

Seminar Presentation at Center for Women & Work, Rutgers University.  
Marianne Hill, Ph.D., February 28, 2023.

I'd like to begin by thanking Yana Rodgers for her kind invitation to speak here and for arranging this event. I am glad to see you all here today and extend a warm welcome to those with us online as well.

**1** It is good from time to time to step back and look at where we are and where we'd like to be. I will begin my talk with a quick look at the crises we face and the response to these crises so far. Then I will discuss how we might work together towards a solidarity society – a society that is cooperative, caring, & eco-friendly. I will argue that we need a transformation of our current capitalist system – radical change that goes to the root of the problems is needed. That is a long-term project that will likely require the emergence of a new political party in the US. But there is much we can do to move us in that direction right now. And acting now is a matter of urgency.

Today we face: global warming, a weakening of democracy and a range of egregious inequities.

**2** Let's look at these three crises.

Fires, droughts, rising sea levels, new diseases and human migrations are some of the effects of global warming. And CO2 emissions hit their highest level ever in 2021 after a slight drop when Covid first hit. We know how to stop and even reverse global warming. Besides ending our use of fossil fuels, we must reverse the desertification of agricultural land through regenerative practices. We need to protect ½ of earth's surface not only to save many species from extinction, but also to restore ecosystems, enabling them to absorb many more tons of greenhouse gasses (GHG). With these steps we could actually reduce the GHG in the atmosphere. The global response so far has *\*not\** been adequate.

Turning to the crisis of democracy. The US is not the only country in which there is a large gap between what people want and what politicians deliver. Which is part of the reason for the growing distrust of government in many countries. The interests of the wealthy dominate policy decisions, not the best interests of the people. The US has also seen the overturn of Roe v Wade, an increasing number of persons who deny election results and rising gun violence. It is now ranked as a ‘flawed’ democracy in the Economic Intelligence Unit global index.

The crisis of democracy is closely related to growing inequities. There are inequities globally in income, opportunities, access to health care and more. In the US, the share of total wealth going to the top percentiles has been rising for years. The bottom 60% now hold less than 3% of total wealth. People of color, women and minorities are hit especially hard. The poverty rate of Black Americans was 20% and of Native Americans 24% in 2021. Globally, the number of persons in extreme poverty is again at 700 million.

Our government is not prioritizing ensuring that people’s needs are met. Each of you probably knows someone who has suffered serious hardship as a result of the high cost of health care. And look at the allocation of funding during the pandemic — trillions of dollars in loans were set aside for business but the government didn’t provide food stamps to those who lost jobs and income - remember the lines that went on for miles at local food banks?

A transformation of our political and economic systems is needed to meet these crises and to move towards a society in which people and planet thrive. What would this solidarity society look like?

**3** Drawing on the work of feminists and many others, I see a solidarity society as one in which:

Care is the organizing principle of our lives together; the goal is that all will thrive. How we provide care would be as much a part of political discussions as is the provision of education. Everyone would be valued

and have a voice in decisions that greatly impact their lives. Deeper democracy in our political and economic systems is critical to shifting power and re-setting goals to ones that better serve us.

**4** Everyone here can think of problems to tackle in the short term. ...For example, we need fairer taxes and wages, improved access to health care, child care, housing...

A planning process for the transition to clean energy that involves communities and is backed up by federal dollars to ensure that everyone has their energy needs met.

Less production of plastics and less use of toxic chemicals.

There is much more to be done, but with stronger democratic structures, we'd be better able to achieve advances. So let's consider campaign and corporate reform.

Money has too much influence in politics; I would like to see all campaigns financed only by public funds.

We need a change in how corporate boards are chosen. If the boards of big businesses did what's best for the people of the country, we would move ahead in so many ways.

These changes are big, but they are economically feasible with a redistribution of wealth and income. This, of course, requires major political change – but it is high time to shift course. Let's look at the priorities of the wealthy and their effects on policy.

**6** Studies show that the majority of the wealthy don't think that everyone who works full time should be paid a wage that keeps them above the poverty line. Nor do they think that the government should help the unemployed find a job. They would like an even lower capital gains tax.

Most prefer cuts in health care whereas the general public wants more spending.

**7** The wealthy have political clout in Congress. One study spanning 19 years and over 1000 pieces of legislation found that when business opposes a law before Congress, it will almost always be defeated, but when citizen groups like the AARP push for or oppose a bill, they have a statistically near-zero impact on Congress.

The wealthy own major media companies. They fund much of the research that develops the policy options Congress considers. Their funding of political campaigns gives them access to politicians they have supported.

### A Class Society

The US is in fact dominated by a wealthy elite. Our legal system supports their control of businesses and their political influence.

As a result, regulation of big business is weak. Corporations too often take risks with the environment (the train derailment in Ohio is a recent example). They also risk workers' health and even the stability of our financial system. They move their companies to where labor costs will be lower and government regulation less. Business rights too often take precedence over human rights. As the UN Panel on CC notes, the future of the planet is jeopardized as a result.

**8** Even business professors are lamenting the current structures and practices of corporations. This includes Colin Mayer, founder of the Business School at Oxford University.

