley narrator of the new *Gaslit Nation* graphic novel *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*.

[clip - Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think trailer]

Judge Lackey (02:30):

Always champion the underdog. [small barking dog sfx] Dictators arise in times of economic and political instability, such as the aftermath of wars and recessions, and have a vulture-like instinct for capitalizing on people's pain. [people screaming, lion roaring sfx] Learn more in the new book starring me, Judge Aileen Cannon... I mean, Judge Lackey. *Dictatorship: It's Easier Than You Think*... almost too easy.

[end clip]

Andrea Chalupa (02:58):

Welcome to the *Gaslit Nation* Presents... The Future of Dictatorship. To start things off, we're looking at how technology is worsening the income inequality crisis in America, and what to do about it. For that, meet this week's guests; the brilliant minds behind the must watch documentary *Americonned*, inside America's income inequality crisis as told through the heroic grassroots power to unionize at Amazon in an age of AI. The film's director-producer is Sean Claffey, who has worked in the film industry on feature films, documentaries, and commercials for 25 years, and the writer and producer of *Americonned*, Dave Pederson, is also the producer of the Oscar-nominated film, *Supersize Me*, and the Cannes Award-winning *The Third Wave*. Before we get to our conversation, here's the trailer of their absolutely powerful must-watch filmer.

[\[film trailer\]](#)

Andrea Chalupa (05:54):

Dave and Sean, thank you so much for making this film. What brought you two into this project?

Dave Pederson (06:01):

So Andrea [mispronounced], this is, this is a film—

Andrea Chalupa (06:03):

Andrea, sorry [laughs].,

Dave Pederson (06:05):

Andrea. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

Andrea Chalupa (06:06):

It's okay. It's a joke on our show. I'm always correcting people on the show how they say my name.

Dave Pederson (06:11):

I thought it was and then I was talking to someone the other day and they said, "Andrea" [mispronounced], and I said, "I thought it was Andrea."

Andrea Chalupa (06:16):

I love you, but go on. [laughs]

Dave Pederson (06:19):

Alright, Andrea [laughs], so this is a film I've actually tried to make as far back as 2008. It came to me through Jeff Mann, who's also a childhood friend who's a producer on the film. And he had gotten me into, following the 2008 subprime crisis and he was like, "This is gonna get bad. This is gonna get bad for months." So I started following it and as I watched it unfold, I wanted to make a documentary because the one thing I was really angry about was the bailouts and the Obama administration, like, oh, with TARP and they're gonna send 'em a trillion dollars. And I'm like, this is crazy. And then I just started doing research and research and I actually tried to go out and pitch doing something about that and nobody was interested. They're like, "Oh, we'll just bail the banks out. Everything will be fine."

Dave Pederson(07:04):

And so march on down the road a few years, Sean and I were spending a lot of time together hanging out and I was like, “Hey, we should do something on income inequality. Let's broaden this out.” And he was like, “Sure.” So, you know, we started filming. As early as 2014, we went out and did some interviews and we were trying to get it out for the 2016 election because we just thought that was such a big one because you had two, you know, you had, like, Bernie on one side, Trump on one side, and then, you know, Hillary, wherever she lays in that right-middle area kind of thing. And we just couldn't get out in time for 2016 and we didn't think the story was quite there yet. So, you know, fast forward to 2018, Sean's like, “Let's get back on the road filming” and him and I packed up his Volkswagen Golf station wagon and set across the country to Seattle.

Sean Claffey (07:57):

Yeah, we shot in 23 states, met hundreds of people throughout the country. And we knew it was a problem, but we didn't realize that it was much worse than we had thought. And one of the reasons I wanted to get involved is my family comes from immigrants from Ireland, left out of abject poverty. My grandpa didn't have a pair of shoes 'til He was like 15. He comes to the United States, was basically a servant for a while. Then the New Deal gets put into place and, you know, then we have labor protections. He was able to get a union job and ascend right into the middle class. And that changed the dynamic of my family and built the greatest middle class in the world. Now, it wasn't all-inclusive... I wanna, you know, say that. Then, my whole life watching that path to the middle class erode and the middle class erode, where you see rural families are making half what they made in 1975 and wages are stagnant and this is happening on our watch. And we all have to do something about it. And that's why, you know, we wanted to tell the emotional stories of people that it's devastated.

