

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 4 Episode 7: Mary Kay Henry
Building The Most inclusive, Racially Diverse, Female Dominated Middle Class
the Nation Has Ever Seen
Airdate: March 16, 2023

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Hey, Mary Kay. How are you doing?

MARY KAY HENRY:

I'm great. How are you doing?

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

I'm good, I'm good. I was just restarting everything because I was having some glitchy wifi.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Oh!

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

So, here's hoping that I am not glitching anymore. So, if you see me freeze, just wave.

Hi all, I'm Abigail Disney and welcome to All Ears. In recent months, I've been on the road with my new documentary, *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*. In the film, I tell the stories of some Disney workers to show how the American Dream has become a nightmare for so many. Of course, the problem is not just with Disney. Today, nearly half of all American workers are struggling to make ends meet. That's why in this season of All Ears, I'm taking a deep dive into some of the big questions raised in the film with folks who are doing the most Disney thing possible, using their imaginations, in this case to rethink modern American capitalism, because if we don't reimagine how it all works, and fix it, we're going to be in big trouble.

If you've been paying attention, you've probably heard the rumbling out there in America: workers are speaking out, standing up, and fighting in numbers not seen in generations.

Unionization efforts are popping up everywhere from Starbucks, to high profile magazines, to college campuses. There have been organizing drives at Amazon warehouses and inside Apple stores and don't forget the Great Resignation, where workers left bad jobs in droves in search of higher wages, better benefits, and yes, a little more dignity.

Now, to be clear, all this doesn't mean labor is winning. Not quite yet. To put it all in perspective, right now about 10% of American workers belong to a union. That is low compared to the 1960s when nearly one in three workers did. And despite some recent successes, there's little evidence that any of this is going to get any easier or move any faster. In fact, corporate America is spending record amounts of money on union avoidance efforts, while at the same time trying to pass laws that make it harder for workers to demand their fair share of the pie. That's why I'm excited to talk with one of the great warriors of organized labor, Mary Kay Henry.

Since 2010, Mary Kay Henry has been president of the SEIU, the Service Employees International Union. It's the second largest union in the country, and it's growing fast, representing about 2 million service workers in hospitals, nursing homes, libraries, law enforcement, airports, even the janitors at Disney who appeared in *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*.

So there is much to discuss.

Welcome, Mary Kay, and thank you so much for taking the time.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Thank you, Abby, for that great film *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*. It was such an expression for me of all of the lives of workers that I have the privilege to walk beside, so I'm glad to be with you.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Yeah, I felt really honored that they trusted me enough to let me in like that. And I was so impressed with everybody and impressed with the union, too, frankly.

Well, that's where I wanted to start, was in California, right? Because they're service workers. And so maybe you can define a service worker to start with?

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yeah. 80% of the US economy is a service economy: retail, fast food, what the workers do at Disney, cleaning, custodial, home care work, childcare work.

We talk a lot about manufacturing jobs, but it's a sliver of the American economy and we're really committed at SEIU to eliminating poverty wage work in the service sector and making those jobs the foundation of the next, most inclusive, most racially diverse, most female-dominated middle class the nation's ever seen.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

And just in SEIU alone, you represent 2 million people, right?

MARY KAY HENRY:

That's right. And 2 million home care workers are going to become 5 million home care workers by 2030, because of the aging of our population.

And airport service work is exploding. They have a lot in common with the workers at Disney that you talked about. The people that keep that park sparkling clean are also the same people that do it in our nation's airports.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

So fast food workers are sort of where a lot of energy has been for a while now, and it's been a really notoriously hard sector to organize. But you guys accomplished something extraordinary in California. Can you tell me about that bill?

MARY KAY HENRY: Yeah, it's the Fast Food Recovery Act and it sets a service council that has fast food workers, their advocates, franchise employers and government officials sitting at a table thinking about how to solve problems on the job. And so, AB 257 wrote into law a way for half a million workers, primarily workers of color, women and immigrants, a chance to create a better life for themselves and their families.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

And the council was pretty radical because it would be sort of a permanent entity where folks would always be talking to each other. They wouldn't only come together in moments when things were really stressed and everybody was really angry, right? It was an open line of communication where everybody was at the table.

MARY KAY HENRY:

That's right. We could deal with PPE. We could have had a way to deal with personal protective equipment at the beginning of the pandemic or when the heat waves were happening and workers had terrible trouble in the stores with heat stroke, there could have been a mechanism for dealing with it. So yeah, it is radical.

