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**Opening Remarks: Tony Mazzocchi Centennial Conference
June 4-5, 2026, Rutgers Labor Education Center**

By Professor Rebecca Givan

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The following is a lightly edited version of remarks given at the Tony Mazzocchi centennial conference on June 4th, 2026.

I never met Tony Mazzocchi.

As we were planning this gathering, Les Leopold said he wanted to understand why people who never met him are inspired by him and Les cajoled/strong armed/organized me into talking to you today.

Tony gradually seeped into my consciousness. I learned a lot more about him when I read Les's book. People were excited when it came out- people are still excited. Any single one of Tony's areas of achievement would be significant- a commitment to radical, democratic unionism and worker education; strategizing and building towards a just transition; health and safety as both a shopfloor program and a legislative victory; and of course, thirty years ago, a party of our own.

Why elevate the legacy of one leader? What is it about Tony that inspires all the people in this room who didn't have a chance to meet him. Who never organized with him. Probably no-one here subscribes to the great man theory of history. We believe in organizing. We believe in

collective action. We don't really believe in elevating individuals. And yet, anyone with even a little organizing experience knows that we cannot make progress without both structure and leadership.

But to what end? How do unions and working people move between the day to day requirements of a safe, fair, workplace and the urgent need to make a better world, to raise our sights higher.

I heard Tony described as a pragmatic utopian. I often think of utopians as those who are ungrounded in reality – deliberately ignoring a necessary power analysis, not recognizing our context, our material constraints or avoiding an honest assessment of our own power. But without a higher vision, an understanding that a better world is possible but only if we organize, we are left with the mundane work of so-called bread and butter issues. It's on all of us to connect these bread-and-butter issues to something broader. If eleven percent of workers have bread and butter, maybe better bread and butter, but the rest of the working class is starving, toiling away for poverty wages, with unaffordable healthcare, and no retirement security while facing detention, deportation, environmental collapse, no support for caregivers, corporate deregulation and the end of the few remaining restraints on corporate power and oligarchic rule, then what? Our movements and our institutions must build enough power to effect change far beyond individual workplaces.

Every day I wake up thinking about how to fight the very real fascism that we're facing, while committing to the work of bargaining and administering a strong contract, representing workers every day and organizing for a fairer university. This work is so hard. It exacts an incredible toll. But the thing about organizing is that it requires relentless optimism.

The work I do, the organizing I have chosen to do, is infused with Mazzocchi's legacy. Of course, I work and teach in this building, the Rutgers Labor Education Center, in this room, where I have the privilege of walking in his footsteps. But my organizing work is deeply and directly influenced by Tony's work. Through the Labor Campaign for Single Payer, one of what we might call the Mazzocchi legacy campaigns, we organize not only for single payer healthcare, but to ensure that working people understand that bargaining every three or four years to cling to our profit-ridden employer-based healthcare, prioritizing supposedly good healthcare benefits at the expense of wages, is never enough. We will win single payer healthcare.

And we are still fighting for free college. Through the wall to wall and coast to coast organizing of higher education unions with Higher Ed Labor United, a union of local unions, we are fighting for free college. Higher ed workers are building revenue campaigns at the state level, to tax the rich. We are supporting higher ed champions running for federal office, who will support not only free college, but free college where those who work and study there have academic freedom, and the price is not born by exploited,

contingent workers. And in multiple states we now have free college - community college in Massachusetts, four years of college in New Mexico. We win this piece by piece, step by step, never all at once. We win this by setting our sights higher, and by doing the patient organizing to get from here to there.

When I think of Mazzocchi's legislative work, I see this imperative to organize beyond our workplaces. The audacity to organize for, and win, OSHA, required a deep material understanding of our conditions. First of all, winning improvements contract by contract will not protect workers who lack union representation. Second, there is, and will always be, a role for government.

In this room, we have some of the most tenacious fighters for workplace safety this country has seen - from those on the shop floor every day to those who have taken the reins at OSHA. At each level, we are fighting back against corporate power. To believe in OSHA is to believe in the government - there are some things that employers cannot do, no matter how great our contracts are. To believe in the role of government is to acknowledge that we, as workers and organizers, must engage in advocacy and electoral work. We can and must elect people who not only give lip service to our values, but come out of our movements and are accountable to our movements. We will not restore OSHA, or win broader labor rights, by walking away from electoral and legislative politics. Rebuilding the federal government, rebuilding the federal workforce, rehiring the dedicated civil servants

who have been discarded by the Trump administration will take organizing, and it will take a belief that government can be good, and taxes can be good. In the prescient words of the Labor Party's Call for Economic Justice in 1996: "If corporations continue to get their way, OSHA will be gutted, our environmental and labor laws will be worthless, our public health system will be dismantled, and the safety net and public universities will be only a dim memory. It's time for working people to put an end to this nonsense."¹

We will not win a better OSHA, or a better VA, or a better CDC, or a better EPA, without a bottom-up movement that takes electoral politics seriously, and demands candidates who represent us and are accountable to us. We have to engage strategically, thoughtfully, and collectively, if we are serious about building a better world.

When Les mentioned in passing that Tony had no patience for factionalism, I again felt reassured. You cannot move forward pragmatically if you aren't willing to build mass alignment. Electoral work requires alignment—this is no easy feat, but it is absolutely critical.

I want to talk a bit about Just Transition. We are living in terrible times. There is so much we need to transition from—specifically, there are so many jobs that should not exist, and workers doing these jobs who must have humane, safe, clean, livable alternatives. It's on all of us to build

not just the world where these good jobs exist, and the bad jobs no longer do, but to do the deep organizing, and messy, pragmatic work of plotting each step of the transition.

Last week at Delaney Hall, one of my fellow protestors engaged with a young, masked, heavily armed Latino ICE agent lined up in front of a tank. The agent looked like he was a teenager. The protester spoke to him directly in both Spanish and English. He said "Come over here with us. I promise we will get you a good job. You don't have to do this." For too many in our communities, these are good jobs—long term secure jobs with decent benefits. How many high school graduates now have access to a job with a pension? A job that can support a family, with solid job security, without fear of mass layoffs? What does a just transition look like for the ICE agent? Or the criminal justice graduate, recruited by Customs and Border Patrol? We owe it to ourselves to answer these hard questions together. Because it's not just "Abolish ICE". It's build a better world, where the former ICE agent, or those who would have been ICE agents—or those who would never be ICE agents because they understand that ICE is the gestapo—those people all must have access to good jobs, free college for themselves and their children, government-funded and provided healthcare, and a safe, peaceful, equitable and sustainable society. We don't win this all at once. We build it step by step, issue by issue, coworker and neighbor by coworker and neighbor. But we will not build it if

¹Leopold, Les. 2007. *The Man Who Hated Work but Loved Labor*. Labor Institute Press.

we don't believe in a better world, and strategize and organize collectively to determine how we get from here to there.

Our planning group was trying to settle on words from Tony that might encapsulate this gathering, and the work we hope to do together. Kristina [Mazzocchi] said emphatically that we shouldn't represent our common cause with a picture of Tony but with his words. When we thought about "Movements Grow in Desperate Times" I first fact-checked it. I confirmed the source- a 1995 Newsday interview on the coming founding of the Labor Party- and I really considered the weight of the context. NAFTA, the contract with America, Clintonian politics as the lesser of two evils. We were in desperate times then, and we are in more desperate times now. The forces lined up against us are daunting, but we must be undaunted. I feel deep in my heart the truth of the whole sentiment. Tony knew. "Movements grow in desperate times. We are being born."

We are being born. Let's build something together.