Andrea Chalupa (09:11):

Tell us about the people you chose to focus on. I know with documentaries—especially a story as scary and immense as income inequality in the havoc it's wreaking on us now and will for the foreseeable future, and how destabilizing that is... I just wanna point out for our audience, when we talk about authoritarianism on this show and how it works, one of the ingredients that allows fascism to come to power and flourish is economic instability, economic vulnerability. And income inequality is worsening all that. So to tell such a big crisis story, how did you choose who to tell that through? Tell us about some of the people you profile in *Americonned*. Who are they and why did you choose them?

Sean Claffey (09:55):

Basically through activists. Also Julian Hurley, who was one of the producers, helped us find a bunch of people. And we were looking for different people that were in different parts of the economic strata. Having people, working class people that are falling into, you know, extreme poverty; middle class people that are falling out of the middle class; and people in different places of the country. And we filmed a lot more people than we actually, that actually made it onto the film. We could probably do a 12-part series on this. It's just very sad to go around and just see how unstable everything is. We would see all these cars pulled off on the side of the road throughout America, and then I started putting it together. That was their last ride, right? Their car broke down, they pulled off, and they don't have money to fix it. They don't have money to tow it. And that's that. And then your whole world falls apart, you know, and there are children involved. It's a very sad state of affairs here.

Andrea Chalupa (10:56):

And how did we get here?

Sean Claffey (10:59):

So, you know, this was all planned. 1968, 1970, Milton Friedman, it was his doctrine basically. It was in the backlash to the New Deal. His basic mission statement is, "The sole purpose of corporations is to increase its profits." It's not helping society or the workers or anything. Then the Koch brothers and others took that doctrine and they pushed that through all the way to Mitch McConnell. They funded the judges, they funded the Congress to push these platforms and the think tanks. And it was a 40-year plan and they won.

Andrea Chalupa (11:42):

And was there any sort of pushback in the Democratic establishment where the Democrats co-opted to go along with it? What sort of resistance, if any, was put up over this 40-year period?

Sean Claffey (11:53):

Obviously the Republicans embraced it wholeheartedly, and then slowly as the whole country shifted to the right, the Democrats followed. They walked away from the workers. Then we have Clinton that signs NAFTA and that was really the nail in the coffin for rural America and manufacturing in the United States. And then the country didn't help those people. You know, in other countries, they retrain them, they got them jobs. They have social welfare programs between the gap, you know, so that they could make it onto the next stage. But we didn't do any of that here.

Andrea Chalupa (12:32):

So you focus a lot on Amazon. Society across the board, across the US has become massively dependent on Amazon and you show in your film the efforts to unionize Amazon. What sort of challenges did they face? What sort of resistance did Amazon put up against that?

Sean Claffey (12:54):

Ha. They spent \$25 million to crush that union, first in Bessemer, and then another \$25 million in Staten Island, New York to try to crush that union. And, you know, we're sort of seeing in this building of this new labor movement that we have, these young people, you know, we focus on Chris Smalls and Derek Palmer and seven other of their team that goes up against Amazon and eventually wins it. But, you know, they had them arrested. They would change traffic patterns so that where they were—they set up at the bus stop to greet people and try to talk to 'em about the unions—they would have the city change the bus route so that they could no longer set up near there. Or in Bessemer, Alabama, they took out a light because they were giving pamphlets out at a stop sign at a red light. So they took that light out so that the people wouldn't ever stop there. I mean, hiring union busters, paying them \$3,200 a day each. Private investigators. You know, they're getting followed by black SUVs. I mean, it's insanity.

Andrea Chalupa (14:07):

It's corporate fascism

Sean Claffey (14:09):

Amazon is the primary company in this film, but they're a stand-in for hundreds of other companies. We also show companies that do great jobs and support their workers, and those workers do extremely well. Jeff Bezos could transform the middle class overnight if he raised his lowest wage to \$30 an hour and gave good benefits. That would make all the other companies have to match that and we would rebuild

the middle class in like two years. He has the power to do that. Now, maybe he won't be the fourth richest person in the world. Maybe he would be the sixth or the eighth. His life wouldn't change. But in the end, the insanity is he would make more money because more people have money to buy..

