

## **Commons Conversations: Sarah Schulman and Holly Hammond, Aired on 3CR Radio on Friday, 13 January 2023**

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### **Margie Thorpe**

G'day, my name is Margie Thorpe, you are listening to three 3CR community radio 855 on your dial.

### **Iain McIntyre**

Welcome to Commons conversations a series of interviews with campaigners sharing their experiences and insights into activism, learning and movements, radical history and more. The programme is broadcast by community radio 3CR and produced by the common social change library, a website containing over 1000 resources for campaigners, which can be accessed for free at [commonslibrary.org](http://commonslibrary.org). In today's programme Commons librarian Holly Hammond talks with novelist, playwright, screenwriter and historian Sarah Schulman about lessons from campaigns led by the AIDS coalition to unleash power, better known as ACT UP during the 1980s and 1990s. A participant in the campaign Shulman's book, let the record show a political history of ACT UP New York 1987 to 1993 is based on over 200 interviews, as the book blurb states, quote, in just six years ACT UP New York abroad, an unlikely coalition of activists from all races, genders, sexualities, and backgrounds changed the world. Armed with rancour, desperation, intelligence and creativity. It took on the AIDS crisis with an ingenious and multifaceted attack on the corporations, institutions, governments and individuals who stood in the way of AIDS treatment for all. They stormed the FDA and NIH in Washington, DC and started needle exchange programmes in New York. They took over Grand Central Terminal and fought to change the legal definition of aids to include women. They transformed the American Insurance industry, weaponized art and advertising to push their agenda and battled and beat the New York Times, the Catholic Church and the pharmaceutical industry. Their activism and its complex and intersectional power transformed the lives of people with AIDS and the bigoted society that had abandoned them. In the following conversation, Sara and Holly discuss the

nature of effective coalitions, the challenges of accurately documenting social movements, and what activists can learn from ACT UP today.

### **Holly Hammond**

So just to kind of start, for some context, the Commons Social Change Library, our project is gathering the kind of collective wisdom of people engaged in social change, so that people can learn and it can inform future action. Part of that is connecting people with history, connecting activists with history, and it's really a constant struggle, I think, to counter the erasure of collective action and the role that it plays in creating the world that we live in. I know you're very passionate about this, I was really struck by the story that you shared in *Gentrification of The Mind* when you heard AIDS activism being erased in real time on the radio. I'm just interested to know, this correcting the record kind of compulsion that you have, why is that so important to you? And how did that play out with the ACT UP Oral History Project and the book?

### **Sarah Schulman**

I think it's been a lifelong thing for historical reasons and personal reasons. I think I'm a person who has not benefited by the facts being hidden and then I do much better when the structures are made visible. In terms of AIDS history, AIDS has been misrepresented since the first day and the entire history of AIDS is filled with false stories. You know, at the beginning, I mean, first of all, AIDS is probably 100 years old, and you know, people date it to 1981 but that's only when science recognised the pattern that came to be known as AIDS. So even the start date is wrong. And then from the beginning, at that time, there was a lot of pseudoscience, abounding in the early 80s, about the, quote, causes of homosexuality and that they were biological. So far, no one has ever found a biomarker for queerness or homosexuality. But at that time, that was the theory. So the first name for the disease was GRID, Gay Related Immune Deficiency. There's no such thing as Gay Related Immune Deficiency, immune deficiency is not gay, but you know, or gay cancer, there's no such thing as gay cancer. But, you know, so from the very, very beginning, the issue has been misrepresented the realities of people with AIDS and the truth about AIDS activism have all been

misrepresented and that was really my major mode for doing this book.

### **Holly Hammond**

You know, I think it's activism. It had a big impact on me as a young activist, but also reading the book. It just really feels like the energy of the movement, you know, echoes through the decades. It's just so powerful. And one thing I was picking up in your writing was around the urgency of people living with AIDS were at the centre of things and they didn't have time to waste and that urgency was the real kind of engine in AIDS activism, I was kind of thinking about, you know, times I've come across a lot of urgency and desperation in groups I've been working with, that hasn't always been helpful. You know, it's kind of led to a resistance to being strategic or reflecting, and just kind of staying in motion all the time and reacting. But I feel like in your writing, it really comes across as a really positive force, which allowed people to take on, you know, simultaneous actions of different kinds and kind of be accepting of that, you want to say a little more about that element?

