

## Where do we go from here: Chaos or Community?

**Ross** [00:00:28] Welcome to Renegade Inc. In his 1967 book, it was Dr. Martin Luther King who posed the question, where do we go from here, chaos or community? Having changed America and the world with a civil rights movement, he then turned his attention to economics. Heavily influenced by the political economist Henry George. Dr. King concluded that if the economics in America were not addressed, then chaos would rip communities apart. Just over 50 years later, it looks like Martin Luther King was correct. We went to Newark, New Jersey, to speak with community organizer and civil rights activist Larry Hamm. He has dedicated his life to social and economic justice and sees 2020 as a pivotal moment in American history.

**Ross** [00:01:26] Larry, we sit here. 2020. You've got an election coming up and anybody watching looks at America and you can't help but think this is a country at a huge crossroads.

**Larry Hamm** [00:01:38] Yes.

**Ross** [00:01:39] What are the options?

**Larry Hamm** [00:01:40] Well, quite frankly, the way I see it, it's a choice between democracy and fascism. I think the election of Donald Trump signalled, I wouldn't necessarily call it a resurgence because they've always been here, but signalled the rise of an even more strengthened right wing and dangerous and violent movement in this country. And all of those sections came together to support Donald Trump. I mean, Trump, of course, he got many different kinds of endorsements. But among those endorsements were the Ku Klux Klan who openly endorsed him and the three hundred and thirty thousand member Fraternal Order of Police. So the police and the Klan endorsed Trump and so many other right wing groups. And I think his election showed that this whole section is on the rise and is very dangerous because in the aftermath of Trump, we've had an increase. I mean, we always had racist violence in this country, but we've had an increase in racist violence, racist attacks, people going into churches, killing people, going into mosques killing people, going into synagogues, killing people, going into Wal-Mart with a AR 15 rifles and killing 20, 30 people at a time. It's a very dangerous situation. And I think that America is at the crossroads. I think the re-election of Trump would strengthen even more this dangerous ultra right wing tendency in this country, this neo fascist movement in this country. And I think it's a choice. That's why I think Trump has to be defeated, not because I think that, you know, it will bring about any transformation of the economic system or the political system. But a victory for him will only strengthen that dangerous rightward trend.

**Ross** [00:03:26] And who is the person to defeat him?

**Larry Hamm** [00:03:28] I think the person best suited for the job is Bernie Sanders. I supported Bernie Sanders in 2016. I was a delegate for Bernie Sanders to the Democratic National Convention. I'm supporting Bernie Sanders in 2020. And right now, I am the state chairman of the Bernie Sanders campaign here in New Jersey. And I think he is the best candidate. And I think he's the best candidate not only because the polls show that he can

defeat Trump, but because he is the candidate that wants to, in fact, change the whole damn system.

**Ross** [00:04:02] And in the last election was he robbed with the Hillary?....

**Larry Hamm** [00:04:04] I absolutely believed he was robbed of the nomination. I think the effort from the beginning, once he announced and once it became clear that he had popular support, the effort was to, in fact, rob him of the nomination and I think they will try and do it again.

**Ross** [00:04:18] Right. What is the establishment here in the US so scared of? Why is there such a visceral reaction to Bernie Sanders?

**Larry Hamm** [00:04:25] Because, first of all, they definitely don't want a socialist movement in this country. That's thing one. But thing two is they don't want even the initial reforms that Sanders is talking about. Medicare for all is not socialism, but it's a better alternative to what we have now with millions of people without health care in this country, with privatized health care. So they don't want even the reforms that Sanders is talking about in the immediate. And they definitely don't want a popular socialist movement. Like there are people in the United States now that say they are democratic socialists and socialists of various stripes. But that has not congealed into a major popular movement. But Sanders, if he has done anything, he has shown, in fact, that there is a wide swath of the American population who gravitate toward his ideas and who want to see a fundamental change in our social system.

**Ross** [00:05:25] Do you agree with him when he says that every billionaire is a policy mistake?

**Larry Hamm** [00:05:29] I don't know about a policy mistake, but I think a social system, an economic system that produces billionaires and millionaires at this level is a social system that's antithetical to the interests of the majority of the people, because you can't have wealth without poverty and you can't have extreme wealth without extreme poverty. Billionaires are not accidents. They are the product of a particular type of economic system. And that economic system is the capitalist economic system. Every institution in this society, all of the major institutions are geared up to work in tandem to support this popular mythology. This Horatio Alger story, this idea that everybody can be a millionaire, that you can walk in your corner store and buy a lottery ticket and you, too, can become a millionaire.