Andrea Chalupa (14:54):

Given that, do you think we're at the point or far past the point where we need to start addressing greed as an addiction just like we do with like sex addiction?

Sean Claffey (15:05):

Yeah. It's funny you say that. Jeff Mann, the producer here, has been saying that for a long time—and I didn't agree with him at first and now, I think I do—that the billionaire... It's like a hoarder mental illness. Back in the '80s, they used to say, "Oh, what do you want? You want more." Right? Now, I think they want it all.

Andrea Chalupa (15:24):

Right, but what's going to be left?

Sean Claffey (15:27):

That's the other insanity. If you destabilize the country so that the democracy frays and collapses, and that's what you're seeing. And you're a hundred percent right about the authoritarianism. We see it right now. The Democrats aren't doing the right thing, but the Republicans are marching toward fascism and authoritarianism because they know they can't give the people what they want. Not that they can't, they're not planning on it... So they want to take control. And they're using all these things, you know, the same regurgitation of the '20s and '30s. The *other*, right? It's the refugee, it's the person coming across the border that's to blame. It's the Jewish people that are to blame. It's the people that don't look like you or, you know, gender or whatever, right? Using all this to divide and create hate. If we all succumb to that, it'll be terrifying. But I really do have hope, you know, seeing what's happening in the last two years.

Andrea Chalupa (16:32):

Do you? Well, what's giving you hope?

Sean Claffey (16:34):

You're seeing these unionizations of all these people coming in together, whether it's educators, adjunct professors, nurses, Starbucks, Amazon, Home Depot. There is a major resurgence from the youth. Young people are like, "This is not working for us." And what we've seen happen just in Michigan this year in the last four or five months, that's kind of the model, right? What they've been able to achieve by getting back the state government should be the model for the country.

Andrea Chalupa (17:07):

Absolutely. And so let's talk about automation and AI because as you mentioned just now, the far-right scapegoating of non-white people, immigrants, LGBTQ people, just the scapegoating culture wars that they're waging to try to create this enemy to bash, to unite their base around to distract from the fact that it's the corporate genocidal class that's really creating the problems. So the big villain in all this has really been automation. Obviously corporate greed and greed as a mental illness, as an illness that has to

get addressed is what's driving all this. But one of the weapons I would say is automation and with it the coming AI revolution. So could you talk about, in your years of research and reporting and making this documentary, what did you see about the impacts of automation and what do you see coming down the pipe with further automation and AI?

Sean Claffey (18:05):

Yeah, certainly. We're seeing the beginnings of it. I think this is going to be the NAFTA of the white collar. And also we're gonna lose all the driving jobs, right? Which is 5 million in the country. The Ubers will not have people in it. The trucks will not have people in it. But the stockbrokers... I don't know, 50 to 80% of them will be gone. We don't need contractual lawyers. We probably won't need them in two years. The CEO of IBM proudly said, he gleefully said he's gonna eliminate all back-office workers that can be replaced with AI as soon as possible. You know, he's backtracked that. His PR people came in and backtracked that. But that's what he said. We should believe people when they say that the first time. And I think our stat is 47% of American jobs are at high risk of being automated or being eliminated by AI. We finished the edit in the fall, but since Chat GPT 4 came out, I think we might have underestimated that.

Andrea Chalupa (19:15):

Wow. And so we've seen over the decades factory jobs, worker jobs in the Midwest become decimated by automation. And now you have these so-called white-collar jobs. You listed some. Do you see what's happened to the factory jobs across the Midwest happening to the media jobs, the arts and entertainment jobs, the culture of jobs and so on that occupy the big cities; New York City, San Francisco, LA and so on? Do you see that that's another big decimation, a big ticking time bomb about to be set off in the next 10 years?

Sean Claffey (19:59):

I mean, I think that basically you have eight CEOs who run the big eight media companies. And last year they made—and this is what they made, you know, not future options or whatever—about a hundred million each. And they're actively trying to crush the writer's union and the SAG AFTRA because they don't want to pay. They want it all. And, you know, I would love to see a CEO write a screenplay or pick up a camera and make a movie. It would probably be laughable.