And the industry, as you know, Abby, three days after Gavin signed it into law, on Labor Day, announced that they want to go to the California voters in 2024 and stop it. They are terrified of workers simply having a seat at the table and a voice on the job.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

So they just came out and spent a lot of money on a lot of signatures right out of the gate, and before it could even be implemented.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yep. Starbucks put in \$2 million. Chipotle put in \$2 million. We know that McDonald's is

moving a lot of money through their franchise owners in the state of California and through the franchise association that's put in \$2 million.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

And when I see how hard Starbucks has been fighting, just fighting the idea of having workers organized, it's just mind blowing to me how there are CEOs who think of themselves as nice, liberal people who can't tolerate the idea of their workers having and expressing their rights.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Right. And we would love to take your sentiment, Abby, and make it the sort of popular opinion that employers can't do business in our country if they're going to fight workers' desire to join together and bargain for a better life.

And so, Starbucks being anti-union should be as unacceptable as Starbucks sexually harassing their top executives. So, just like the #MeToo movement made it unacceptable for sexual harassment and assault on the job, we want to make it unacceptable to have anti-union behavior.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

You, the SEIU represents, like, the most poorly paid workers. I mean, every one of the jobs that you mentioned are some of the most poorly paid and poorly treated jobs. Why?

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yeah, I think these jobs were written out of labor laws and labor protections back in the thirties. And they were written out because southern Democrats made a compromise and wrote out all the jobs being done by black and brown workers, both in the south and in the west, because farm workers didn't have labor protections, domestic workers didn't have labor protections, all the tipped workers, no labor protections.

And so, I would say it's racism and sexism that got written into not valuing service and care work. And that has continued to this day, and employers have figured out how to franchise, contract out, or make the workers independent contractors so they don't have a right under current labor law to join together in unions.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Which is why you're interested in sectoral organizing.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yeah. If you think about the California story that we started with — AB 257 — individual fast food workers may be 30 workers in one store. 30 workers bargaining with

McDonald's, Wendy's, or Burger King doesn't have the power they need to change those jobs.

And so it really requires thinking across those employers in that sector to raise wages and create good jobs that people could either advance from or be able to feed their families on one job. And that's what happens in countries around the world. In France, they just agreed to sectoral bargaining for gig workers.

And so we think sectoral organizing and bargaining for fast food, nursing home workers, airport service workers, is a way for workers to have the power they need to end poverty-wage work and create living-wage jobs all across the service sector.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

You know, I think service work, organizing service work and visibilizing service work is sort of like, I think, the magic key to changing attitudes about labor more generally.

Because, I think every single one of us is a service worker. It's in some part of our day, every single day. We have to wash the dishes and we have to take care of the kids.

It's personal work. It's human work.

Which kind of comes around to feminism. You've worked in the union movement all of your professional life. I mean, basically you graduated from college, you went straight into SEIU and you've been there ever since. And you have a little bit of a feminist origin story, because when you talk about when you first started organizing, with labor, you were around these UAW women workers and UAW is not a union I associate with women. But can you talk a little bit about those women that you saw in your early days?

MARY KAY HENRY:

I was a work-study student at Michigan State University and I was assigned to do legislative lobbying on a reproductive health drug that we were trying to get stopped. And I ran into a lot of UAW women who were also lobbying to end the reproductive hazards on the assembly line of women having to work in the paint shop or in certain jobs that harmed their pregnancies.

And I was just spellbound by how these women led and had the power of the UAW that I saw legislators respond to.

And they kind of scooped me up and said, "You know, if you really want to make change, you need to join the labor movement because we link all the fights. We link reproductive health and environmental demands and immigration demands, and ending racism and sexism. And so, come join us." And they really inspired me.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Which was what year?

MARY KAY HENRY:

In 1980.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Yeah, so with Ronald Reagan's election, basically.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

So it was a full-court press against the union movement with everything Republicans had. How has that felt all those years to be up against such powerful forces so well coordinated and funded and so determined to crush unions in this country?

MARY KAY HENRY:

I have to say, as an individual organizer, I was always inspired by the incredible courage of individual people that were willing to risk their jobs to make things better for themselves, their families, and their coworkers. That's been the source of my inspiration in the 40 years.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

It was so moving to me that the SEIU workers at Disneyland were organizing a, you know, food bank, a food pantry, for their fellow workers.

And Ralph and Trina in the film who, you know, they don't have a lot of spare time. They're working nights, they're raising four children, and yet there they are, bagging up groceries for their fellow workers. It's really remarkable.

And I do think that the culture we're living in now is so impoverished by this narrative of individualism. I mean, in the eighties, in those dark years, in the eighties and nineties, it felt like they poked a hole in a bucket full of collectivism, and when it all drained out, they filled it with individualism.