### **Sarah Schulman**

Well, I think that, you know, people with AIDS were living against the clock, there were no treatments and once people got sick, they died very quickly. And also just for younger people. And AIDS, death is a terrible death. I mean, people really suffer because your, as your immune system breaks down, there's like dementia and blindness and you can't retain nutrition, I mean, so it was an emergency and, therefore, the agenda of the movement was determined by the needs of people with AIDS. So one of the things that met was that there was really no theoretical discussion, which is very interesting, because it was action oriented because people had concrete goals. And I think this is a really good lesson for political organising, in general, you become the expert on the issue and you determine a concrete goal, something that you must have, that is reasonable, winnable, and doable, not abstract or vague. And then you design the solution of how to achieve this thing. So for example, one of the early obstacles that people with AIDS faced is that the Food and Drug Administration was very slow to approve drugs and people in ACT UP who had no policy backgrounds, and no science backgrounds, like this playwright named Jim Igo, just studied the FDA, until they could

design a fast track system that would allow very sick people to access experimental drugs before they had completed the approval process. So you design the solution, then you go to the powers that be and present your solution, of course, they say no and that's when you do non violent, but theatrical civil disobedience to force them or pressure them through the media by informing the public through your actions, that you have the winnable and doable, reasonable solution. So it's very systematic, and that's really what a campaign is, you know, having a concrete demand. So I think that really came from the fact that that's what people with AIDS had concrete needs.

### **Holly Hammond**

But I also hear in that, you know, really fundamental tenants of community organising, in terms of, you know, how you cut your issue and how you go after getting the solution and hold the power holders accountable in that process. One thing I really appreciated and let the record show was you talking about the different influences on AIDS activism, including feminist organising around reproductive rights and black liberation, where the people have been involved or kind of observed it, and it's there in your description of direct action as well. And so, you know, we're really concerned with how do people learn about social change and do how people learn within movements. And one way is from the experience of the people who are there, but I'm kind of curious are there other forms of learning that you think are important in social movements? And also, I guess, history writing or the work to kind of keep telling the story while the action happens?

### **Sarah Schulman**

Well, the first thing is that no movement is discrete. There's no such thing as a movement that just comes out of nowhere. You know, I'm just reading a very interesting book by Bettina Aptheker, who's like 83 years old, whose father was on the Central Committee of the Communist Party USA, and it's about how many different routes of queer liberation came from the Communist Party. You know, Mattachine, one of the first gay organisations, their founders, Harry Hay and Rudi Gernreich, right were kicked out of the Communist Party but also like lesbian separatism, Alex Dobkin and women's music. She grew up in the Communist Party, PFLAG Parents or Friends of Lesbians and Gays, was founded by Jean Manford, who was a member of the Communist Party. I

mean, so you're seeing things that we thought were, you know, separate, actually have these roots and people who are highly politicised and knew how to think analytically and had basic organising skills because, you know, the reason that there was an autonomous gay and lesbian movement in the first place is not because gay people want it to be separate. It's because we were kicked out of the left. So not only was the Communist Party kicked out gay people, but the black civil rights movement, famously sidelined Bayard Rustin, the feminist movement had a number of lesbian purgers that have not yet been really historicized and so that's why there was some autonomous queer movement and it wasn't for political reasons. It was de facto, but many of those people had come from previous experiences. So recognising that is very important and then I think the second thing is that, you know, in America we have the John Wayne myth right of the white male individual hero who comes in and saves the day and this person doesn't exist, but also they can't exist because that's not how change gets made. At least in America change gets made by coalitions and there's no other way. So breaking down some of these myths, which are obstacles to people moving forward is a really important part to understanding how to build campaigns.

### **Holly Hammond**

Oh, there's just so much in that. That's great. Yeah, I think I really think about like this sort of generative tension in social movements of inclusion and exclusion, like what happens when people aren't able to participate in the left and create their work done as movement or, also, you know, you have ACT UP being predominantly white male, and then the other groups that then organised to make sure that their issues are being addressed, you know, so it's kind of this productive struggle, not necessarily enjoyable at the time for people to be experiencing that exclusion, but the way that it leads to autonomous organising can be really powerful.