Andrea Chalupa (20:35):

What do you say to someone who wants to sit back and get paid for essentially doing nothing or just, you know, showing up to do just the work they're interested in and letting everyone else carry the load, carry the weight, and be unfairly paid. What would you say to that person? And they're gonna justify it, saying, "Well, I am powerful. I am a celebrity, I am a name. Go fuck yourself." Like, they're gonna have their own justification in their head, like, "Oh, that's unfair to me. You're a bunch of socialists, or you're being selfish or greedy, or, how dare you think about yourself?" So we've seen all these arguments coming out, but what would you say to that person to kind of break through to their mentality?

Sean Claffey (21:19):

So Nick Hanauer, who's in our film, who's done very well for himself, states it perfectly. With a country with the levels of income inequality and wealth inequality that we have here in America, there's three historical outcomes. It's authoritarian rule, a police state, or a revolution. All of those things are extremely bad. To lose the democracy here is worth your not paying people enough to survive? What are

you gonna do? You're gonna live in a bunker? You're gonna live in a bunker in New Zealand? They're gonna come for you. And we fixed this before. Again, I have hope. We fixed this before. We can fix it again, we just have to get to work. And we can't be depressed, we can't be cynical. And it's hard not to be. I understand. But if they could do it in Michigan, they could do it all throughout the country. And if we could all stand up and work together—

Andrea Chalupa (22:26):

How did they do it? What strategies were most effective?

Sean Claffey (22:30):

Well, they did it from the inside out—they worked there—as opposed to the outside in with more traditional unions. So they identify with the people. Their friends were in there, their coworkers were in there. They spoke the language. They knew the ins and outs and they could stand up at meetings, at these anti-union indoctrination meetings and say, “That's false.” So that was powerful. And then the more the management came down on them, the more sympathetic they became. And they worked... I mean, they worked day and night, seven days a week for like 300 days during snowstorms, ice storms. Tornado hit them, they lost eight tents that blew away. They just were all in. And that resonated with people. And you can move mountains, I think, if you come together and work that hard.

Andrea Chalupa (23:20):

And what benefits did they reap from all that?

Sean Claffey (23:24):

So that still remains to be seen. They're negotiating a contract, right? They won the vote and now of course Amazon's dragging their feet and stalling. But traditionally, you know, it's much better wages, pensions, health insurance, and you're not able to fire anyone for no reason, right? If you go to the bathroom too many times on Amazon, you're fired by a text message. So none of them drink water because they can't go pee. So they pass out all the time... I mean, it's horrific.

Andrea Chalupa (23:58):

Yep. And so what advice do you have for people listening and any line of work? Where should they start if they wanna unionize their company?

Sean Claffey (24:08):

I know that Chris and Derek are very open to getting them information on how to do it from the inside out. Then there's also the AFL-CIO which will support them. Chris and Derek went a different route and they won. And then the traditional route is with the AFL-CIO. Just get the people together. That's the main thing. The collective action in organization can go up against and win against organized money.

Andrea Chalupa (24:38):

Given all that you've come across in your reporting, do you think a universal basic income is the answer given how automation and AI are going to be sped up in the coming decade-plus? We're gonna have a new industrial boom driven by machines, which is going to put a massive amount of people outta work, inevitably.

Sean Claffey (25:01):

Yeah. I think if we wanna survive... You know, people get caught up with socialism and capitalism. These are just economic systems that were invented. The thing that we have to really focus on is democracy. You know, even democratic republic, which means it's us, right? So we should be the ones that determine the outcomes, not the lobbyists. And a universal income would be great, I think. I think we have to think long and hard about, you know, what's gonna happen because we're gonna have a couple dozen trillionaires and we'll all be living in tents or we can make it fairer. Now, as Kurt Anderson in our film says, "If we don't make it fairer now, it's gonna be really bad later."

