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Mobilizing Social Workers to Action: Frameworks for Social Change

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Peter Sobota [00:00:11] From the University at Buffalo School of Social Work, welcome to the In Social Work podcast. I'm Peter Sobota, thanks for joining us and good as always to have you along, everybody. Lately, in fact almost every day, we hear of a new and lightning fast assault on the people, institutions and values that are near and dear and even fundamental to the profession of social work. Many social workers and advocates of human rights and justice are wondering. How do we even talk about what's going on? What are the frameworks to understand what's happening and what can we do about it beyond the performative? On today's show, we are joined by Dr. Rosemary or Rosi Barbera. Dr. Barber is a long time human rights advocate, student and scholar of social movements and an academic who brings an international perspective to her thinking and activism. She'll discuss where she thinks social work is. And needs to be in our current climate and talk about why it's important to look at and connect history to the present and how these histories can be instructed in light of social movements and actions in the US and other countries. She'll also spend some time describing the need to engage in political action, education about policy and political processes, and finally about moving human rights from theory to mobilization and action consistent with our values. Rosemary Barbera, PhD, is associate professor in the Department of Social Work at LaSalle University. Hi Rosi, welcome to In Social Work. Thanks for joining us.

Rosi Barbera [00:01:52] Hi Peter, good to see you. Good to be with you.

Peter Sobota [00:01:54] Yeah, you've already told me that it's beautiful in Philadelphia. And I'm not gonna tell you what it's like here in beautiful, it's what is it? It's always sunny in Buffalo, is it to coin a phrase, right? All right, yeah.

Rosi Barbera [00:02:08] It's always Sonny and Philly is a

Peter Sobota [00:02:10] I know that's why I'm goofing around. Yeah. All right. Well, thanks again for joining us. So let's let's just get right to it, if you will. So I think it's probably fair to say we're living in, you know, to say the least interesting times.

Rosi Barbera [00:02:28] Mm-hmm

Peter Sobota [00:02:29] And I know that we spoke previously about, how do we mobilize our profession and ourselves, our students into action? You would think that we would be good at that already, but obviously we're a work in progress. So every day we hear of regular and kind of lightning fast assaults on people, institutions, values that are, you know, dear and fundamental to our profession, as well as human rights and justice in

general. So and more than ever, you, know, we're both educators, I hear students, colleagues, and even like-minded, you know, lay folks. Wondering out loud about things like, you know, how do we even talk about what's going on with each other? You know, what are resources or frameworks to make sense of it all? And then, finally, you, know, the most practical, what can we do about it, especially beyond the performative stuff, right? So that is I you know, I that's our mission for the podcast you're going to you're gonna solve it for us, which was very nice of you on this Friday afternoon. So yeah, so that's where we're gonna go. When we look for ways and frameworks to mobilize social workers to action, where do we even start?

Rosi Barbera [00:04:10] Yeah, so, you know, I think I kind of see this as like, you know a thinking out loud kind of an experiment, not experiment, but you know exercise here. And so other people hopefully will, as they listen have some ideas. But I think one of the things for me that's been really important is to look at history. And you know and of course we know like history's being erased or trying to be erased, you know recently with so many different directives Um, things going on at the National Museum of African American History, all of that, all of that kind of stuff, you know, we're not getting the full sense and we've never really, I don't think, gotten the full history of what it is, what our country, the roots of our country and we also don't know a heck of a lot about other countries as well. I think the history that we really need to know is the history from below.

Peter Sobota [00:05:09] From below, below?

Rosi Barbera [00:05:10] Below like the people the people who are not the people in power.

Peter Sobota [00:05:15] I see.

Rosi Barbera [00:05:17] You know, and I think that's important for us to know in our own history in the United States as well as internationally and knowing and understanding that the history we like and the history we may not like, you know, like, and I mean this particularly in social work, right? Owning up to our faults in social work that actually aren't just in the past that we still kind of continue to use.

Peter Sobota [00:05:43] Oh yeah

Rosi Barbera [00:05:43] theories that are of a colonial mindset, right? That, you know, and practices and asking, you know round people and small pegs, all of that kind of stuff. So I think about, in terms of the United States, I think like the work of Howard Zinn. People's history of the Unites States. I think we can learn a lot from his work and others like him. The Zinn education project and rethinking schools have lots of different materials and and really accessible history that we don't often learn. We know something about the Underground Railroad, but I'm not sure that we know enough about it as a social movement. And I would tie that to the sanctuary movement today with immigrants, both sanctuary movement in the 80s and today, and there's a real common thread there. But what was going on and the power of those people and the courage that they had. And where did people get so much courage? Yeah. When the consequences could be death, right? I mean, really incredible to think about it. Early union organizing as well. I was just at a talk about early union organizing in Philadelphia starting in the late 1700s. Like I didn't know that. I've lived in Philadelphia most of my life except when I lived out of the country I didn't know about all this really interesting work going on that laid a great foundation for workers' rights and the like. Anti-lynching, Ida B. Wells and so many others, right, that we

finally, what is a couple of years ago, got an anti-lyncing bill in the U.S. Congress after all those years. These are all kind of like social movements and groups of people that are part of our history that we can gain strength from. And that I think we need to study and look at and think about and say, what can we learn from that and how can we use it today? And then something a little bit more recently, something called the solidarity economy, like looking at different ways to do economics. So cooperatives, whether that's worker-owned cooperatives or member-owned co-operatives, they push back against oppressive capitalist system that is all about consumerism. So here in Philadelphia, for example, there's a, they don't call it a cooperative. It's like a tool sharing program, but these kinds of things.

