

## **SAD FRANCISCO EPISODE 34: 'How City College Got Free' with James Tracy**

### **TRANSCRIPT**

Toshio Meronek: I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how the Free City campaign came into existence.

James Tracy: Well, it came from three different sources, really. So one is, the first accreditation fight that they went on? And, you know, our Union American Federation of Teachers 2121 did a really remarkable job at Saving City College. Right? And they did it, you know, by, really centering how important City College is for working class people, especially working class people of color in San Francisco and reaching directly out to organizations and building a coalition to do it right. So it was definitely good social unionism and labor and community, coalition building. And, you know, there was points where certainly points where even very optimistic. People thought that City College was going to be either done privatized or shrunk to the point where they could just strangle the baby in the bathwater so to say. But they won. And that was fantastic. Shortly thereafter, we saw, you know...the work is never done. Right? So the Civic Center campus, which has really important campus in the Tenderloin, is right there on Eddie and Paul was was shut down overnight. Right? because of ignored seismic problems. And I mean, those problems had been well known for years. There wasn't any great mystery or anything like that. And what happened is that the administration just thought people would just say, okay, great, you know, we don't want to work in a building that's falling down, go ahead and cancel all our classes. And I don't think they expected that there would be any type of fight back. But because of the massive amount of community based organizations that are interested in a timeline and that their members use that campus for ESL, for adult basic education, there is a big push back that was initially led by a lot of the Tenderloin and Community Housing Partnership, but also because the issue was so widely felt and deeply felt. At the same time, you were even able to bring in small business people to sign on. And even the BID. Right? Even the business improvement district that is oftentimes at odds with progressive forces - I guess that's an understatement. They were completely supportive and wonderful. Right? And it was one of those moments where you could unite a bunch of people in a short amount of time. I was the lead organizer at Community Housing Partnership at the time. And we you know, of course, we let Jane Kim's office know about it and alerted them to it and said, well, you know, there's a lot of issues going on, a lot of important issues you have to get 100 people out onto the streets. And we actually ended up getting 500 people out in the streets in like three days. Right? It was like the easiest organizing or at least mobilizing that I've ever done in my entire life. You made multilingual flyers, you went and talked to the people and invited other people who were there. And it was a march from the closed down building to city hall. And that really, really fortified Jane Kim's office to ally but also all of city hall where they put a lot of pressure on City College to find a place. Right? So they reopened right there on Market Street. I believe that address is like 1183, right there by U.N. Plaza, which has shut down now. Right? Which is sad, because I think that that area certainly needs the presence of a City College, But, you know, it was a victory that held for like three or four years. And what it did is it broadened out that coalition or built upon that coalition that AFT had so skillfully built around there, and

there was this conversation. I believe the person who came up with the idea for Free City was Alisa Messer, but I'm not sure, but the conversation was like, Well, you know, why don't we go on the offensive, right? We're really good at saving things. And we've saved the campus. We've saved the college. Well, let's do something big, right? Because success is the best revenge. So Free City, I think, is a bit of a you know, it was like warm hearted revenge for having to fight these defensive fights and wasting our time and together. You know, community housing partnership and AFT were the two major pillars of the campaign. and it became a kind of a multi tactic campaign where you had at some point some forces being deployed to do more community action tactics, right? Going to City Hall and bird dogging the supervisors who were on the fence and then a very traditional electoral campaign to get the money to pay for it. And what I think was really nice about Free City coming out of this is that it was actually funded by progressive taxation right and we live in a city where oftentimes like if we want to get something good done, that benefits human beings like building more affordable housing, it's often done through like very market-friendly methods, like bonds and things like that. And I think good people could have an argument over whether paying for public things through bonds is an acceptable compromise or not. But I don't think you can debate that just going and taxing the rich is a far superior method to that. I should say, as a footnote, you know, showing you how slippery the slopes are between local organizing and national conditions is that, a lot it localized the conversation around free college that was going on in the middle of a presidential campaign. Right? Whether you're Bernie Sanders, Hillary or Donald Trump, everybody was taking a position on it. And it was part of the national conversation. And I think that we knew at the time that that wasn't ever going to happen on the national level or - not ever, you know, but certainly not in 2016, where we're going to all of a sudden see like student debt forgiveness and tuition free public colleges there, which is the goal. So we localized it and prefigured a big victory. You know, the saddest thing was I remember that we were basically doing very good, accurate vote projections. We knew that we were going to win Proposition W, which is the thing that funded the thing. Get all excited, go run down to Slim's where the victory party was and everybody was crying and I was like, Well, why is everybody crying? We'd literally been like, skipping down 11th Street, and it was because Donald Trump had just been elected. Right? So, you know, I think that what we did was a pretty amazing victory. Right? But it is a progressive victory in one city. And we need to, certainly take these type of efforts national.