Andrea Chalupa (25:48):

And I wanna tell people, because I know there's a debate going on about how much AI could actually do and how we still are years from any sort of big revolution on that front and so on, but the reality is that where there's a will, there's a way. And it's obvious, as you mentioned, that our corporate overlords certainly have the will to put a lot of people to engineer layoffs. They've got that Jack Welch strategy. They want to feed the beast of their shareholders. So certainly they're looking for this. They're angling for this. So it's just a matter of time. And so as you said, now is the time for everyone to get together and unionize and organize and demand not just the unionizing, but demanding the social safety net from our elected public officials.

Sean Claffey (26:38):

Yeah. And then at the same time, they're talking about getting rid of social security and Medicare and Medicaid. I mean, it's complete insanity. There's so much money here, right? You know, in much smaller countries, in much lesser countries, they have all this stuff in place.

Andrea Chalupa (26:53):

Right, and they're much happier too. The Scandinavian countries rank the highest on the happiness index. And meanwhile, in America, we're miserable and fighting each other. And this is why. It's the corporate greed that's really driving that misery. One thing I don't understand is it's so easy to lose it all. It's so easy. It just takes... These families that are built on inherited wealth, it wouldn't take much for one generation to squander all that wealth, to place some bad bets, to trust a Bernie Madoff Ponzi scheme with the family's inheritance and so on. It wouldn't take much to fall from a great fortune. And once you do, society isn't built currently to carry you. So I'm looking at all these immensely rich people and just how out of touch they are and how convinced they are that this will never happen to them.

Dave Pederson (27:42):

I mean, you look at our country, like everyone is like a paycheck away from bankruptcy. I think something like 56% of the country has like \$400 or less than their account. But what I've been seeing is the transfer of wealth. And what we've seen in the last, since 1980, is like \$50 trillion of wealth go from the bottom 90% to the top 1%. And I find that is the most staggering figure. So now we're getting this disparity between the haves and have nots that's unbreakable. And one of the things that I saw in my research was I was looking at Rome and how Rome fell. And it wasn't more or less like barbarians storming the gates, it was income inequality where 95% of the Roman empire was living in poverty and they had a massive bureaucratic infrastructure that was too hard to support. They had a sprawling military trying to defend their empire. And those are the things that bring empires down. So I mean, as Sean said, we're gonna end up with like 12 trillionaires and then everyone else, you know, feeding off scraps. I think the

disparity has just gotten so outta whack. It's just gonna be those 12 and, you know, the other 8 billion of us sitting here trying to make ends meet. And that's the way it's going. You don't see another way.

Andrea Chalupa (29:00):

Mmhmm. <affirmative> And *The Golden Girls* knew it. I just watched an episode, a Christmas episode where the ladies were serving at a soup kitchen in a church. And Dorothy's ex-husband Stanley came dressed as Santa Claus because his latest get-rich-quick scheme failed and the big lesson that he learned was to appreciate what he has because many Americans, which we don't realize, are just a paycheck away from poverty, from being in the soup kitchen on Christmas Eve.

Dave Pederson (29:26):

Yeah. Some of the other numbers that we have in the film that really catch people's eyes is like 45% of the country is making \$10.25 an hour or under. And we're still discussing the fight for \$15, where for me, that's like 15 years ago. It's nowhere even close. When I started the research of this film, what really got me going on it was LBJ's 1965 war and poverty speech. And I started going through the numbers. I'm like, "Oh, okay. What was the minimum wage in 1965?" It was like \$1.25 an hour. So, you know, fast forward in like 2009, it's like an extra six bucks. So when you start extrapolating those numbers—Barry Ritholtz touches often on this—we're looking at like, you know, it should be like \$22 to \$24 an hour as the minimum wage. We're so far behind with \$15. \$15 doesn't even cut it and we're looking at like 44% of us in this country are not even making \$10.25 an hour. I mean, it's so outta whack. I mean, I just don't know how we continue on. Eventually it just... It has to collapse. I mean, you just can't live like this anymore. I mean, it just gets worse and worse.

Andrea Chalupa (30:38):

Mmhmm. <affirmative> President Biden likes to tell himself as a pro-union president. He has some union organizing in his family history. Do you think that's a fair assessment? How do you think he's been on this front?

Sean Claffey (30:53):

So I think that he has been better than any president in my adult life with a caveat. Certainly if Manchin and Sinema had voted, we could have had a pretty amazing law put into place that would've really strengthened everything.