I mean, did you feel that draining out of this culture as it was happening? Because I feel like I've watched it in real time.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yeah, this, especially in the Reagan years about "We're all on our own," and "We each need to pull ourselves up." I definitely felt that and I was able to experience being in the labor movement, the contradiction to it. The labor movement had shrunk from 35% of

the economy down to 15% and now 10%. And so that experience of collectivism got diminished.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Yeah. I heard you when you talked to David Axelrod a few years ago, and you talked a little about how in the eighties the unions went into what you called a crouch.

MARY KAY HENRY: Yeah, instead of throwing the doors of our movement open and increasing the organizing of non-union workers, the crouch was, “I better protect the members I’ve got.”

And we lowered our expectation about what was winnable, in the eighties, especially with globalization and the de-industrialization of the Midwest, where there was a huge concentration of union members happening alongside of the attack, where Reagan just summarily fired all the air traffic controllers. And that sent a huge chill in a lot of bargaining, because employers then understood that the highest elected official in the land was going to back union busting whether it was legal or not.

And so, all those conditions created the conditions for the crouch. And I’m proud that at that time, SEIU made a decision to invest more in organizing and really open up the Justice for Janitors campaign, the home care campaigns, and help move our union out of the crouch into opening our doors and helping our current members understand we weren’t going to raise wages and improve their standards unless we organized more workers.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Yeah, yeah. But I think it’s really important that there’s this cross-cutting between feminism and service work, and where the economy is headed, because service work is the fastest growing set of jobs, as you said earlier. And it cannot help but land us in this place of talking about what we call the care economy.

Can you talk a little bit about what we mean when we talk about the care economy?

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yeah, there are currently 2 million childcare jobs and 2 million home care jobs and both of these jobs are growing faster than most other jobs in the economy, and most of them are wages only — no paid time off, no access to social security, no overtime or sick leave or anything like that.

And so, these care jobs are what makes it possible for other jobs to be done in the economy. When somebody comes into your home and is caring for your elderly parent, it allows a full-time worker to leave the home and go earn a living.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

So much of the essential work of life, we've been getting a subsidy on because of sexism and racism.

Maybe if we paid the real cost of those things, which is a person's time and dignity, maybe we could actually monetize those businesses. But as long as they're dominated by low power people, we need the SEIU and others to be very politically powerful to force recognition of them.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yeah, and question our priorities where we're willing to subsidize major corporations in the economy that are earning record profits and have outta control CEO pay, but we're not willing to invest in the care work that is being done in poor communities.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

I read that piece you did really early with the *Times* during the pandemic. You described yourself as "grieving and outraged."

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Can you just describe those early days of the pandemic for you?

MARY KAY HENRY:

I have to say, I took a lot of handwritten notes in that period, because I was working 15 or 20 hours a day and I felt frantic.

It was crystal clear the federal government was abandoning any responsibility for thinking about the health and wellbeing of the nation, and it had the best capacity to move quickly. And so, the states, as we saw, were left to kind of fend for themselves. I had governors calling me asking if we had extra masks. It was just absurd. And then the respirators was the next thing.

But I have to say the grief, for me, Abby, is hundreds of our members every day were dying.

And, any member that a local leader would call me about, I'd write their name down on a card. And so I used to start my mornings remembering their names and saying it out loud and lighting a candle just because it was a way I felt like I could stay connected to, frankly, the horrors that our members were experiencing in New York, Seattle, San Francisco, and LA is where we started hearing about the deaths first.

But the thing that I was the most, I moved from grief to outrage about was what was going on in our nation's nursing homes, the degree to which those employers and the individual owners were left to, again, fend for themselves when there should have been a coordinated government response given the vulnerability of elders.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Yes.

MARY KAY HENRY:

40 to 50% of the deaths, depending on which state you were in in that first year, were in those facilities. That's just wrong. I remember a nursing home worker sitting in her car clutching a ball of masks that she had gotten from dollar stores and she was smuggling into the home because her management team didn't want the workers to bring in their own masks.

I think they were, you know, worried about cross-contamination, but because the workers' masks were under lock and key and they were issued one per month, and the, you know, strings were breaking, it was just like an outrage.

And so this worker called it mass murder. Mass murder is happening. It was very, very, soul crushing and enraging at the same time.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Yeah. But your soul doesn't seem to have been crushed. So, tell me about that. I mean, you're a person of faith.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yeah, my faith helped me kind of sustain the worst of the grief and it's also my faith in the union and the leaders in our union who rose to the occasion and objected in every venue that we could.