Peter Sobota [00:08:22] Ah, yeah.

Rosi Barbera [00:08:22] Solidarity economy right where you pay a small fee and you're a member and everyone doesn't need a chainsaw on your block right you can you can share that there's a bike there's a bike um one as well where you can go and use the tools to fix your bicycle um all of those kinds of things like creating different ways to operate and That also helps us build community, right? All of these things. Also are about building community, getting to know each other, you know, and sharing our stories with one another, right? Stories are so critically important. And I also think about like what we can learn, particularly from Latin America, because that's kind of where I've lived from outside the United States. And just like Zinn has a book about US history, Eduardo Galeano has a books called The Open Veins of Latin America which tells history from the bottom up in Latin America, and so... I think there's a lot to learn, but kind of recently, if we look at human rights movements across the Americas, despite horrific kinds of human rights violations of torture, disappearance, exile, political execution, people fought back, right? People fought back. They didn't, many people didn't hesitate. Some people did hesitate, let's be honest, but many people did not hesitate to continue to go out there. And to say, what's going on here, right? When I lived in Chile and Bolivia, but mostly I lived mostly in Chile, I was part of a number of human rights organizations. We would go out in the street in one, for example, and go to places where there was torture going on. And we would say, in Chile there's torture, it happens here and the media doesn't say anything about. Or I think about the family members that disappeared who would chain themselves to a fence outside the presidential offices, knowing that. They were going to be the next ones, right, to be... And so those kinds of things, like taking that strength. And these are all history of very common, ordinary people that have a lot to teach us about how we can push back about these assaults, as you said, these assault that are happening in our country against people, against just who we are. And I think a lot of times social workers don't look at these. Don't look these histories and these social movements enough, because we're too navel-gazing and we only look at our work. We don't have to be the leaders of everything. We can be members and participants and get involved in these things and learn about them and see how we can connect to them and we can connect. What's there to the work that we do. So there's some of the things I think it's really important for us to think about, you know, social movements build power, they build community, and we definitely need both community and a change in the balance of power, you know in our country, not just at this historical moment, but you know I think, I think it's a long time coming. And so that's a really important thing. That I think we can think about. And if we don't connect to our history, then as the saying goes, right, we just repeat it.

Peter Sobota [00:11:49] Yeah.

Rosi Barbera [00:11:50] Now, I'm not sure if we repeat it so much or it just continues, right? That the abuses and the assaults, you know, are, you know keep going.

Peter Sobota [00:12:03] Oh man, there were so many, I didn't want to interrupt you, but there were so many things that I was thinking about while you were talking. And I, you know, I'm thinking about, you know, the, the. I think people are too cynical sometimes, and we failed to realize what's happened here in even just the United States. And so you've got like what the civil rights movement, um, women's liberation, gay and lesbian liberation. You mentioned unions, disability rights. These have all, you know, that none of them are perfect, of course, but they have made a difference. Yes. And they're almost blueprints for what might, I don't, will it work in this day and age? That's a great question. Are there commonalities amongst those movements that made them successful? Could you? I know I kind of hit you with that one just kind of, you know, off the top of my head, but what do you think? Are there?

Rosi Barbera [00:13:10] Yeah, I think some of the commonalities are people who understand that their lives are connected, and so, and people who care about other people, people who have a real kind of empathy, or I would go beyond empathy, to solidarity and understand that kind of concept. That's a great word, yeah. That we are. You know, we're together, we are human beings together, and we're, you know we're and there's other living beings as well. I mean, we haven't even gone into that, that whole thing in terms of the planet and climate and things like that. But I think there are some of the commonalities that building communities where people can work together and feel supported by one another. And not just, and this is one of the things I think is really important, and not just in the work but supportive personally as well Right. It's not just all kind of instrumental towards like the goals of the movement, but just as human beings, right? That supporting people as human beings and caring for one another. I think that's, you know, there are things that are really important for us to keep in mind.

Peter Sobota [00:14:27] Yeah, thanks. You know, I think about, you know, I've been a practitioner social worker and an academic now for I think 40 years or something like that. And I kind of think back over. I think it's fair to be critical about social work. We have been complicit in a lot of things we shouldn't be proud of, but I'm proud to be a social worker and everything that I criticize is really, I would call it a lover's quarrel. But it is interesting how, at least my take, it'd be interesting to hear what you say about this is that... At least in our graduate school, many of the MSWs come in really are, you know, aspiring to clinical careers and to work in those settings. And, you, know, I get that. I mean. You kind of hang around long enough and you realize that best, that's not very efficient. And that large scale change is really kind of where the rubber meets the road. What have we kind of gotten wrong about that? Is that social work education, do you think? Are there things we could do better? You mentioned history. Most MSW programs teach the history and policy of social work, don't they?

