

All Ears with Abigail Disney
Season 3 Episode 2: Sara Nelson
No One Expects Flight Attendants To Be Militant
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Sara Nelson: Well, I had peanut butter and jelly for breakfast actually. And what better?

Abigail Disney: Mmm, yum.

Sara Nelson: Yeah.

Abigail Disney: What kind of jelly? I need to know.

Sara Nelson: So it's—I'm very specific—it has to be, Smucker's all-natural peanut butter.

Abigail Disney: Oh, yeah.

Sara Nelson: And then definitely never jelly. So I shouldn't actually even say that, it's gotta be jam preserves or something.

Abigail Disney: I can't believe I'm back to fruit loops. That's just not good, but I fucking love them.

Abigail Disney: Welcome to All Ears, I'm Abigail Disney. This fall was supposed to be back to school, back to work, back to normal. Well clearly, that's not happening, and let's face it, for a lot of folks, especially women, the old normal wasn't so hot anyway. The list of crappy things we should be doing better on? Well, lemme see. Sexism, racism, unequal pay, unaffordable childcare... need I go on? This season my guests are women. Women who are envisioning a new and better normal for all of us, because lord knows we still have so far to go.

My guest today is a flight attendant and she's also one of the most powerful labor leaders in the country. And if you're as old as I am, you will remember when we did not call them flight attendants. And they got no respect. Sara Nelson has been president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA since 2014. And she is as tough as nails when it comes to representing her constituency. People have called her militant which I love because she's such a powerful advocate for workers. And when the pandemic hit, she really showed what a labor leader can do. As a force in the negotiation of the CARES act, she made sure that aviation workers got paid and kept their healthcare for 16 whole months. And during the 2018-2019 government shutdown, which lasted longer

than any government shutdown in history, her leadership was a big part of getting then president Trump to finally cave and agree to a deal. So, Sara, thank you so much for coming and I'm so excited to talk to you.

Sara Nelson: Well, I'm super happy to be with you. Thank you so much.

Abigail Disney: Great. So, I alluded briefly to the retrograde life of flight attendants at one time. And that labor really did have to fight very hard to improve. Some of this is before your time, but for the younger folks can you just remind us what used to be expected of flight attendants

Sara Nelson: You bet. I started only three years after we won the right not to have to step on a weight scale when we checked in for work every day. And, our union formed back in 1945 and we won our first contract in 1946. And with that contract, one of the first things that we negotiated was a seniority list. That was really the basis for taking on the battles of all the discriminatory practices that were in place. Managers could no longer try to get flight attendants to trade sexual favors for schedules, everything was transparent and fair, and there was a process people could follow. It used to be that you had to quit when you were 30, or if you got married or got pregnant, or, got a little too heavy, in the airline's eyes, which was over 115 pounds. And it also used to be that men couldn't have this job. So, you know, we fought for the right of people with the heart of a flight attendant to do this work, no matter where you come from or what you look like or what gender you claim, or how you identify. I mean, it's an incredibly democratic union that was built by some really strong women who were not just going to take things the way they were.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. Wow. But women have kind of not always found a welcome place in the union movement and I want—can you talk about why that was?

Sara Nelson: I have to tell you, I didn't really fully understand sexism until I became a union president.

Abigail Disney: Oh really? Not even when you were a flight attendant?

Sara Nelson: Well, I mean, I had the things like, you know, the passenger coming up behind me and like, you know, no warning at all. All of a sudden I feel a hand on my hip and he's rubbing up and down on my hip and my rear-end and going, 'What no girdle, how do you look this good in your uniform without a girdle?' You know? I mean, I had all that stuff, but, I mean that is intended to control women, sexual harassment, that's all that it's about. It's not about sex. It's always about power. So I experienced all of that.

But it's really when you're fighting for other people and you have a reason to be in that room the same as everyone else. And then you're still dismissed as the woman in the room or the woman who is representing other women at the table. I had situations where I would be there at meetings where everyone is sharing what's happening in their union and it's all men in the room and the leaders just didn't call on me. And then in the same conversation, turning around to me and, when someone said, 'What's happening with this election?' This was in 2016. 'What is it with all these women supporting Trump?' And they're turning around and they all look at me. And as if I'm supposed to answer this question, I said, 'Do you want me to answer for all women?' So, you know, some of them, this is just clearing out old ideas.