“The corporation ... threatens to consume us in its own avaricious ambitions. It is a matter of urgency that we end its damaging effects on our prosperity, social cohesion and the environment “

We can do better than our current system. The corporate culture of profit before people can be replaced by a culture of creative collaboration for the common good. The recent interest of the World Economic Forum and the Business Roundtable in Environmental, Social, and Governance goals is a sign of the growing recognition of the debilitating imbalances in the world today.

9 There are already alternative ways of organizing production – besides all the work done in the public sector, there are coops, B corporations, benefit corporations, employee-owned businesses and ESOPs (Employee Share Ownership Programs), social enterprises, nonprofits — that are all operating successfully while being socially responsible. There is rapid growth of certified B corporations, enterprises committed to serving not only shareholders, but all stakeholders in a company – consumers, employees and community. Publix is a successful supermarket chain with 230,000 employees – and it is owned by its employees.

LET's move on to some of the more radical proposals for corporate reform...

Professor Mayer, whom I quoted earlier, favors a structure like that of Novo Nordisk. The majority control of the Novo Nordisk board of directors lies with a trust set up to ensure the company stays true to its values and mission.

Elizabeth Warren favors a requirement that large firms be federally chartered and subject to penalties if they violate the terms of their charter.

There is also increased interest in employee representation on corporate boards.

I am in favor of the requirement that the majority of members on a board of directors be charged with acting in the public interest, with an emphasis on righting wrongs from discrimination to environmental degradation.

**10** In the US, Toys R Us provides a very modest example of including worker voice in the decision-making. It is establishing a mirror board of directors made up of employees who will have access to company documents and offer recommendations to leadership.

This move towards greater economic democracy is important.

Europe already has Works Councils and some employee representation on boards. New proposals are also being advanced. It has been proposed that companies have two decision-making bodies – a board of directors but also a council of employees. Both bodies would have to approve any major decision.

**11** The ability to enact measures such as the above depends on grassroots political pressure. Unions are known to have a positive impact on the political clout of workers as well as on wages and work

conditions. **12** In 2022, unions won the most elections they have in 20 years. And **13** approval ratings are the highest in over 50 years.

Passage of the PRO Act (Protecting the Right to Organize) would be an important step towards greater voice for workers.

All the social movements active now – feminist, racial justice, environmental, LGBTI and more – are also critical to the efforts to advance the thriving of people and planet.

There are many instances in history of transformational change. The emergence of the welfare state in the last century is one.

LOOK at what happened in Europe after it went through WWI, the Great Depression and WWII. After millions died and billions of dollars of infrastructure were destroyed, political power shifted. The importance of labor and socialist parties grew. The change in policies was remarkable. Here in the US, after millions of workers went on strike and organized during the 30s, the political climate changed and the New Deal was passed.

There is now increased political activism around the world (confirmed by a recent report). Populist parties on the left as well as on the right have been growing in Europe, and here in the US we have the example of the populist appeal of Bernie Sanders.

We are in a period of transition; positive changes do not come smoothly and automatically. But positive transformations can happen and will come faster if we work for them. There is reason for hope.

Logic is on our side. Logically, we should all be working to save the planet and to improve people's lives. But major commitments **14** are never based solely on logic. Both head and heart must agree before we make a commitment. And surely heart and head can agree that a eco-friendly, caring solidarity society is a goal worthy of commitment.

Clearly the profit motive will not drive the change we need. Feminists have long pointed out that the vital work of caring labor done within homes is motivated by love of family, not by a desire for monetary gain.

Ask yourself:

Did you choose an occupation or your college major based solely on the desire to get the highest income possible? Are scientists driven by greed to explore the outer reaches of space? Do artists and musicians create their works out of a love of money?

I think we can all agree that people do not often marry and have children out of a desire for personal gain? There are many motives – both positive and negative - that drive us. Money at root is a means to an end -- respect, pleasure, love, survival, security of ourselves and our loved ones.

There are millions of people and thousands of organizations that are committed to making the world a better place. THE big problem: we are not working together.

We do not recognize the URGENCY of acting together. I visited the websites of several unions and nonprofits looking for evidence of collaboration. There was for the Green New Deal. But for example, before the overturn of Roe, the AFL-CIO said nothing about women's right to choose abortion. Our organizations generally do not even inform their members about the existence of proposed legislation that would change millions of lives. I'm thinking, for example, of the PRO Act – which would protect and democratize the process of forming a union. My friends have often not heard of it.

**15** Each organization of course will decide for itself how it will work with other groups for goals like saving the planet and democracy. In building coalitions, a deeply democratic process with accountability, transparency and inclusivity is needed. The hierarchies existing prevailing under the status quo should not be replicated. The standpoints of groups that have been marginalized should be sought out on the issues at hand. It should be recognized that the marginalized may require time

to self-organize and work out their true interests as proposals are made. There will be confrontations as defenders of the status quo resist change.

Those of us working for a more caring and sustainable society are many. There are manifestos and party platforms from around the world with many creative ideas for change....**16** I have drawn on several of them in preparing this presentation.

Those of us working for transformative change, once united, can be the force that leads society towards a cooperative collaboration aimed at better serving people and planet. The main obstacle to creating this unity lies in the failure to form strong networks and coalitions. This we CAN change.

The solution is there! Let us commit to this work, and move towards the kind of society we want to leave to children, grandchildren and future generations.

Sources: See Hill, *Building A Solidarity Society*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2022, especially chapters 3 and 6.