Andrea Chalupa (31:10):

The Build Back Better.

Sean Claffey (31:11):

Yeah. But then also at the same time, Pelosi and the Biden administration in the fall made a law to crush the transportation strike, the train operator strike. Ugh. You know... I had no hopes for Biden and then he kind of outshined what I thought, and then that happened and I was like, you know, "Ooh my God, come on."

Dave Pederson (31:34):

Sean and I both had that same assessment of Biden. We were like, "Ugh, here we go again." And it's like another right-center Democrat who's gonna just kowtow to the Republicans. And, you know, he has

surprised us. I think he's been a better pro-labor president than I had expected. Like bringing in like Marty Walsh—he's left—but bringing him in as Secretary of Labor I think was a nice move because he's so pro-labor and worked so hard in Boston and he's also in our film. But, you know, he was leading some big union initiatives in Boston for years and they've been really successful. And we document those in the film, I think, really well on how successful those types of programs can be for people.

Andrea Chalupa (32:21):

Yeah. I think the problem is that both the Democratic and Republican party establishments, they feed from the same trough. They take money from the same big corporate donors. So they're all on the hook in delivering for them.

Sean Claffey (32:32):

Yeah. And we show that in the film. The same people that created this plan basically to take down unions also donated hundreds of millions of dollars to law schools and created the Federalist Society. And then Mitch McConnell realized—smartly but diabolically—that if he could take the Supreme Court, then even if they do pass laws to help people, that they can strike them down as unconstitutional. And then of course Citizens United, which was really devastating for our democracy. And that's in the film as well.

Andrea Chalupa (33:06):

It's extraordinary what you capture. *Americonned* is a must-watch film to ground people in this moment that we're in and how we got here. And I think the more we are reminded of the recent history, the facts, the better we are to see what our options are and how we fight back.

Dave Pederson (33:25):

Yeah. A hundred percent. You can't unsee the film.

Andrea Chalupa (33:29):

Exactly right.

Sean Claffey (33:30):

Even conservative people that have watched this film are kind of blown away. It's not a partisan film. You know, we call out both parties and I do wanna say the Democrats are not living up to this. And I think that if we can hold on for maybe another presidential cycle or two, I don't think they're gonna be able to win again. Just in the core four years, people are waking up and I really do have hope. We just have to make it through the next four-six years.

Andrea Chalupa (34:07):

What do you mean by that? We have to stay engaged election cycle after election cycle, fight for the lesser evil on the ballot every time?

Sean Claffey (34:16):

Yeah, and then especially at the local levels, because that's what they did, right? That's what the Right did. They really put a lot of money into the local elections and then you get to draw the maps for the gerrymandering. The election maps. And the Democrats kind of like... They don't focus on the local

elections. And that's the basis of everything. If you get to decide how the maps are drawn up, then you get to decide who wins.

Andrea Chalupa (34:49):

Mmhmm. <affirmative>.

Dave Pederson:

If you look at it, it's all about stuffing the judicial system. And we touch on that a lot. That's been their approach. Think about it. I mean, the Republicans have won one popular presidential vote in 30 years and they put six justices on the Supreme Court. We have a president that's about to be indicted for a second time who put three justices himself on the Supreme Court. I mean, that's frightening. And, you know, you're seeing it and that's the one thing that people have missed. Sean touched on this and I believe this firmly. Since I was in college, the most effect you could have is on the local level because you can effect changes around you. You can get to your representatives easily. Those are the places you push.

Dave Pederson(35:35):

And now you see that they packed the courts so now they can just gerrymander districts. Like, they're crazy. When you look at some of the maps, I'm like, "How did they get that shape?" You know? It's completely insane at this point. But I mean, I think that's what we have to do is like one, we gotta, you know, the courts. Because everything's geared. I mean money buys you justice, money buys you whatever you want. Money buys you power. And I think that's where we're at right now.

Sean Claffey (35:59):

That local state representative, that local state senator then becomes a congressperson, right? And that congressperson then becomes a senator. Your state senator, normally they don't just jump into a congress position. That's much more rare. So by taking back the local houses and having fair maps would... look at Texas, right? It's so gerrymandered. That's the only reason it's still a right-wing state.