You know, there were nurses in Madison, Wisconsin that did one of the first vigils, and they put these candles on the steps of the Capitol that represented all of their coworkers that had been taken by the pandemic, and it was a visual way for them to show the breadth of the impact.

I was really proud of the way that our union, in the face of the grief, was willing to mobilize and, in the memory of the brothers and sisters and siblings that we had lost, make sure that we were not going to let this happen again.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

What was it, 75% of SEIU employees were working through the pandemic?

MARY KAY HENRY:

Oh yeah, and many of them said, “We’re being called essential, but we feel sacrificial.” or “We’re being called essential, but we’re treated like zeros.” Each of our members had sort of a different phrase because the praise being heaped on in the early days — yeah — was like a big thing, but it didn’t translate into a change in people’s conditions.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

So it was very clear that at least the people in power in this economy didn’t have any intention of changing things, and I think in some ways used the pandemic to maybe bring in more automation and shift things around to their advantage.

Have we gone back to the same economy, do you think? Or are we at a different place right now?

MARY KAY HENRY:

Well, I think our members experienced that billionaires and corporate executives did very well in the midst of all this tragedy, and that the racial and economic inequality that existed pre-pandemic got worse.

And I think it’s creating the conditions for the uprising of working people saying, “No, I’m enough is enough. I’m going to reject the status quo. We’re not going to return to normal. We’re going to create a new normal and we’re going to do it through our collective action.”

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

I hope you’re right about that. I had naively hoped that the billionaires might see what was happening and might feel, you know, I’m an idiot, clearly. Because it just felt like they were all sitting there in front of their bags of money and they seemed fine with the way it was happening.

I mean, at most they contributed money to hospitals, but that felt like - I don’t understand the disconnect. I’ll never understand it. But I think it goes back to this narrative of “We’re all in it for ourselves.” So, you are now facing landscape with a lot of right-to-work laws.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yeah.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

How do unions continue to build in the context of all of these Orwellian-ly named right-to-work laws?

MARY KAY HENRY:

You know, I think it's like going back to basics and making it clear that even in the face of those Supreme Court decisions that have weakened unions and state legislative decisions that have weakened unions, we can build a powerful movement for change, especially by backing the Amazon workers that are organizing and from all forms of non-traditional organizing together with the more traditional organizing, because I actually think it's workers deciding to disrupt the status quo in whatever way, whether it's striking or joining together and filing an NLRB petition or protesting climate change like the Google workers did.

There's lots of collective action that's happening and so I really think the traditional labor movement needs to back all this innovation and creativity that's happening all across the country, because I actually think the fundamental structure of the labor movement where members elect leaders, leaders elect other leaders, is a really good form of teaching people civic participation and democracy in every aspect of our lives.

Like our members talk about how much tougher they feel like they are in parent-teacher associations because they have a union in their workplace. So it allows people to participate with more confidence in a lot of the structures that exist.

We have to be willing to change and adapt to the changing economy. And I think gig work is the current expression of that. There was a time in the labor movement where we thought we had to cling to the definition of employee that was created back in the thirties and reinforced in the fifties and we are actually advocating for, "Let's talk to the gig workers about the standards they want to have in this new sector of the economy, and let's establish a new set of benefits and protections that make sense for these workers, and combine it with the flexibility that collective bargaining should help liberate the worker and not make the worker suspect to the app or the algorithm, but engage it in a way that actually makes that job a good job, as well."

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Well, I mean, the adaptability and the flexibility has to be hardwired into labor because work is going to evolve based on the way employers change work to get around people organizing. And so, we have a gig economy because it's a way to short-circuit people organizing and disempowering them as workers.

If we had a stronger social safety net, gig work wouldn't be anywhere near as awful and difficult. With some basic protections for their safety and job security, it would basically be fine. So, I think that the union movement has finally showed a capacity to change.

Global warming, similarly. I mean, you mentioned the Google workers and the thing is global warming's coming for every worker, everywhere and there was a time when we got told a story that we could choose labor or we could choose the environment.

MARY KAY HENRY: Mm-hmm.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

And that was a false choice, always. But I think that the crouch that you described fit into that narrative.

MARY KAY HENRY:

And I feel like that's really shifted, especially the Biden administration has done a really good job talking about how taking care of the environment requires the creation of good work in the clean energy sector so fossil fuel workers can transition into the clean energy sector. And that false choice has been punctured in a really important way, I think.

Like, we have home care workers that just won the right to figure out how to be climate frontline folks in California because of the fires and floods that home care workers were exposed to with their elderly consumers and couldn't get out fast enough.