**Ross** [00:06:24] But it's bigger than that isn't it because people go to work day in, day out.

**Larry Hamm** [00:06:27] Right.

**Ross** [00:06:27] The economy's working against them.

**Larry Hamm** [00:06:29] Right.

**Ross** [00:06:29] You've got trickle up economics. You certainly haven't got trickle down.

**Larry Hamm** [00:06:33] Right.

**Ross** [00:06:34] Wall Street, by using financial capitalism, has hollowed out the productive economy, the real economy.

**Larry Hamm** [00:06:40] Yes.

**Ross** [00:06:41] Yet people still seem blind to it. And whenever you mention the s word they say, no.

**Larry Hamm** [00:06:47] Right. That's absolutely correct. Because they have a false consciousness, a consciousness that is instilled in them from the time that they are babies and children. And it keeps going until they become adults. I mean, this false consciousness is what we learn in school.

**Ross** [00:07:07] I mean, what is it? If you were to define it, what is that false consciousness?

**Larry Hamm** [00:07:10] Well, the false consciousness is a belief in the capitalist system, that this is the best of all possible worlds and any other world is inferior to this.

**Ross** [00:07:20] These people have never been to Scandinavia.

**Larry Hamm** [00:07:21] They never they don't know about Scandinavia. And if you say democratic socialism or social democracy or any kind of thing, immediately they're going to cringe as I did when I was a kid.

**Ross** [00:07:33] Right.

**Larry Hamm** [00:07:33] Because we were taught that socialism was bad. Socialism, communism bad. Don't believe in that stuff.

**Ross** [00:07:41] So how did you break free then mentally?

**Larry Hamm** [00:07:43] Well, I broke free because of a combination of both objective and subjective conditions. Objectively, I was probably in the dark until I was about 12 years old. And the Newark rebellion. What we call rebellion, the history books call it riots, broke out in 1967. There were riots all over America. In fact, if you read the history, you'll see that between 1960 and 1972, there were over 1000 uprisings in cities and towns all across America. And one of the biggest and most remembered was the Newark rebellion of 1967. I came from a poor black family, a working class black family. But we believe it or not, we didn't back then in the 50s, we didn't talk much about race, or at least as a kid, they didn't talk much about race to me. But when literally the rebellion was happening all around our house in the street that our house was on, I had to ask my mother and my grandfather - my father was then deceased - why are people so angry? And then that was really the beginning for me. And then when I got to high school, there was controversy about the Vietnam War. Literally my student orientation at Arts High School, the student government president was asked by the principal to get up to speak. The student government president goes to the podium and starts talking about the war in Vietnam. The student government president and the principal

get into a fight on stage. I'm 13 years old. I'm sitting in the audience with my mouth open, not knowing what the hell he was talking about. But I knew that this must be important because he felt so strongly about it that he would challenge the principal. And so these things kept happening objectively. And then subjectively, I was exposed to certain things like in my senior year in high school, I had a humanities class where we began to read the works of James Baldwin and other black authors. So as a combination of events, conditions, things that I was exposed to that helped change my consciousness. And, you know, that has continued throughout my life and brought me to where I am today. But most people, you know, they're still under the burden of that false consciousness, even even among African-Americans. You know that somehow capitalism can save us. You can see it during the Democratic debates that the black candidates are still putting forward - these ideas and these proposals within the system. I'll be 66 next month. And at this point, I have to make an assessment. And the assessment is that everything we've tried up to this point is not working because black people in this country are actually in worse shape today than we were in 1968 when Dr. King was assassinated. The paradigm of this consciousness is episodic and we think that these things have just started, but they haven't. Class warfare has been going on in this country since the country was founded. Now it ebbs and flows. It goes up. It goes down. The last really serious class conflict we had was probably during the depression. And what's been going on since the New Deal has been an effort to turn everything, not just the gains that black people have made, but the gains that everybody have have made for the last 75 to 100 years. I mean, think about it in this country. After World War Two, almost half of labour in America was unionized. Today, less than 10 percent of labour. Now, is that an accident? No, it's not an accident because they have made efforts, legal efforts and all other kinds of efforts to stifle the union movement in this country. So these things just didn't begin. But they ebb and they flow overtime.