Rosi Barbera [00:16:01] Um

Peter Sobota [00:16:02] you would hope.

Rosi Barbera [00:16:03] You would hope but how much time do they how much? Yeah, you know, oftentimes the history is in the policy class and it's one semester. Yeah, it's been reduced, right? Like I know.

Peter Sobota [00:16:16] I'm very excited, we just split them here in Buffalo. We decided it wasn't enough, so we split them.

Rosi Barbera [00:16:22] I'm so happy. Yeah, because when I got my master's, it was, it was two semesters. And so we got a real sense of, you know, the history and then also a policy means all of that. So that's really great to hear and very encouraging to hear. I think, I think we got into this false fight about, you know, a micro, macro, macro micro divide kind of thing, not understanding the connections between the two and how They are so dependent on one another, really. I always say to students, so I teach community and policy and that's where my practice areas are. But I always said, I can't do community work if I can communicate with people. Like if I don't have good personal skills, communication skills, if I cannot understand people, if we can't build rapport, right? Then you're not gonna be able to do any community work. Likewise, if you're doing kind of more one-on-one and clinical work without the larger context, then are we just helping people adapt to some dysfunction in society? So I used to be, there's an organization here in Philadelphia, immigrant rights organization that I was one of the founding board members of. And when I cycled off the board, I continued to participate there. As an MSW supervisor. There were two staff people, neither one were social workers. So I would supervise students from Bryn Mawr and University of Pennsylvania that were doing internships. And sometimes they were second year students doing social and economic development or policy or community. But oftentimes they were first year students going into clinical work. Yeah. And what they always said at the end of that year was they now had a community context for clinical work I felt much better prepared to connect people to resources in their community, not resources in terms of services, resources in terms of organizations and ways to change things that were impacting the quality of their lives.

Peter Sobota [00:18:31] Yeah, that's the rub. Oh, I'm sorry, but that's that's the rub, right? Because we've separated them when they're really kind of entwined there. It's it that's a false dichotomy in a lot of ways. Sorry for interrupting.

Rosi Barbera [00:18:41] I agree, right? That they really are connected. Is it true that some people make better clinicians? Yes, of course. No, I'm no beef with that. But how can we, and I don't think we've looked enough about how we can collaborate together. Rather than just saying, all right, these are two different ways of practice and they shouldn't, they're all meat. No. We have think about, well, how do we, how can we collaborate with that? The folks in Boston, the Boston Liberation Help folks have a great way to do that. And I really enjoy their work and they use Paulo Freire's work, you know, clinical work in a community context, right? And so they're really kind of combining it and doing some really interesting things. But if we don't work across systems, we're just gonna be spinning our wheels. We're just going to be, you know... So we're just going to, you know, not be looking at. What are some of the structural issues that are causing so many people to suffer so much?

Peter Sobota [00:19:45] Yeah. And it's really, this is very timely because just recently, maybe two weeks ago, I asked, I teach like a foundational interventions class here at UB. And I asked it was in the context of an assignment and I asked my students to wrestle with as like people who are becoming socialized and, you know, just went, what is it called, cutting their teeth in the profession. I asked them to kind of be reflective and ask themselves, you know, are you working to provide services primarily, or are you working for social change? And I, you know, I gave them, you know, that wealth pyramid that shows how, you know, wealth is distributed, you know, all in the top, you know, the top

people have all the net worth and what net wealth, and I them who they were in solidarity with.

Speaker 4 [00:20:43] Right.

Peter Sobota [00:20:43] And they actually, I would say half of them, I love my students, but half of them struggled with like what solidarity meant.

Rosi Barbera [00:20:51] Yeah.

Peter Sobota [00:20:52] And so, yeah, I think a lot of people come in looking to provide services because that's, it's necessary. I mean, I'm not criticizing it, but there's a never-ending supply if you don't change the environment and the context that promotes those folks coming into your office on a never ending basis. And I think that's where social work is kind of complicit.

Rosi Barbera [00:21:17] Yeah, yeah, I had a student right at a different institution, who was an advanced standing.

Peter Sobota [00:21:23] See, you're smart. You're talking about students that you're previous. I was criticizing my current one. So, you know, but I mean.

Rosi Barbera [00:21:28] No, no, no. But I mean, I've had these students, one particular student at a previous institution who had gone somewhere else for the BSW and came into our advanced standing and said to me, when I was a BSW student, I was taught that social justice meant more services. Now I understand that social Justice means we don't need so many services. I said yes.