TM: Yeah, it's like a dream come true for an organizer on the left's. All of these things coming together. Also this idea of instead of just reacting to the things again and again just reacting and as you said, like, you know, saving City College from cuts that you all were able to take this moment where you had saved Civic Center campus at the time, and seeing that there was still more energy to push beyond just reacting or just saving the thing - that is super inspiring. I was wondering if you could also talk about what was at stake when Balboa Park - which is the largest campus for City College - what was at stake when that fight over, what was a parking lot, there were several moments in the past ten years when it could have gone left and it could have become market rate housing. And now it is to become affordable housing, 100% affordable, although some of that affordable housing is set aside for people making above 100% of the area median income, which we could talk about, but at several points, yeah, it could have

gone in a very different direction because there were some forces who wanted to see that parking lot become straight up market rate housing.

JT: The Balboa Park thing was like, we had a crew of people that were so concerned with Balboa Park You know, without that pressure, you wouldn't have seen the high level of affordability and there's other factors as well. But without the pressure that came from not just City College folks, but even the more conservative neighborhood groups would raise affordability as a demand not because they actually want to live next to middle and working class people and everything. But they thought you know, if they raised that demand. It could you know, somehow derail the project... Like an unreasonable demand, you know, or whatnot. But it definitely put pressure to make it much more beneficial. You know, like, my vision of affordable housing, you know, is much more closer to like social housing in ways, is like, yeah, I want, I want, I want massive amounts of working class housing built that include people coming out of the streets up to nurses. Right? I don't want nurses displaced even though they maybe like 120 AMI, right? Like I want them to live here and firefighters and teachers, although most of us are, we'd now qualify for the lower income shit-

TM: I know, right?

JT: -because of austerity. But so it was you know, it improved the outcome there, you know, all that resistance and agitation there. So, you know, hats off to it.

TM: Yeah, yeah, Could you talk a little bit about who in the Free City fight, who did you come up against? Who was like some of the major opposition to that fight?

JT: The surprise part was that there wasn't a ton of opposition, hardcore opposition. There were people that withheld their support. Mayor Lee wasn't, you know, London Breed, weren't excited about it, but there wasn't a ton of organized opposition. In fact, I think that the only people that took out like ballot arguments against Proposition W were like the Republicans and the Libertarians and like given the Trump candidacy at the time, I was like, please, can you take out some more? You know, it actually really helped us a lot. People like Alisa [Messer], who worked on the implementation of it, can talk about how hard it has been to get the regulatory agreements, make - you know, and get the details because you pass the legislation, and then the Free City Commission, how to negotiate with the campus to, you know, just do all the technical things of how you transfer money from one, and what the conditions were, and who could be included or excluded because of this. What was the role of past student debt, things like that. And so that's really where the opposition and the roadblock came into is like coming up with the regulations that interpret and implement the legislation.

TM: Did you have any sense as like W was coming into being and it passed, there was a moment when then Mayor Ed Lee was like, okay, all this money, it's in the general fund. And I could take it. I could put it into City College which it was intended for according to the vote that passed, or I could take it and put it into, you know, something else.