Andrea Chalupa (36:29):

And I have to remind people that America is one of those very rare democracies that has gerrymandering. Another democracy—in theory anyway—is Hungary, which is keeping in power Viktor Orbán, thanks to gerrymandering. So gerrymandering is extremely unusual and the UN even issued an emergency report over America's gerrymandering crisis. This isn't normal.

Dave Pederson (37:00):

No. Two of my favorite weird gerrymandered districts are Crenshaw's in Texas. And then look at Jim Jordan's in Ohio. [laughs] It's like, what are those shapes? What are these? It's crazy.

Andrea Chalupa (37:15):

Yeah. And and the US Senate, the US Senate with every state getting two senators regardless of—

Dave Pederson (37:22):

Ugh, abolish the Senate.

Andrea Chalupa:

Exactly.

Dave Pederson:

Thomas Paine was right on that. Unicameral.

Andrea Chalupa:

Mhmm. <affirmative>

Dave Pederson:

You know, it was there to keep slavery.

Andrea Chalupa (37:32):

Exactly.

Dave Pederson (37:32):

It was there to keep slavery on the books. I mean, it's ridiculous. I mean, the fact that like Sean's neighborhood in Brooklyn has more people than like all of Wyoming, you know, it's insane. You know? [laughs]

Andrea Chalupa:

Yeah

Dave Pederson:

It's absolutely insane. But yeah, for me, the Senate could just go, I'm all about unicameral.

Sean Claffey (37:52):

Speaking of Hungary. So in Hungary, he was able to eliminate the independent judiciary so he can basically overrule the judiciary. And he was also able to eliminate the free press. The Republican CPAC the last several years has been having their meeting in Hungary. So this is their model that they want to bring here. And we're seeing in Poland, they got rid of their judiciary. They still have a free press—

Andrea Chalupa (38:19):

Well, they're actually taking over the state media across Poland. They've done that.

Sean Claffey (38:24):

Okay. So that's fallen. And they've just put out a bill that probably will pass that the current administration can keep anyone they want from running for office.

Dave Pederson (38:37):

I think in America too, we have this, like, immunity to history; like we're special, like these things can't happen to us. But I assure you they can. You know, like, "Oh, we'll never be fascist." It's like, Eh, no. We're

not immune to these things, you know? But Americans have that view like, "Oh, it can never happen here" and look at what's happening. I mean, these are blueprint cases of fascism. I mean, we're headed straight down that path. And faster than we thought. And I've been saying this for decades, you know, that we're heading down that path and everyone's like, "That could never happen here!" And now people are thinking, "Maybe you were right."

Sean Claffey (39:18):

Well they, they took the capital.

Dave Pederson (39:20):

Yeah.

Sean Claffey (39:21):

Luckily they didn't hold it.

Andrea Chalupa (39:23):

Yeah, exactly right. And it's been a 40-year plan in the making, as you point out.

Dave Pederson (39:28):

Yeah. Actually 50. You know, how I looked at it was like '73. You always hear of 1973 as sort of that watershed year because LBJ's war on poverty was very effective. When he started, I believe the poverty level was like 24 to 25%. And by the time Nixon was really dismantling all his social programs, by 1973, it had been halved down to like 11%, 12%. It clearly was working and then they just started dismantling it about 1973. That year is just such a number ingrained in my head with everything. And then, you know, it just shifted. And then you see the Democrats kind of jumped on board with them. Carter was a big, you know, free enterprise president and then Clinton, Obama, they were very pro-business and less for the workers. Look at it. It's like I said: We haven't had a minimum wage raise in 14 years now. That's... I mean, it's crazy.

Sean Claffey (40:29):

Yeah, and what was the raise? 25 cents? 50 cents?

Dave Pederson (40:31):

Yeah. Obama raised it 25 cents. But hey, let's not sneeze at \$2 a day, you know?

Sean Claffey (40:40):

Yeah, totally.

Andrea Chalupa (40:40):

What is next for your film America?