Peter Sobota [00:21:51] Yeah, oh, that's good

Rosi Barbera [00:21:52] You know, like that, you understand that that's, you know, yes, are we gonna need services? Of course, there'll always be hospice workers. There'll always all sorts of things. But so much of what we're doing is just constantly putting out these fires that are caused by the systemic or structural issues. And we never really get to do the other, get to the other stuff, right?

Peter Sobota [00:22:19] Yeah, I don't, I'm going to change gears slightly here, but I don t want you to get away from us without because you're, I think, at least in my opinion, you're kind of unique in that you've spent a lot of time working internationally. And like you mentioned in Chile and also in Bolivia, if I remember our conversation. Are the movements and the expression of social work similar, different, and if so, in what ways? What have their social movements been? And acted similarly to the ones here in the States.

Rosi Barbera [00:23:02] Well, if we think about social work, social work in Latin America is much more political than it is in the United States and by a point. Yeah. I mean, by that is not party politics, but.

Peter Sobota [00:23:16] Mm-hmm.

Rosi Barbera [00:23:17] Political in the sense of being much more invested in protest, much more pushing for policies, and more work at the community level, you know, more understanding of economics. That's actually one of the reasons I wanted to go and get a

PhD was meeting so many people and social work that didn't understand economics. And I'm like, well. You know, and I mean, like also educators, and I'm like, well, if we're not, they don't understand that our students aren't gonna understand either how that plays into everything that we do. So I think there's a much larger understanding and a real partnership in being involved in social movements for all different reasons. So in Chile, I mean this is a while ago, but in Chile after the coup in 1973, One of the first things that was done was closing the School of Social Work at the University of Chile.

Peter Sobota [00:24:16] And weren't social workers in Chile among the disappeared?

Rosi Barbera [00:24:22] Oh yeah, there are actually the, if you go to the, you know, here's some self promotion. If you go the Catherine Kendall Institute webpage that's part of CSWE's webpage, there are international social work leaders and they're usually individuals, but I wrote a piece about the disappeared social workers in Chile there.

Peter Sobota [00:24:42] Ahhhh...

Rosi Barbera [00:24:44] And so the irony is that, so there are now social work programs again in Chile, and one of the programs actually is in the building where the former School of Social Work for the University of Chile was, and they had a ceremony a number of years ago for those disappeared social workers, and there's a plaque there for them, et cetera. But they were, you know, it was closed down and they were disappeared because social workers were seen as part of the problem. I mean, we could do a parallel for today. And that is Tom Homan saying, well, you know, immigrants, it's tough to catch immigrants because they know their rights and all these do-gooders are teaching people their rights. Yes, yes!

Peter Sobota [00:25:30] Thank you

Rosi Barbera [00:25:31] And that's what, you know, the Pinochet regime was saying, like all these social workers are too involved in communities and helping them organize to get their needs met. You know, not providing services, but organizing to get to get there needs met and I think that that's something and that's a different perspective, not organizing again for services, but organizing, you to go to the government and say, you we need sanitation, we need the school, we need all that kind of other kinds of things using our our good communication skills, our effective communication skills to help people. Because sometimes people are really intimidated by that. And I think that's a great use of our skills, you know? To help make sure people can get their voices heard.

Peter Sobota [00:26:16] Yeah, this is great to talk about this because I'm also thinking about that we're going to stick with, oh, I'm going to try and stick with Chile for a minute here. But, you know, speaking of like practical and powerful protests. You know, at the grass roots level, wasn't it, um, in Chile, where the, the women who who had their. Spouses and family members disappeared would dance with the pictures of the men pasted um to and they would dance by themselves with the pictures of their disappeared on their um on their chest probably i mean that's the image i have and that grew into a pretty powerful and influential movement didn't it

Rosi Barbera [00:27:11] Yes. So oftentimes people get that confused with the mothers of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina, but it really, it was chilling and Sting, you know, wrote a song about it. They dance alone. You should have been there.

Peter Sobota [00:27:24] Yes, yes, yes.

Rosi Barbera [00:27:26] He sang it in the national stadium, which had become a concentration camp, and there wasn't a dry eye. And I'm actually, it's so funny because I'm looking off to my left, I have this arpeggiata, which is an embroidery of the women dancing alone. That was a gift to me. And yeah, so they have the little picture on, you know, on them dancing alone, but they're dancing what's called the quica sola. So the Quaker.

Peter Sobota [00:27:49] Right.

Rosi Barbera [00:27:50] Is the national dance of Philly based on a dance between a rooster and a hen, right? It's, you know, it's very heterosexist. And so, you would dance it with your partner. And they started dancing it alone as symbolically to show that their partner was not there. So I encourage people to look up the song, They Dance Alone by Sting. And it's also, it's in English and Spanish, you can find that whole album that it's on, I think was. It was in English and then there was another version that was in Spanish and Portuguese.

Peter Sobota [00:28:25] Yeah, this is all coming back to me now. Maybe that's where it came from. I'm trying to think. Now this is Sting from the police, right?

Rosi Barbera [00:28:32] Yes.

Peter Sobota [00:28:35] I'm not good at pop culture and you're a lot better at it than me.