**Ross** [00:11:51] So when the poster boy for financial capitalism, Warren Buffett, says there is a class war on. And guess what? My class are winning.

**Larry Hamm** [00:11:58] That's right.

**Ross** [00:11:58] You're not shocked by that?

[00:11:59] I'm not shocked.

**Ross** [00:12:00] I mean, he is refreshingly honest.

**Larry Hamm** [00:12:02] Right? He's honest. And at the same time, some of these people understand that if they continue down this path, it's going to lead to an environment where they can't make any money. So they would rather make concessions and keep the system going than to keep things bottled up and have it explode. Because if it explodes, then there's a possibility the system can't function or that it may collapse so that the those who can see beyond their own self-interest are able to make utterances like Warren Buffett. And it wouldn't be the first time. All through history, there have been people in the upper classes who understood that the current social arrangement is not healthy for everybody, you know. And so they comment on it. But at the same time, you have those who would hang themselves in an effort to keep making money.

**Ross** [00:13:07] In that first half we talked about when you were 12 years old, suddenly the lights start to go on. You ask your mother and grandfather what's going on? Why is this rebellion happening? Why is it happening here? Ordinarily, these things happen in other places far away. And then through education, you're thinking differently, you're watching the social fabric, the ebb and the flow. And then eventually you go to Princeton.

**Larry Hamm** [00:13:33] Undergraduate and graduate, and then...

**Ross** [00:13:35] And then you come back to Newark, you come back to the place where it all started. Just talk a bit about that and why you deliberately came back to that bit of the world.

**Larry Hamm** [00:13:44] I actually I wasn't born in Newark. I was actually born in Washington, D.C. But I was brought to Newark as a babe, almost as a newborn.

**Ross** [00:13:53] But it's your home?

**Larry Hamm** [00:13:54] It's my home. And I always felt connected. And I wasn't a particularly politically active youth, unlike my peers. Believe it or not, when I was in high school, I had peers that worked in the election of Ken Gibson, who was the first black mayor of the city of Newark. I was an average kind of high school student. I ran track. I wanted to graduate. I want to go to college. I want to have a girlfriend like everybody else. But the rebellion happened. That happened like right at the beginning of my high school experience. And then in 1971, that's when I became a student activist. There had been a teacher strike in Newark in 1971. And the law was that if we missed thirty five consecutive days of school, we weren't going to graduate. I happened to be the student government president at my high school at that time, and I led my first walkout in March of 1971 when I was a senior in high school. And we ended up taking over this building right here. We took over two floors of this building, the Gateway Hotel. It was the Hilton Gateway at that time. And that's where the Board of Education and the union were down here negotiating. We sat in down here in 1971. I thought I was going to get thrown out of school. My principal told me I was going to get thrown out of school. Then result was at 17 I was appointed to the Newark Board of Education being the youngest fully voting school board member in the history of United States. I think that's still true. At that time, I was scheduled to go to Princeton to start at Princeton University, which I did. But my duties as a board member was so much that I couldn't do Princeton and do the board, too. So I left Princeton and became essentially a full time school board member and actually continued as a student organizer because it was the student movement that brought me to power. When I finished my school board term, I ran for city council here in Newark at the age of 20. I think I'm still the youngest person ever run for city council in Newark. That didn't work out. I didn't win the election. Then I went to Princeton University, went back to Princeton.