### **Sarah Schulman**

I think, you know, this question of exclusion inclusion is very interesting, because people have a false idea of what a coalition is. It's based on those sort of Benetton ads, if you remember those from the olden days, you know, one Asian person, one black person, one Latino, that is not how coalitions work. Coalitions are usually discrete communities

of people who have their own interests who cooperate with each other and whose work resonates with each other. That's actually what they are. So because of that structure ACT UP, which was predominantly a white gay male organisation, actually ended up winning the biggest victories for women and poor people in the history of HIV. When they got the government to change the definition of what symptoms you had to have to get an AIDS diagnosis, thereby getting women access to benefits and experimental drugs and you know, it's very rare in history to find a white male organisation that wins a major victory for women and people of colour. But the reason that happened is that the women and people of colour and ACT UP, although they were a minority, tended to be more politically sophisticated, because they were coming from the previous movements with the 70s. Now, among the white gay men, the older ones had been in the gay liberation movement, people like Theodore Russo, for example, but many of the younger ones had never been political before. So the more savvy feminists, and also this was a time of fascist dictatorships in Latin America and there was an exile community of gay men who had also been come from those movements or from Mexico City student movement of the late 1960s. With these groups of more savvy women and people of colour did was that they did not waste their time trying to make the white gay men be less sexist or less racist, like they would never say stop the action, we have to have consciousness raising, they never did that, because you could spend your whole life trying to change one person and fail but what they did was they kept their eye on the prize of what they needed to win for their constituency, and rally the ample resources of the larger organisation. So for example, ACT UP had an art auction that raised \$650,000. So there was quite a bit of money. So when women with AIDS needed money to travel, let's say to Washington or something to testify at a hearing and they needed to stay in hotels, obviously, people were sick, they didn't have to raise the money, they could just go to fundraising and get the money. When the Latino Caucus realised that people with AIDS in Puerto Rico had no support, they just went to fundraising and got the money and went to Puerto Rico and started ACT UP Puerto Rico. So instead of obstructing themselves, they kind of rose above the fray and figured out strategically how to use these resources to win for their constituencies and that's a very important lesson.

**Holly Hammond**

and in that, you know, the diverse strengths that come together in a coalition so if you have one section of your coalition has really great contacts than the establishment or ability to raise money and others have you know, real strategic nous and campaigning experience that coming together in the coalition is really powerful.

**Sarah Schulman**

That can work for a while but it also can come back. Yeah, we did have a sector that was very effective and connecting because this is the 80s right so there was the entire government was all white male, the media was all white male, the private sector is all white male, even me as a white lesbian. There was no one like me. There was no Rachel Maddow or anyone like that, right? So, there was a group of people, mostly men and ACT UP who were very well educated, who came from upper class backgrounds, and they were able to connect really well with these insider men but on the other hand, that didn't necessarily trickle down. Because, for example, it took the women two years to be able to get a meeting with Fauci when the men were meeting with him all the time. So, you know, there's not necessarily a trickle down effect.

**Holly Hammond**

For sure and really getting the sense that the insider outsider combo was a strength in the early days, but that the gap widened over time and contributed to the split. It's always very heartbreaking I think, reading those stories of people when they've experienced division after having been in unity, and the kind of shock, like, how can you do this, and then a complete blind spot of what the problem was.

**Sarah Schulman**

I mean, there's a lot of ways of looking at it because to be really honest, if we had insisted that these groups of people who were at the inside represented the diverse coalition, they probably wouldn't have been listened to, you know, so probably, there was no way to transgress those limitations and that's a really rough thing to say and it's a hard thing for me to say, but I think it's realistic, given the way everything was

constructed at the time.

### **Holly Hammond**

Yeah, sorry, I'm just grappling with this a little more. With the Commons Library one of our most popular resources is Bill Moyer's Movement Action Plan and the Four Roles of Social Activism. I think people are always really hungry for frameworks that help them understand differences and tensions in social movements, like we do it this way, they do it that way... is there a way we can be complimentary, maybe have some begrudging respect for each other's role. In terms of being able to work together, effectively, over time, it makes me think about your emphasis on deep communication in Conflict Is Not Abuse: how we need to be able to stay with each other while we're in conflict, to work through things. Is there potential for movements to be much more powerful, by being able to find communication across those divides?