Rosi Barbera [00:28:38] And, you know, Amnesty International had a bunch of human rights concerts, and they would bring the women from Chile to those concerts in other countries, too. And Sting was one of the singers, Sting and all sorts of other really great people. And they would bring the women from Chili to dance alone.

Peter Sobota [00:28:56] Yeah. How powerful though. Oh, at least the videos that I've seen. Yeah.

Rosi Barbera [00:29:01] I'm working with those women. I'm hopefully writing a book. Other things kind of get in the way, but I've interviewed a lot of those women to tell their stories as protagonists because we know a lot about their family members, which is fine, but we don't know so much about them. They were amazing protagonists, right? In a very sexist country, they just took the bull by the horns and went with it.

Peter Sobota [00:29:33] Yeah and and how brave because it's just on the fine line of being adversarial. Yeah. Something that could get them into trouble. Oh yeah. But also you can arrest me for dancing. Yeah. Yeah it's perfect. Powerful. There's a lesson there. All right, well, thank you for that. Well, thank for indulging me. That went in an interesting direction. I like that. How about we come back to the United States and actually let's get like super practical for just a second. Let's talk about social work education. So any social workers who are listening to this will probably know that the Council on Social Work Education and the EPAS, what does that stand for? Educational Policy and Accreditation. Yeah, thank you. You know, they have two competencies out of nine that goes something like this, to advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental justice, kind of a tall order, and then engage anti-racism diversity, equity, inclusion in practice. So, you know, those are kind of things on paper. But man, those are relevant to address our current environment, let alone, you know, almost like the status quo here. But I also think,

like we were saying before, that it's fair to say that, you know, the meat and potatoes of those two competencies are really not the jam of most. Social workers or even students. I mean, not all, that's not fair, but I think there's some truth in that. Could you just talk a little bit about the connections that you see between those competencies and what we're talking about here in general and how they can be instructive as a framework for what's happening now And really, how can we mobilize? Do stuff. Actually make a difference. I'm sorry that's very convoluted, but my hunch is you know what I'm trying to say.

Rosi Barbera [00:31:55] Yeah. And I think one of the things that I have found with those two competencies particularly is that they remain theoretical in people in a lot of programs, right? Yeah. I think you said it better than I did. First of all, how do you advance human rights and social, racial, economic, and environmental in a one semester course, for example? Or even in a two semester course? And how you do that if your the the organization where you're doing your practicum doesn't you know understand that you know so we we learn about what it what that means but do are we really giving the tools for people to to kind of do that work on on the ground you know to really I mean I think that word in that competency advance, right, to advance.

Peter Sobota [00:32:51] Yeah, I'm looking it up here, yeah.

Rosi Barbera [00:32:54] And then, you know, so I think- Yes, advance, you're right. That means like, how do we, what kind of assignments are we giving? Are we bringing people into our classes that can talk about their human rights work and give us suggestions about how maybe some of their experiences with social workers, good and or bad, and how they could be better. You know, I think that kind of thing could be really helpful. There's so much we're doing in our curriculum, right? So sometimes it's tough, but we can learn from other people who aren't necessarily social workers. Oh, beautiful. Yeah, engaging in anti-racism, diversity, equity, inclusion and practice. I think, so I was on one of the subcommittees of the task force that looked at these issues for the writing of the competencies. And it sounded really good as we were doing all this work, but we kept bringing up some of the things that were still in like competency one, which sounds like gatekeeping, which is really racist.

Peter Sobota [00:34:03] The ethical stuff, yeah.

Rosi Barbera [00:34:05] Right? And so how could you, on the one hand, you know, talk about being anti-racist, but then still have programs have to report out on these gatekeeping kinds of things that are white supremacy. You know? Um, so...

Peter Sobota [00:34:21] Hmm… wow.

Rosi Barbera [00:34:20] So I think we have to, you know, think, think about that, but, and again, I think the same here is for us to listen to the people who are most affected, to listen to the People whose, whose lives have been dedicated to this, and who, you know, have some real important things for us to say, and not just today, but even again, this goes back to history, some of those historical figures if we think about Ida B. Wells, Barnett. Who was not really permitted to be a social worker. Or other people who weren't able to get into social work schools. Or we look at the settlement house movement that was pretty much all white. And so there was a separate black settlement house movement. And these weren't necessarily trained, I'm putting air quotes along train, right? Social workers, cause they couldn't get into Social Work schools. So how do we think about, well, what are some of the legacies of that? How might we still see that in our practice and our education and

how can we push back against that? So are we looking at theories that individualize people and don't, and individualize all people and don' understand that there are many cultures that are more collectivist. What are we looking at when we look at self-care and not communities of care, building communities of care, you know, instead of, you know, reducing things again to that individual level, which isn't really going to deal once again, back to the structural issues that cause so much, you know social workers to suffer, right? In this case, right, not even the people we work with, but the social workers themselves. So, you know, I think. We need to do a better job. And I think there are people out there putting together resource guides. I've been working with ACOSA, the Association for Community Organizing and Social Action, and we're working on, along with other organizations, putting together a new macro guide, right? So with activities and readings and things like that. And I thinking continuing to do that kind of work and share our resources. Can become really important to help us, you know, integrate into our curriculum and help integrate into the practice. So, you now, how do we get, how can we help students integrate this into their practicum experiences, into their internships? Yeah, and this is raising.