JT: Yeah. I mean, that's always been the threat. And if it wasn't for the follow up legislation that happened, I think there were two pieces of it. I mean, it's not going to be a threat for like another 20 years right? There's been trailing legislation that has made Free City a thing for the next two decades and so it's safe for a while but because of the way that you know tax law is passed if we name the purpose as like, this has to go to City College in the ballot measure, it would need a supermajority. So what the strategy was - and it worked but by the skin of its teeth - was to have the Board of supervisors pass a resolution saying if a piece of legislation ever looking like Prop W were to ever pass, we would use it for City College, which is like a pretty flimsy thing because the mayor, the way that San Francisco is, the mayor has a lot of power, right, over the budget. But again, I think it goes back to that block by block, neighborhood by neighborhood coalition, where it became a political liability to go against City College in that way and go against the students. And so, you know, there's certainly a lot of compromises in it there because you never win anything, everything that...that you want when you're doing a campaign. I always told one of my students who was really upset about all these compromises, like no these are your opportunities to continue our work. So, you know, get busy.

TM: Yeah, yeah, it helps that, you know, free education is a really popular thing. What would you say to people at other community colleges in California that would like to see something like Free City happen locally.

JT: Well, you know, build broad base political support because anything you win can be taken away from you. If you don't have that, you know, use it as an opportunity to build a long term relationships beyond that campaign and public education is one of those things that is a really powerful tool to shift the debate right because even more conservative people will listen around education. Right. And community colleges are certainly, are certainly used by everybody right? You know, God, my Tuesday my class I got a got a spread from from left to right for sure in that class. And that's what - that's, that's part of the beauty of it. So you have all these opportunities to talk about the value of the commons, you know, the value of the public sector, the value of working class education. I get worried because I'm super excited that, you know, Peralta has been free for two semesters now but it's a pilot program and it was passed because, you know, people on the - on the board of trustees of Peralta thought, hey, you know, let's try this and see if we can pay for it. Our enrollment's down, maybe it'll bring in some money from the enrollment numbers, you know, powerful people making the right choice. But without that base, you know, it could go away in a second. We have no idea. But it is exciting to see something that you worked on, like those ripple effects shifting things and, I didn't even have to do any work for it.

TM: It's amazing as a precedent. I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about the department that you teach in in City College, Labor and Community Studies, which is certainly not offered at every college. How did this unique department come about?

JT: Welcome to our new office. I'm just putting all my Just Seeds stuff up. if you're ever looking for an obscure labor book that's out of print or not in your library, it's probably over here. Come on over. Labor and Community Studies is part of a really long tradition

of worker education, I think about the worker schools of the 1930s that came out of that - like the Wobblies School and Highlander, you know, I situate it in that because what we're here to do is to provide training and political education for people who want to become organizers. And when I say organize, I don't mean just paid. I mean I love it when my students get a job somewhere but it's also for people who want to take more leadership in their communities. Tenant council members in supportive housing have been a big thing. I have people from Mujeres Unidas as taking our classes. So we provide a certificate in labor and community organizing. And we're part of a Social Justice Associates of Arts with an emphasis in Labor Studies. We obviously have an Organizing 101 course. We have Who Builds America, a kind of People's History of the United States framework, we have a class that's all around the history of housing, politics and policy from the 1930s up to now. But the basic thing is it just goes back to like my approach to this job. And I've only had this Chair for like, you know, two years now and been part time here since 2015, is that, you know, the Left can talk a really, really good game around inclusion and wanting everybody at the table and say all the right words and acronyms. But if you're not making everyday people feel comfortable with participating, you know, the room is always dominated by people who are already walking in the most empowered and feeling themselves as the song goes. Right? And so making sure that everybody who wants to participate is armed with outreach skills, meeting facilitation skills and some historical or political examples, just makes for a better movement, you know, it just means that you can have, people with duties, sit down next to people with pitches and figure out how to make a movement.

TM: Yeah. It sounds like I should be taking that housing class in particular. Well, much appreciated. You have a couple books I definitely recommend that we'll link in the show notes and we'll see you around town soon.

JT: Yeah, anytime.

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