### **Sarah Schulman**

I don't know if communication would have helped ACT UP but I think the one thing that really helped ACT UP was simultaneity of action. It was not a consensus based movement and we did not have to agree on things, it was a majority vote. So if you had an idea for an action, and I thought it was ridiculous, I would argue with you and also we were not conflict averse. It was like, you know, Jews and Italians, people screaming at each other and this type of thing and we're still screaming at each other in our old age but in the end, I wouldn't stop you from doing what you wanted to do. I just wouldn't do it and then I would go get my five people to do my idea and this is what made the whole thing work because, yeah, there were people who were doing negotiations with pharmaceutical companies and that sort of thing. But then there were people who were trying to get needle exchange, who were, you know, former and current IV drug users and harm reduction was a brand new idea at the time, the predominant approach was abstinence, insisting on abstinence. So harm reduction was something that a lot of people in ACT UP didn't understand and they didn't necessarily support needle exchange. But the needle exchange people being addicts, some of them themselves took very high risk strategy of deliberately exchanging needles illegally in order to get arrested so that they could have a test case that they could have lost - but they did win!

Then you have things like a Haitian Underground Railroad, because when President Aristide was overthrown by a coup in Haiti and a huge number of people fled to the United States, the government tested them and found that a large number of people were HIV positive and incarcerated them in Guantanamo, and ACT UP's Housing Committee was involved with getting people housing so that they could get out of Guantanamo. Now that had nothing to do with needle exchange, and nothing to do with negotiating with pharma and it's not the same people. These are different kinds of people doing this work but the fact that it's all happening at the same time, is what creates, you know, the paradigm shift. My study of history tells me that no movement that has tried to insist that everyone agree on one strategy or one analysis has ever succeeded and I don't think there's any exceptions to that. I think, my definition that is a fail, because people are different. I mean, it's just like a basic thing to say, but people can only be where they're at, and trying to force people to be someplace where they're not at does not work and what does work is facilitating people being effective from wherever they're at. Like that's what actual leadership is. So you need this simultaneity and you have to live with the discomfort of being in an organisation with people doing things that you don't like. The one thing really interesting about ACT UP is that no one was ever thrown out. Now there was one kind of cultish political party called the New Alliance Party that tried to take over ACT UP and they were thrown out but no individuals were ever thrown out. And let me tell you, there were a lot of crazy people in there because it was a very high stress situation and people were very angry, very upset but no matter what anyone did, people could get angry at them and yell at them, but no one was ever excluded. Because in order to exclude somebody, you have to feel like you're better than them and this was at a time when you know, homosexual sex was illegal in the United States and people with gay people with AIDs were the bottom of the barrel and nobody had supremacy ideology about themselves enough to say, you're not good enough to be in group with me. So that never happened. It functioned like a community and a community is not a curated thing, for better or for worse.

### **Holly Hammond**

constantly changing and different pressures coming in and different talents and skills coming to the fore. You really get that sense of it.

### **Holly Hammond**

What you're saying about not being consensus organisation was the key strength. You know, it could have gone a different way in terms of the influence of consensus in the environment movement, the peace movement, the women's movement in the 80s and 90s. So, it's an interesting example

### **Sarah Schulman**

they didn't have the same system of immediate winnable demands. Though, you know, it's interesting, because when you look at the history of American radicalism, there's really like two different strands and one is like the utopians, utopian socialists, the anarchists of the 20s, the communists of the 30s, the beats, the hippies, gay liberation, Occupy Wall Street, these are movements that want total system change and consciousness change. And then you have reform movements like ending slavery, women getting the vote making abortion, legal, AIDS activism and these are absolutely reform movements, they have very concrete demands from the system. And I feel like the society really moves forward the most when both of these kinds of movements are active at the same time, and are dialogic. So when you have black power and civil rights that's when you have this culture, subculture that gets built, or when you have gay liberation and gay rights. But you know, after aids, we lost gay liberation, or we had only gay rights, and that's why it's become so assimilationist, pro military and all of that.

### **Holly Hammond**

Thinking again, about that kind of concrete demands, but also like paradigm shifting and big picture visioning of how things could be different. What kind of ripples do you see from AIDS activism?

### **Sarah Schulan**

Millions and millions of people are alive today who wouldn't be. That's it, you know, so many people that we know and are and our parents and everybody are alive today because of that. But then there's really concrete things like when ACT UP won the right so women were excluded from experimental drug trials. This is a very interesting bit of

history. In the 1960s, there was a drug called thalidomide that was given to pregnant women and many women had children born without limbs, and they sued pharma and they got big settlements. So pharmaceutical companies reaction was to ban women from experimental drug trials. So a woman could not get in a trial and when you have a disease like AIDS where there are no treatments, trials are the only treatments so the fight to get women into those trials resonates perhaps more widely than almost anything ACT UP won because today, any woman in the world with HIV who takes a medication is taking something that was tested on women. So that's a very, very big reach.