Peter Sobota [00:37:01] Yeah, go ahead. Sorry.

Rosi Barbera [00:37:02] Oh, not just leave it as an intellectual exercise, but really it's a practice issue.

Peter Sobota [00:37:10] Yeah. And I mean, I'm just having a lot of light bulbs while you're talking because, you know, a lot this really could happen, for example, if we're talking about social work education in the field practicum. But most, you know... You know our field practicon is not associated with a stipend. You know, it's... And we rely on our colleagues in the community to to literally volunteer their expertise at their agency. And, you know, in many ways, there's very. Very few good reasons to take on that challenge in a challenging environment to begin with. So I think we ask a lot of field education and you're right when it doesn't fit how do we make it fit? So I we need to look maybe at our own structures, our own business as usual ways of doing things if we want to get greedier about the impact that we can have.

Rosi Barbera [00:38:18] Yeah, I asked students, what does it say about us as social work programs in terms of economic justice that we're asking you to do all this work and there's no compensation for you. And I think that's, I mean, I love the organization Payment for Placements and the work that they've been doing across the country to get some sort of compensation for social workers. In Pennsylvania, just last year, they started having money available. It's not enough and they're not enough of them stipends, but for students doing student teaching. And this year there's also legislation to do the same for social workers. Also, representative Gwen Moore, who is from Milwaukee, just reintroduced the earned income tax credit and it's the worker relief. And she calls it the Worker Act. And she wants to expand it so that student, low-income students will be eligible for an earned income tax credit, which could be like having that money for their practicum experience. So looking at things like that, how do we, I mean, that's a great campaign to get our students in a policy class.

Peter Sobota [00:39:40] Exactly, yeah. Say again what that organization was that is advocating for the...

Rosi Barbera [00:39:48] So I think it may have started at the University of Georgia with MSW students, and then it's got like over 40 chapters across the country now, and they're

organizing for some sort of payment. And I've been working with a group of people that were doing some research around the effects of not having a paid placement on people's overall well-being, physical, mental, economic, you know. Et cetera. And we had, I don't know, 300 pages of qualitative data, looking at how people answered some of these questions about the toll that it takes on them.

Peter Sobota [00:40:31] Absolutely. So it'd be nice if we mobilized as social workers on our own behalf.

Rosi Barbera [00:40:37] Yeah, so actually, some of our students got to go for the leap day, the legislative advocacy day here in Pennsylvania, went to Harrisburg and talked to their representatives for them to sign on to this bill in Pennsylvania to get these stipends available for social work students. So that was cool. They felt they were they were really pleased to be able to do that.

Peter Sobota [00:40:59] I'm sure, yeah, and it's like if you give them, and I think this is true of many students, if you can provide them the opportunity or give them a hint, they will mobilize. And I think that's exciting. So, all right, so now I'm gonna, now to the exciting part to the less maybe optimistic part here. When it comes to... You know, understanding history and and truly understanding, like the person in an environment, all the things that we've been talking about social movements, large, large scale change. What do you think our biggest obstacles to action are? And what do we need to do? To overcome them. I think this is what students, I mean, I hear students talking about this. In fact, our, the person who is helping us record today, Ryan, is one of the people I know who's asking this question. What can we do to overcome these obstacles?

Rosi Barbera [00:42:03] So I always say to students, one of the things that we have to do is be counter-cultural, because we live in a society that glorifies rugged individualism, right? And so we go back to the pulling yourself up by the bootstraps, and I tell them how that saying actually means something that's impossible to do. So we've taken a saying that was developed to communicate something that is impossible, and we've made it. The metric we use.

Peter Sobota [00:42:34] The answer.

Rosi Barbera [00:42:35] Yeah, right. And so think about how like screwed up that is. So, you know, let's think about, you know, how do we move out of that individualism and move into and again, not that we don't have, you know that that we do have any of that but that we also see ourselves as part of a larger community. So I think I think that focus on individualism is an obstacle. I think fear and I think that's a valid obstacle, especially right now. Fear, I have to pay my bills, I have pay off my student loans, right?

Peter Sobota [00:43:07] Mm-hmm.

Rosi Barbera [00:43:07] That's an obstacle too, how education, you know, the whole loan thing in education. But so, you, know, so people don't want to push back and I, you know, and I'm not judging anyone for that because people need to do that. They need to care for themselves, but also to some extent complacency. We're kind of comfortable.

Peter Sobota [00:43:30] Uh, it hurts.