Abigail Disney: Yes. Amen. So you started flying in 1996 and of course in 2001 there was September 11th which had a huge impact on flying but also on you personally.

Sara Nelson: Yeah.

Abigail Disney: Can you—can you just tell us a little bit about that day?

Sara Nelson: So, I normally flew flight 175. 175 was the United Airlines flight that departed from Boston, and ended up crashing into the south tower of the World Trade Center. And so the seven flight attendants who were crewing the flight and the two customer service agents who were on to go on vacation—actually to Disneyland—were close friends and colleagues and people who I knew very well. I had just landed actually in Chicago that morning, because I was going to a union training. And so I walked into our national union office and the officers had already been called over to United Airlines to the crisis room. So no one knew what was going on and everything just really came crashing down very quickly. Although it seems like it was weeks that formed that morning. We had 15 minute briefings where we were talking about where all the planes were because there was an order to get them all on the ground. And as we started to get information about which planes were missing and where people were, flight crew lists were on lockdown and we were trying to get all of that information so that we could support people and initiate all of the relationships that we have around the world with other unions, so they could be there to support people who were stranded.

Our union had been run by these incredible women who just didn't take BS off of anyone. I had really fought my way in. So here I am, really the youngest person in the room, by several decades. And also the only one who was based in Boston. And these women who were tough as nails, my God, and all smokers from the early days of aviation, they didn't take any crap off of anyone and weren't necessarily even kind, and they expected a lot of you, to prove yourself. But, as the flight was announced that it

was flight 175 I started to black out because that's my flight, that's my friends. And I started to go down and one of those tough as nails, union activists with a gravelly, smoky voice caught me and held me and stayed with me the rest of the day. And so in that moment, everything changed. Everything that I knew changed. I mean, here we were, apparently at war. In a war, we didn't know we were fighting and we were on the front lines and we had to grieve our friends, but what happened and what I learned after that is that there are people who are just laying in wait for the next crisis in order to take more from working people. And that's what happened. And so the next three years were a real hands-on learning process for me about what happens in a crisis if there's not a voice for working people and not someone to fight back and make sure that we're focused on taking care of everyone rather than taking advantage of everyone.

Abigail Disney: You know, I just heard such an amazing journey just in your voice, just now. Cause you went all the way there. And then the minute you started talking about organizing you came all the way back. Is that what organizing does for you? Does it make you find more strength than you used to have? I mean does it make you strong?

Sara Nelson: It absolutely makes me strong, you know, my first weeks on the job, I didn't get my paycheck. I went several weeks without any results from the people in the office. Finally, I was completely out of money and went in and said, 'Somebody's got to help me. I still haven't gotten my first paycheck.' I just started to get some of the same, empty words said back at me. And the tears started to roll because I literally didn't have enough to eat. And rent was due in a couple of days. And I had this tap on the shoulder and turned around. There was someone standing there. I'd never seen her before, but she's wearing the same uniform. I remember her union pin and she's holding her checkbook and asking me how to spell my name. And she handed me a check for \$800 and she said, 'Number one, you go take care of yourself. And number two, you call our union.' And I did call our union. I had my paycheck the very next day, but I always tell everyone that I learned everything I needed to know about our union in that moment because standing alone, there's nothing we can do, but standing together, there's nothing we can't accomplish. And so that's really what has driven me. And I have to tell you, you know, growing up, I wasn't even aware that there was any evil in the world. Just that everyone belonged and everyone should be loved. That was really the mantra in our house and that was expressed in a lot of different ways. And so, I think from that strong foundation of loving everyone, a strong sense of justice, and the idea that everyone should be lifted up and given a little help, it just became very natural to fight back when I started to see that that's not really what was happening in the world. And so organizing, absolutely it feels like a calling, it feels like my mission.

Abigail Disney: Sara, I got to say, I do feel like over the years, the activists and the organizers that I've known and worked with taught me about organizing and activism as an extension of love and like a logical thing you do with your love.