We have green janitor programs happening in downtowns where the janitors learn about energy efficiency in their downtown building and they want to take it to their poor neighborhoods and so employers and the government are working together with our members. It's really exciting to me.

ABIGAIL DISNEY: So, what's next for the American labor movement? What do you see happening?

MARY KAY HENRY:

I think we're in this moment of an incredible revival, but it's going to be a new American labor movement, not the labor movement of the last one hundred years. It'll be a labor movement that includes all kinds of workers, and will be majority people of color and will be led by young people, as we've seen in Starbucks and Amazon and the fast food organizing that's happening across the country.

It includes those fast food workers in California pushing back on the fast food industry's attack on their sector council and being able to win that initiative with California voters and get to a bargaining table in 2025.

It includes airport service workers joining together, and in my dreams, Abby, the four airlines coming to their senses and creating a way for a million service workers to

bargain for a national contract. Instead of us organizing airport by airport, which will take 20 years, we could do it in the next five.

And then home care and childcare workers electing a president and a Congress that is willing to invest billions of dollars in those jobs and turning those jobs into really good living wage jobs where people's families can do better and elders and people with disability and children can do better because we have a sane, universal care system in this country.

So, I actually think there's a way to begin to take the uprising and turn it into permanent change that creates a democratic, independent union movement in the country that helps secure the democracy for the future, as well.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Narrative building, where does that fit into - this is a pretty grand vision you have, unions for all?

MARY KAY HENRY:

Well, I think telling that story in a way that people can see themselves in it and how it would make a difference in their lives is really key.

I think you did it in the film when you talked about the fairytale of the existing American dream and puncturing the right wing narrative that somehow, "If I'm on food stamps, or if I'm getting housing subsidy or Medicaid, that somehow I'm lazy or not working hard," when most people that are accessing those benefits are working two and three jobs at 80 to a hundred hours a week just to try and keep a roof over the head for their kids.

And so, I think all the narrative work is really essential to turning the tide.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

So 43 years at the SEIU, right? That's kind of extraordinary.

MARY KAY HENRY:

I tell my nieces and nephews I'm a dinosaur in the American economy because they've all done two or three different jobs for different employers and they're in their thirties.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Well, that's very ironic, right? Because that's the jobs that when people were being hired in 1980, they were starting to kill the very jobs that would keep you in a place for 43 years.

But, what keeps you in the fight?

MARY KAY HENRY:

You know, I believe that every life is precious and that every human being deserves dignity and respect. And what keeps me going, Abby, is being furious at the conditions that the Disney workers were in that you unveiled.

That, in order to make ends meet, they had to create a food bank. It's just outrageous when you think about working for one of the most iconic employers in the world, who's doing fine economically and could do better by the lowest wage workers in that company. And that's true for Amazon workers, McDonald's, Wendy's, Burger King, Starbucks, all across the economy.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Actually is doing more than fine, economically. That's kind of the point. Far more than is necessary for them to do.

Exxon is reporting a record profit, the most profit they've made ever, ever, ever. And we spent the last year talking about gas prices going over \$5/gallon. So, I wonder if these things are connected?

The fundamentalist economic vision that we're functioning under right now, this fundamentalist capitalism is choking us all to death.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Yes it is. And it is part of what workers want to reject in terms of the status quo. And that's why I think encouraging unions and the ability of workers to check that corporate power is so critical to the future of our democracy.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Well that is the perfect last words, right there. You just summed it up beautifully.

Thank you, Mary Kay.

MARY KAY HENRY:

Thank you, Abby.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

Yeah, this has been great. You can follow Mary Kay on Twitter @MaryKayHenry, all one word. The SEIU also tweets about all that its members are up to @SEIU. And for more information about the Fight For 15, go to fightfor15.org.

If you want to see *The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales*, it's available on Amazon, and iTunes, and vudu. And we're hosting screenings across the country, so to

find out if there's a screening near you, or to host a screening, please visit americandreamdoc.com. That's americandreamdoc.com.

Next week, I talk with author Rick Wartzman about the company everybody loves to hate:

RICK WARTZMAN:

Walmart went from being an iconic company in a good way to maybe the most vilified employer in America.

ABIGAIL DISNEY:

That's next week on All Ears.

You've been listening to All Ears with me, Abigail Disney. Our supervising producer is Alexis Pancrazi. Jake Frankenfield is our associate producer. Our engineer is Florence Barrau-Adams. Bob Golden composed our theme song. And our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes.

For Fork Office, the All Ears team is Angie Wang, Dominique Bouchard, Phil Nuxoll, Codey Young, and Cathie Camacho.

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Thanks for listening.