Rosi Barbera [00:43:31] I think we're kind of comfortable. I mean, I have in times when I'm really comfortable too and I prefer to be here rather than on the streets or at a meeting or something. But again, that's where kind of knowing that if we're building communities in our movements and things, then I'm participating in something not just for me, but also because I have a commitment to these other people. And we're in this together. So. I think they're really big obstacles to action. And I think, and I also think our political system, you know, Francis Moore Lepay says, democracy isn't something we have, it's something we do. But here, democracy is something we elect, and then we leave it to them. And that, and we have to get beyond that. We have to understand that the election is one step. Now we have to hold people accountable. And, you know, so here in Philly, they do used to be Tuesdays with to me, that was ours, one of our state our senators. Yep. Now they're doing Mondays with McCormick. He's one of Our senators and they do Fridays with Federman. Because he's a senator. And so people protest outside their offices and just say, What are you doing to push back? What are You doing on these issues? How are you protecting your constituents, right? And so, you know, those kinds of things, I think, can be really helpful. And if you can't go, maybe you can go to, because you have to work or whatever, maybe you could go to a sign-making meeting and help out that way, making a sign, or maybe you know you can do something else. So, understanding that we can push back and we can hold our political leaders accountable and we must hold them accountable. That's what democracy is.

Peter Sobota [00:45:31] But I've got to learn how to do cognitive behavioral therapy, Rosi. Don't send the letters, please.

Rosi Barbera [00:45:38] And there's a role for that, you know, I mean, there is a role for that. And I'm not saying we throw that out. But wouldn't it be better if, you know, some of the people that you're trying to do cognitive behavioral therapy with, if you understand the context that is causing them so much distress, you might not need that

Peter Sobota [00:46:00] That's right, that's right.

Rosi Barbera [00:46:01] You can help them create those conditions where they empower themselves to be part of something bigger than themselves and push back.

Peter Sobota [00:46:09] Yeah. All right. I'm going to throw you a juicy one here. Ready? Better take a drink of water. Yeah. Is there a difference between radical social work and progressive social work? Oh, no.

Rosi Barbera [00:46:23] So this is, yeah, so my colleague and friend, Mary Bricker Jenkins and I, you know, wrote, first she and Barbara Joseph, and then Barbara had died. And so then I took it up with her. We have the radical social work entry in the encyclopedia of social work. And it used to be called progressive social work and we pushed for it to become radical. And the reason is because as Angela Davis and so many others say, you know, radical means to go to the roots. And I'm not sure that progressive goes to the routes. Yeah, it wants to do away with the injustices, but is it willing to look at how they're kind of embedded in our society and that we might need to, I don't wanna use the term destroy, but we might to rearrange some things. We may need to reorder, we may need get uncomfortable in order to make the changes happen. So that's how I see radical. But radical can also has this meaning that could be misused in other ways as well, so as being violent. And it doesn't, and I don't use the term radical in the sense of violence, although poverty is a horrible form of violence. So that is, that's violence. Trauma. So fighting against it, you know, I'm not saying, you know, that we should be throwing Molotov

cocktails and things like that, but I'm saying. We need to push back. And sometimes, Mark Lamont Hill, I don't know if you know him, he teaches now at, I think, NYU, but he's from Philadelphia, has a bookstore here, very close by. And after the George Floyd protests, he said, you know, you're all pissed at us because you want us to play nice, but we tried everything. We had protests, we had sit-ins, we ran marathons, We raised money! We held signs and you didn't listen to us. So a target went on fire and now you're listening to us

Peter Sobota [00:48:38] Exactly.

Rosi Barbera [00:48:39] There's some there's there's some truth in what he's saying, right? Nobody listened until we really pushed back, uh, you know, and and sometimes that's what it takes

Peter Sobota [00:48:52] I do wonder what it's going to take for us to be in the streets today.

Rosi Barbera [00:49:03] Well, there's a political scientist, let me see if I can find her name, who says that we only need like 3.5% of the population to be in the streets to make a difference. So that's not huge, right?

Peter Sobota [00:49:25] And that's the lessons of all the movements, right? If you don't have financial capital, you bring to bear human capital.

Rosi Barbera [00:49:33] Exactly!

Peter Sobota [00:49:34] And we can be pretty disruptive if we stop doing our jobs.

Rosi Barbera [00:49:39] Eric, Eric, I want to give this political scientist their due. Eric had 10.

Peter Sobota [00:49:44] Oh, wait, say that again.

Rosi Barbera [00:49:45] Erica Chenoweth.

Peter Sobota [00:49:48] Oh yes, yes, go on.

Rosi Barbera [00:49:50] Suggested that about 3.5% of a country's population participating actively in non-violent protest can bring about significant political change. That's 12 million people in our country. But it has to be well-organized. So we have to organize, we have to understand that, right? So it has, and we have to do it in a sustained way. And we also have to understand that it's not just the protest that brings about change. It's also what we do afterwards, right. The protest brings us together. It energizes us. It shows our power in numbers, then we have to continue. It's not just protests, so.