Sean Claffey (40:44):

Well, it streams in North America. It's been in theaters. We've had great, you know, discussions afterwards. But right now you can get it on Apple TV, iTunes, Prime Video, Vudu, Google Play, and Microsoft. And there'll be more coming up.

Dave Pederson (41:00):

Yeah. The Q&A's have been really great. People are really engaged. And now we're starting to get, you know... This has been a real self-distribution thing with us because this is something, you know, you can't get big corporations to put a film out like this or give us money or things like that. So a lot of it was, you know, it's been a grassroots campaign from the beginning. And now we're starting to see, like, I'm getting emails as are the rest of the team from theaters around the country, like, "Oh, we'd like to show your film." And we're like, "Whoa, really?" So it's starting to take on a little life of that where hopefully it'll create a groundswell and people will start looking at unions. As we see, the approval of unions is up over 70% now.

Dave Pederson (41:47):

That's the highest it's been in decades. And that's great for us. And hopefully, you know, that's gonna turn the tide. And every day I'm watching, I see a strike or I've recently relocated to Austin and I see all these restaurants unionizing and it's great. It gives me a little bit of hope, where I was like the most pessimistic person, but I'm seeing some stuff, you know? Especially all the work we've done with Chris and Derek and what they've done with Amazon. Those guys... I wanted to quit making this film. I was like, after we lost in Alabama, I was so despondent. And those guys did not quit. They did not quit. They went back to Staten Island, they learned their lessons in Alabama and they keep learning their lessons. And I think they're making an effective change. And I think especially with young people. I think they really appeal to the younger crowd. Chris and Derek, I think they inspire young people a lot. So it's great to see that.

Andrea Chalupa (42:45):

That's the lesson of your documentary, *Americonned*. We cannot quit. We're all in this for the marathon. And if we fight our fight, then the ones we pass the baton to coming up behind us, they'll have an easier time and they'll ultimately win.

Sean Claffey (43:03):

100% 100%

Dave Pederson (43:06):

Well, you keep getting the word out. You guys are getting the word out. So it's important to have journalism like yours that, you know, isn't skirting over this topic and isn't co-opted by, you know, some big corporate money. Unless, I don't know something [laughs].,

Andrea Chalupa (43:22):

[laughs] It's me and a Patreon and a mic.

Dave Pederson (43:25):

[laughs].

Sean Claffey (43:27):

The thing that people don't remember or weren't alive for was that in the '60s and '70s you could work in a hardware store and have a house and a car and a vacation and have a great life. Or you could be a cashier and have a house and a car and a pension, right? There is more than enough money for all of that. There's more now than there was then. The profits are higher, the productivity is higher. It's just insane. And one thing that I wanna say is people on government assistance in this country, 70% work full time. The welfare queen is a myth used to... Now, I'm sure that there are some people that are scamming the system, but—

Andrea Chalupa (44:13):

Not as much as those at the top [laughs].

Sean Claffey (44:15):

Yeah, oh, certainly, certainly. And the Senate or whatever.

Andrea Chalupa (44:18):

They've got the accountants and lawyers to do it.

Speaker 14 (44:20):

Yeah, I mean we see that in the film well.

Sean Claffey (44:22):

If 70% are working full time and probably like 15% are, like, on chemo or just at a heart or whatever, right? And then some people are mentally ill. There's such a small amount. And then it's like, we're just... As Nick Hanauer says in the film, the minimum standard we have to hold capitalism to is to pay people enough not to be on government assistance. That's the minimum.

Andrea Chalupa (44:51):

Well, you both have a standing invite on *Gaslit Nation*. If you wanna come back heading to the presidential to see where things stand, give us an update, you're more than welcome to. Income inequality is the key crisis driving everything right now. That's the big puppet master behind all these dark forces. These dark personalities. Trump is just a big dancing orange clown with the corporate class death eaters behind him, moving the strings. That's what we all have to keep in mind. And watch *Americaconned*. There's several places you can get it. Certainly not an Amazon, right? [laughs]

Dave Pederson (45:26):

Yes it is!

Sean Claffey:

It's on Amazon.

Andrea Chalupa (45:28):

Oh, great! What a delicious way to watch it [laughs]

Sean Claffey and Dave Pederson:

[laughs]

[outro - theme music, roll credits]