### **Holly Hammond**

Yeah, really profound. I want to ask a bit about grief. Because I'm conscious that, you know, in these times escalating crisis, there's big losses happening, and people are needing to find ways to respond. So I think in the movement for black lives, and in Australia, the movement to stop deaths in custody, like every time there's a death, that's a trigger event in the movement to, you know, again, kind of mobilise, and make the demands. And with the climate crisis, as we see increasing climate impacts, you know, there's real devastation happening and massive impact on communities. So an activist skill really needs to be able to experience loss and stay in action. And with ACT UP, you know, death was so present was all around you all the time, which just makes me think like, how did ACT UP keep going in the face of that?

### **Sarah Schulman**

It wasn't for everybody, you know, people who one of my clients when Jim Hubbard and I started the ACT UP oral history project, and I want to invite people to go to our website, which is [actup oral history.org](http://actuporalhistory.org). We've had 14 million hits on our website, by the way, but that's where we have interviews with 180 surviving members of ACT UP that we conducted over 18 years. Now, one of our questions was, what did these people have in common? Because actually, it was a very small number of people. Like this is not a mass movement of hundreds of 1000s of people. This is, you know, meetings with between from three to 700 people a week, and the largest demo was 7000 people but they were incredibly effective these individuals. They were very committed to being effective and you know, one of our big questions is, what do these people have in

common? You know, when we were trying to understand that, and because it wasn't for everybody, it was very tough in there. Not only all the suffering and the death, but the anger and the screaming, and the fighting, and all of that. So you had to be a certain type of person to start with, you know, they're also people we had public funerals. We carried people's bodies through the streets. We had an action called the ashes action, where people through the ashes of their loved ones on the White House lawn. I mean, there was a lot of expression but a lot of people did suffer and are suffering now, like the first generation of men who mostly got infected before people knew what was going on, or that first generation they have paid a very high price. They've been through their lives have been at risk a million times. They've been through terrible medications. They've lost their partners and friends and social circles and in ACT UP that generation has had a lot of trouble with drugs with crystal meth with seroconverting late in life, poverty, because people thought they were gonna die, and they didn't they were off their career track. It's a generation that has really paid and attention has not been paid to them. You know, I think that they're under seen and under supported as now people are moving into their 70s.

### **Holly Hammond**

And yeah, people's understanding of AIDS has changed so much in terms of the treatments that are available now and with PrEP as well, I think it's like that, that is also kind of erasing the past kind of sense of AIDs.

### **Sarah Schulman**

I mean, in New York, we have like about 1500 deaths a year and it's because we don't have a functional health care system. So it's really underclass people who have no health care, and or end up in the emergency room when it's too late kind of thing and the PrEP thing is very interesting, because, you know, the standard of care treatment for HIV right now is a drug drugs that virally suppressed you to the degree that you're biologically incapable of infecting anybody. So if everybody who was positive actually had access to the standard of care, there would be no need for PrEP. Right? So Gilead, the biblically named company that makes all their money from PrEP. Their huge profit is based on the fact that we don't have health care delivery. So you know, there's an irony

there.

### **Holly Hammond**

That's shocking isn't it? And Gilead that's like *The Handmaid's Tale*. Yeah, you were talking before about the expression of grief and you know, different actions and different rituals, you know, that meant that could be collective and wondering about the role of art in social change, which is, you know, topic dear to you in terms of being a novelist and playwright and screenwriter.

### **Sarah Schulman**

Those are very particular combination of things. So first of all, this is New York, it still had not completely gentrified, right. So it still was a place that was on the cutting edge of new art ideas for the world and also advertising ideas. So you had graphic designers, fine artists, or studio artists and advertising media people who were all on the cutting edge because it was New York. So that, you also had that gay people were very alienated from the culture, and were aesthetically opposed to mainstream culture. So queer people were inventing some of the most exciting aesthetic expressions of the time, you know, it all ends with the rainbow flag, one of the most banal inventions possible, and it's an anti art invention. But so you had these very creative, alienated people who were in these cutting edge professions. and that's really a lot about how ACT UP developed their look. I did an interesting interview with Marlene McCarty, who was the only woman in *Grand Fury*, which was one of the big art collectives in ACT UP, and she had come out of graphic design and she said that it was really interesting, because at the beginning, when the messages were very simple, they used techniques from advertising for active posters, and they were very effective. But when the messages got more complex, as AIDS evolved, those advertising techniques no longer work, because what they discovered is that you cannot convey complex ideas with advertising. This was a big source of fundraising for ACT UP, because ACT UP was a political movement, not a non for profit or an NGO, so they did not apply for funding. So one of the main ways it was funded was by selling T shirts with these incredible graphics on them. You know, everybody from Keith Haring to Lola Flash to all these people, Zoe Leonard, were designing T shirts, and the first day that ACT UP t-shirts