**Ross** [00:15:59] But even at that time, you were really instrumental in boycotting the apartheid regime?

**Larry Hamm** [00:16:04] Right.

**Ross** [00:16:04] And South Africa.

**Larry Hamm** [00:16:05] That's right.

**Ross** [00:16:05] And you were very, very vocal about it when people weren't. And you led those boycotts?

**Larry Hamm** [00:16:10] Yes. In Princeton with other students, I formed the People's Front for the Liberation of Southern Africa. That's what we called it, to get Princeton to divest its holdings in companies that did business that supported the apartheid regime. And we had many demonstrations and protests. And that led to a takeover of the university administration building in 1978. And Princeton did divest from several - they didn't do a complete divestment, but they divested from a few of the corporations. When I finished at Princeton, I returned to Newark because over those years from high school through college, I saw the importance of community organizing. I saw that we needed to build a movement for social transformation. It was at Princeton that I was exposed to the ideas of everybody from Martin Luther King to Karl Marx and studied revolutions of all types. And I wanted to come back home and build a movement. I returned to Newark in 1980 and by 1983 had formed the People's Organization for Progress, which I am the chairman of. And we've just observed our thirty sixth anniversary and I've been on that path ever since. And I think the task that faces us, probably the project that I'm going to be working on until I leave the planet, and that's going to be to build a movement or be part of building a movement that can fundamentally transform our social and economic system. I believe that Martin Luther King was right when he wrote his book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?* In 1966. In that chapter called *The World House*. In that book, he said we need a radical redistribution of power and wealth in America. He said we need a fundamental transformation of our socioeconomic system. That's a quote from Martin Luther King. Those are not the I have a dream quotes we hear all the time. But I think that's what Dr. King really was about. And I want to continue that effort.

**Ross** [00:18:06] When Dr. King started talking about economics, the economy, people had obviously seen how effective they've been in the other aspects of social reform. Did that absolutely terrify the establishment?

**Larry Hamm** [00:18:16] I think it did. I think that's why he was assassinated. I think he was assassinated for two reasons. And both of them fundamentally were economic. One, he opposed the war in Vietnam. Now, he had wrestled with the polls. He had been thinking about it for a long time because he had people pushing him. People like Stokely Carmichael, later known as Kwame Ture, and many of the brothers and sisters from snick as early as 1963, because John Lewis, when he spoke at the same march that Dr. King spoke at and gave the I Have a Dream speech, John Lewis was gonna talk about Vietnam, but they edited Vietnam out of his speech. So the snick people have been pushing Dr. King. And then finally, Dr. King gave that speech. People call it the why I opposed the war in Vietnam speech, but its actual title is a time to break the silence because Dr. King had been silent. He'd been part of an arrangement not to talk about the war. And LBJ would get the civil rights bill through. But as a man of conscience, he couldn't not talk. And ultimately, he had to break that silence. So that was thing one. Thing two was the Poor People's Campaign. In his book, *Where Do We Go From Here? Chaos or Community?* Dr. King said that he wanted to bring a million people to Washington, D.C. to engage in massive non-violent civil disobedience until the Congress passed an economic bill of rights living wage for all, a guaranteed income,

education for all, universal health care. All of these things were part of his economic bill of Rights in 1968. And I think because of the war in Vietnam, the poor people's campaign, those two things were the reasons that they would assassinate. And it wasn't just the effort. There were several attempts to kill Dr. King. They feared King because they thought that he might be the one that could not only unify the black movement, but bring the black movement, the anti-war movement together to bring that real kind of peoples rainbow coalition together. And that would lead a movement to change the system.

**Ross** [00:20:29] But we sit here now 2020 and you're asking exactly the same question. Chaos or community.

**Larry Hamm** [00:20:35] Right.

**Ross** [00:20:35] An election coming up. All that simmering tension is just under the surface.

**Larry Hamm** [00:20:40] Yes.

**Ross** [00:20:41] What we talked about in that first half.

**Larry Hamm** [00:20:42] Yes.

**Ross** [00:20:43] Trump supporters. Sanders over here trying to unify. But ultimately, those economic questions haven't gone away?

**Larry Hamm** [00:20:49] No, they haven't gone away.

**Ross** [00:20:51] In fact, if anything, they've intensified.

**Larry Hamm** [00:20:53] Absolutely.

**Ross** [00:20:54] And maybe Dr. King could see that that's where that was headed.

**Larry Hamm** [00:20:57] Oh, absolutely. He could see it. And this is not by accident where we are here today. And it's not just because of whatever shortcomings we might have as organizers and people on the left.

**Ross** [00:21:10] So what is it?

**Larry Hamm** [00:21:11] The system has been at war with us. They have been at war with us since 1968. It's not just that we push forward. It's that they push back. And they've been pushing back with all of their might since 1968, since the election of Richard Nixon since 1968, for forty eight years. They have been overtly and covertly engaged in trying to destroy any movement that could shake this system at its foundations.

**Ross** [00:21:43] Why, when Barak Obama then was elected and he seemed to be a break in the clouds, a brave new world, a new dawn. Why is he still so popular in this country when he was so very conventional?