Peter Sobota [00:50:27] Great. All right. Well, all right. So we're bumping up against our timeline here. But I want to get, I really do. I'm not buttering you up because I've asked you on the podcast, but I really think you're a unique social worker and scholar. So in your study of history, anthropology, you know, your scholarship, your teaching, Um... What about all of that gives you hope?

Rosi Barbera [00:51:06] So...

Peter Sobota [00:51:06] Yeah, I'll just stop right there.

Rosi Barbera [00:51:09] You know, Kelly Hayes and Maryam Kaba wrote a book called Let This Radicalize You. And I use it in one of my classes and they say hope and grief can coexist. And so we actually just two weeks ago talked about this in class. And people were like, well, you know, I hadn't thought about that before, but yeah, because sometimes out of grief comes the hope, right, that there is a connection between them and that, you now, we can, through our grief, we can think of better better times. So I think that's something that keeps me motivated. I also think about Rebecca Solnit's work. Hope in the Dark, right? I'm using that in a different class. And she says, hope is only a beginning. It's not a substitute for action, only a base for it. And so what gives me hope, and it's given me hope for a while, are young people, actually, like young immigrants and other people as well. And looking at how in the movements that they are leading, They're really... Making the connections between LGBTQI plus rights, between the rights of people of color, between immigrant rights, poverty, they're understanding that. And that gives me hope because if we can open up ourselves, and again, I go back to one of my sheroes, Angela Davis, who talks about, we have to let the young people lead, right? So here's this international icon right saying we have to get the young people lead and we have to learn from them and it's like yes we do like we don't have the answers but they know a lot and they they're trying to build a world where they want to live in right so I think um I think that you know seeing them and then also uh looking at um you know the practice of Hope is a discipline, we must practice it. Have you know working with people and helping point out to them again going back to our beginning of talking about history that these are people in in class a couple weeks ago I asked people think about let's think about like you know groups of people who had no reason to hope and yet still kept at it and so we talked about that and I'm like so what what can we learn from So trying to get that message out. There are so many people, we don't even know all of them, right? But that just kept pushing back despite and we can take, we can learn so much from them.

Peter Sobota [00:54:02] Yeah, wonderful. So today is, we need to wrap up, but today is we're recording this conversation on April 25th. And before we began, when we were just kind of getting situated before we started, this is in the Hope Department, by the way. We learned that the students, the international students whose visas had been basically revoked and they were told to leave the country, Apparently, the administration is backing off on that as of today. And the other hopeful thing that happened, I think it was yesterday, is that some of the administration's attacks on higher education's DEI initiatives is actually doing well in the courts. And there were, I believe, two decisions that were saying, oh, no, you didn't. Um you need to slow down here so um I I know I didn't have anything to do with that but I I am hopeful that I will and before we end up is there anything that we left out um or that or any way that you would just like to conclude our conversation

Rosi Barbera [00:55:23] Um, I think, yeah, I want to just, I want to suggest to people, um, think about, be really kind of intentional about, about what, what you're reading, where you're getting your news, and then also intentional about not letting it overwhelm you, right? And so maybe turning off, you know, for a couple hours a day. Your news things, right? Or only spending a certain amount of time each day looking at the news so it isn't overwhelming. And at the same time, as I prepare this course I'm teaching on immigration, every week I give a rundown of what's happened in the last week in immigration. And as I'm preparing the last, the last week, right. I mean, it's like, I prepared it like on Friday night last week and then by Saturday morning there were eight more things I had to-

Peter Sobota [00:56:17] Exactly, yeah.

Rosi Barbera [00:56:18] But this week I'm being intentional about kind of saying some of the good things. So I'm gonna use what you just told me as well. You know, so understanding that too, like looking and understanding, yes, not being Pollyanna-ish because that doesn't help any of us, but also seeing that there are people who are pushing back and there are judges who are trying to hold the administration accountable. And I think that that's really, really important. And then there's this kind of saying, I thought, that I think has been really powerful to me. So I wanna share this. It says, do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now, love mercy now, walk humbly now. You're not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it. And I think that that, because sometimes we think it's just too much. It's Perkay Avot, I think this is the name, I can't, it's not like really clear. It's the way it's written. I think it's A-V-O-T, but I think, it is a really important thing for us to kind of keep in mind, right? That we might not see the fruits of our labor. The Nicaraguan poets, Jack Hundabelly says, you know, a cause isn't lost just because you don't see its outcome in your lifetime. The same thing here. We can be part of something that's bigger than ourselves and have confidence in that.

Peter Sobota [00:57:48] And we support the people who will continue it. Rosi, thank you so much for joining us. Very timely, very practical. Thank you very much.

Rosi Barbera [00:58:04] Sure. It's been a pleasure. Thank you.

Peter Sobota [00:58:07] Thanks again to Rosi Barbera for joining us. The In Social Work podcast team that mobilizes this show are Steve Sturman, our tech and web guru, Ryan Tropf, our GA production assistant, guest coordinator, and content curator. Say hi, Ryan. (**Ryan**: Hello). And I'm Peter Sobota. We'll see you next time, everybody.