went on sale on the street, we made \$30,000 in cash. So you know that it just became part of the identity of queer people all over the world was wearing these ACT UP shirts.

### **Holly Hammond**

That's amazing. Yeah, definitely. For me, the first ACT UP poster that I saw was like a pink triangle, silence equals death. It's just it was just so compelling and even, I think the acronym AIDs coalition to unleash power, kind of like sparked my mind in wonderful ways. Yeah, definitely rippled out all around the world and there's still like a really potent imagery to look at now. I'm really curious to hear from you since ACT UP, are there examples of direct action that you've seen people doing that you've thought been particularly effective, and or exciting?

### **Sarah Schulman**

Well, yeah it is all the time but one of the things about social movements is that it's very, very hard to document them accurately. I mean, I was able to do this because I've been covering AIDs as a reporter since the early 80s. So I have knowledge of the full range and arc of the story, even by the time ACT UP started, I'd already been covering it for about five years. So I had a front row seat. I was in ACT UP, Jim and I were able to interview 180 people and we could pull it all together. It was sort of inspired by this earlier book by Taylor Branch called Parting the Waters that does a similar thing for the civil rights movement, interviewing the rank and file and finding out what the strategies actually were and cohering them. But getting that kind of information is very difficult, because the corporate media does not report accurately on social movements. So right now, there are things going on all over the United States and all over the world that we don't know about, like there's a movement against police violence, and this movement is in every city, but I don't know who the leaders are and I don't know what their demands are. I don't know what they're doing. We see movements for immigrant rights. We see movements abolitionist prison abolition movements, Palestine Solidarity, Students for Justice in Palestine is the largest political student organisation in the whole country. There's so much going on, but it's just not covered and we don't have a coherent leftist press that can report every day or every week on what's happening nationally. So there's quite a bit but you know, I can itemise it for you. The one change that I can

articulate is that, as we discussed earlier, gay, the gay movement was the de facto movement because the left wouldn't have us but today, every radical movement has queer and trans people in leadership. So you could really say that radical queer politics is now present in a very wide range of movements. There still is like a rarified white male Gay Rights Movement with organisations like human rights campaign, I don't even know who those people are, I could not tell you the name of the person who's in charge. I never interact with them. I never see them, but I know that they're there and they have a lot of money but that's like, that's where the gay movement is. Otherwise, it's just kind of we're general participation and that's where it should be.

### **Holly Hammond**

Yeah, that we're everywhere in leadership and all those different movements. Back in the 2000s when I visited the US I came across the Human Rights Campaign shop and it was just full of all this different merchandising with rainbows and the HRC logo and I did not understand what was going on. Quite similar to like the college shops, you know, that are just so full of the brand of the university.

### **Sarah Schulman**

With everything that's happening now, you know, abortion being illegal now in a number of states that don't say gay laws, this new law that says that not every state has to marry gay people, all the anti trans laws that are going on, the repression of gay and trans books in school libraries. Where is HRC? Like, how come I never see them on television? I never hear from them. It's just remarkable. It's most of the leadership has come from like the ACLU, the American Civil Liberties Union, which is lawyers who are out in front on all of these issues but these highly paid people, I don't know where they are.

### **Holly Hammond**

Part of that, right is that they're not feeling accountable to a bigger movement? Well, maybe actually, accountability is a good place to look, because I know that's a really strong theme for you, personal accountability and accountability and relationships and,

you know, keeping power holders accountable. We have what would you like to be seeing in this space as we go forward?