**Larry Hamm** [00:21:56] The short answer is that he was the first black president. And racism is such a gigantic problem in this country that just the fact that he could get elected, just the fact that he was the first one to get elected has given him a special place in the hearts and minds of many people. And it makes it very difficult for them to assess him in a critical way. Now, in the interests of full disclosure, I voted for Barack Obama. I voted for him in 08 and I voted for him in 2012. Both times I voted for him. But because I voted for him, that didn't mean I turned off whatever critical faculties I had. You can support somebody for whatever good things they might be doing and remain critical of whatever bad things that they might be doing. Some people are supportive. Some people oppose him. And these are among the people that voted for him.

**Ross** [00:22:50] But Cornel West, your friend, he's been a very vocal critic.

**Larry Hamm** [00:22:52] He's been very critical.

**Ross** [00:22:54] But he puts his critique right in the middle of neo liberalism and says that this guy was a arch near liberal. And his big gripe not only was a terrible foreign policy mistakes that Mr. Obama made, but. Also, the fact that he bailed out Wall Street and he threw Main Street to the wolves.

**Larry Hamm** [00:23:11] That's right. That's why the system has been so hard on Brother Cornell West. They went after Cornell and after Tavis Smiley because those were two credible black voices, not just two black voices, because there are a lot of voices out who were criticizing Obama. But those were two credible black voices that said that the Obama administration was not addressing the issue of poverty in the United States. And that was true. But unfortunately, you know, a lot of people can't see the forest for the trees, so to speak. But I will say this. I think recently former President Obama cautioned people in the Democratic Party about moving too far to the left. And I think that hurt him. I think that hurt him.

**Ross** [00:23:56] Did the mask slip?

**Larry Hamm** [00:23:57] I think the mask did slip. And I think enough people have been catching hell so much hell in the last four years that they are like, well, you know, dear Mr. President, please sit down. You had your chance. Now, let us do this because people want real change. They don't just want to change the governor from white to black, the president from white to black. People want real change. They want their children to go to college without having to mortgage their homes two and three times or even sell their homes to send their kids to college. They want to work 40 hours a week and make enough money to not have to work a second job.

**Ross** [00:24:39] Or take on huge amounts of debt.

**Larry Hamm** [00:24:41] Or take on huge amounts of debt. You know, they want to be able to go to the doctor without worrying about are they going to be able to pay the doctor bill? They want a better life.



**Ross** [00:24:52] So when Bernie Sanders says, are you willing to go out and fight for somebody that you don't know, what does that say to you?

**Larry Hamm** [00:24:58] Well, I think what Bernie Sanders is trying to do is get to the heart of the matter, not only critique the system, but it's also a challenge to us. You know what is required to change the system? It's requiring a change within us. Are you willing, do you believe in this so much that you're willing to fight for someone whose name you don't even know, whose face you can't even see? Because in the final analysis, it takes that kind of selflessness to bring about fundamental social change. My belief is that the kind of change we need is not going to come from someone in the White House. It's going to come from millions of average people who don't really have any stake, you know, in trying to keep things the way they are to come together to make that kind of change.

**Ross** [00:25:56] Back to your community organizer.

**Larry Hamm** [00:25:58] Right. Community organizing is very important.

**Ross** [00:26:02] Are you excited?

**Larry Hamm** [00:26:03] I've worked like other people work a regular job. And now I'm at the point that I can retire and spend the majority of my time actually trying to realize those ideas that I'm talking to you about. That part is exciting. What's a little disheartening is that after 66 years, the same social paradigm exists. There might be a few more rungs on the ladder, but it's a ladder nonetheless. We still have so much, so much work to do that that's a little disheartening. But every time I see some small victory, some fight around police brutality, where the people won and the police actually did get convicted and got a sentence commensurate with the crime that they committed, that gives me new hope. Every time I see the thousands of people that come out, like I was with Bernie Sanders at his rally recently in New York City, where they said there were over twenty five thousand people that came out for a campaign rally. I mean, just being there, I mean, I didn't speak that day. I was just another face in the crowd. But just being there energized me, you know. So these things that happened along the way, they're like recharge, like charging your phone, I get recharged. You know, so I can keep going. But it's gonna be a fight. It's going to be a fight. And it's not going to be easy. But I think ultimately we will win. I believe that.

**Ross** [00:27:29] Larry Hamm, thank you very much for your time.

**Larry Hamm** [00:27:30] Thank you. Alright.