### **Sarah Schulman**

Well, we're in a really bad place in the United States and one of the problems is that we're spinning things as victories that are basically squeakers. You know, half of the people in this country are so racist and crazy that they're voting for insane candidates and the fact that like, it's 49%, and that the other side is 51% is being trumpeted as a victory. But actually, it's a disaster, you know, something has gone very, very wrong and the Democratic Party, their leadership is very poor. There is however, a left wing flank of the party that has the kinds of people that would never government before, young people of colour, people like Rashida Tlaib to be put like Ayanna Pressley, like AOC, Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, who are really, you know, socialists, and leftists and if just a few years ago, people like that would have been fringe left wing leaders, they would never have been in government so that's a very positive step forward. But we're just really in a super crisis here and it's global, you know, fascism is on the rise around the world and the United States is leading the way, in lots of ways.

### **Holly Hammond**

We have a bit of an interesting phenomenon really, where a lot of Australian activists look to the US for examples and to learn from, because, you know, you have had really amazing movements, and also you've had a lot of publication and like, we get the books or, or the movies that document US campaigns. But we have to step back and go, your country is really different, and it's not doing so well. You know, we need to learn from our own experiences here and craft solutions that fit our context, you know.

### **Sarah Schulman**

Absolutely.

### **Holly Hammond**

One bit that you just said in there, around calling things wins when they're not wins and I see this a lot. I think it's people trying to maintain hope, and keep their base engaged

and feel like what they do makes a difference but sometimes that can be kind of political miseducation, saying to people, what we've got now is acceptable, rather than kind of raging for more, or having an analysis of the system that they're up against, and how difficult it actually it's to create change. Any thoughts on that?

### **Sarah Schulman**

Our problems are so profound. It's like, I think it's basically that, well, there's racism is the number one unifying factor of the right but also there's resentment, and it's misplaced. So our problem is that we need to tax the rich in the United States, because we don't have any money from a public sector and until we tax, the rich, nothing is going to be solved. And it's very simple solution and in fact, the rich were taxed until Reagan came into office in 1980. So we have this in our history but that is just not something that the Democratic Party is willing to engage and it is the simplest solution to our to many of our problems.

### **Holly Hammond**

I want to thank you for writing this amazing book, let the record show a political history are backed up, because it helps activists connect to this incredible movement that is so full of lessons and inspiration and power. And yeah, one thought I have is like how do we get people to engage with it more. I've been involved in the past and doing like study group or book clubs where we kind of read a chapter of the book and then we've got some prompts for discussion. Have there been any initiatives like that around this book or things you'd like...

### **Sarah Schulman**

A lot of people have been reading it. I mean, I would love to come to Australia, I've never been there and if somebody can bring me over, I'd be very happy to go all around the country and talk with people but I find like the in person is really the most effective. The problem is a 700 page book but on the other hand, I think it reads fairly well for something that size and that's, I think, my history as a novelist kind of helped getting the story going. I mean, one of the things I realised when I wrote it was that it couldn't be chronological, because then it wouldn't be accurate, because the success of the

movement was about simultaneity and that insight helped me structure it in such a way that you can really just read something and then skip to something else and read that, you know, so you're not forced to go through every page as a story, you know, unfolds in order. And I think that that form conveys the message of simultaneity.

**Holly Hammond**

Yeah, and even just like reading through the table of contents, it's educational, just the headlines of these sort of thematic summaries that you do. Yes, like a mini manifesto. It's really well done.

**Sarah Schulman**

Thank you so much

**Holly Hammond**

As a social movement librarian I appreciate that kind of thematic categorization, you know, the ways that helps people make meaning from something that might be really huge and overwhelming, how do we break it down in ways that are more accessible?

**Sarah Schulman**

Thank you so much.

**Holly Hammond**

But in my heart, when I think about that, it's also like honouring our AIDS activists here and the people from the 80s and 90s, who did really profound working too.

**Sarah Schulman**

Well, I mean, what I'd really love to do is go all over Australia and do events with local activists in each area. And we could do a historical comparison, and have a dialogue about what strategies worked, of course, you have a much more sane healthcare system, and I realised that it going through cuts and all that, but that's a very significant difference that we haven't don't have health care and so our needs were very different but I think it'd be a wonderful conversation.

**Holly Hammond**

It sure would be. Wow, thanks, Sarah, thanks for your time, really good to talk with you.

**Iain McIntyre**

You've been listening to commons conversations on community radio 3CR, you just heard an interview between Commons library and Holly Hammond, and Sarah Schulman, the author of *Let the Record Show: A Political History of ACT UP New York 1987 to 1993*.