Sara Nelson: Yeah. You know, I do wear as a badge of honor the term militant. But to me, that's about claiming our power as working people and as women. I'll never forget the first time that our union was called militant when I was working on our communications. And we were called militant and I danced all the way down the street. I mean, I just thought it was so cool, you know, because no one expects flight attendants to be called militant. But the truth is that when we are fully understanding our power that we have together, that's the best way that we can possibly love each other because it's the only way that we have power to fight for the things that people need. Today, the issues that we fight at the bargaining table, like fighting for affordable health care, as they say, or, fighting for housing—I mean, we have to fight for commuter policies because flight attendants can't afford to live in the hub cities where they're based. So they commute to work by air and it never occurred to me as we're fighting for those things at the bargaining table that actually what we should be fighting for was affordable housing with other unions and other workers. Right. Because that's really what was creating the issues. So there's these big systemic societal issues that we have to take on that very much relate to the needs of my members. I realized we can actually lead. We can actually lead the whole labor movement. Who better to tell the stories than a group of people who are already 80% organized and who can say, yep, we were the first ones to take on big tobacco and win.

Abigail Disney: Yeah, you did. You kicked their butts, that was extraordinary.

Sara Nelson: It was great. We used scientists to define the harms of secondhand smoke and through that science and through the political tenacity of flight attendants, we won that fight. We just barely won it. We started with a ban on smoking, on any flight under two hours, and that expanded to a ban for all domestic flights. And ultimately just after I started flying as a flight attendant, we finally won a ban on all international flights and it wasn't until 2012 that our union finally got a ban on smoking on even charter flights. So it was a long-time battle, but we set our demands and just dug in until we won.

Abigail Disney: You know it's a great example of that when you fight in solidarity for the well-being of people and win, kind of everybody wins. Because we all benefited by the rethinking of secondhand smoke in restaurants and bars and other places. So thank you for that—

Sara Nelson: Thank you!

Abigail Disney: –flight attendants. So COVID comes, can you talk a little about what's been happening for flight attendants recently because it's nuts and hard to understand.

Sara Nelson: Yeah. Well, first of all, we have our planes suddenly full after losing almost all of the demand for air travel. And then you have people coming to the door of the aircraft, thinking that we're at odds with each other and that this is a place for conflict.

CNBC News Anchor: *Trouble in the skies as unruly passengers cause some turbulence.*

ABC News Anchor: *News tonight concerning an unruly passenger on board an American Airlines flight.*

Tom Negovan on KRON4: *A Southwest flight attendant, attacked.*

Sara Nelson: And you know, some Fox News personalities say, flight attendants who are Nazis.

Tomi Lahren on Fox News: *There are some flight attendants out there that take their jobs as the mask-police to extremes. Becoming almost, Nazis of the air.*

Sara Nelson: They're gonna force you to wear that mask. And so the mask is a flashpoint, but it's not just that. People who are really stressed out and then our planes are full. So they're jammed in together and they're having a hard time because when people don't know what to believe, that creates incredible anxiety because most people really want to follow the rules. And when they've been told to believe that any instruction from flight attendants in a uniform is taking away their own personal rights. It's putting us in a position where flight attendants are going to work in the most dangerous time of our careers. Every day when flight attendants are putting on a uniform, they're asking themselves, 'Is today the day that I get punched in the face?' It's really, it's very difficult. It's taxing. And on top of it, we were staffed at minimum levels prior to coronavirus, because as the airlines were making billions of dollars, there was pressure on them to send more and more of that to Wall Street and stock buybacks. And so we would not have been able to meet this demand if we had not had in place the COVID relief that we fought for, which by the way, also had restrictions on management of no stock buybacks and capping their executive compensation.

Abigail Disney: Oh my heart sang when I saw that.

Sara Nelson: *laughs* Yeah, we created the first-ever worker's first relief program. For the first time ever, corporations were told exactly how they had to spend the government money and that it had to go just to the workers.

Abigail Disney: You really showed what a labor leader can do.

Sara Nelson: Well, first of all, we've seen a crisis before, and we know what happens if labor doesn't put their demands out front. So when coronavirus hit, we got to work right away. We got a plan over to the transportation infrastructure committee for the payroll support program. That was ultimately a part of the CARES act. I should say management was fighting with us, for that, because we had negotiations outside of the political process to make sure that we were on the same page. The only way we were going to get this through is if we were united and there were some fundamental parts of it that we disagreed on. But what we got fundamentally in the CARES act was money to go only to the frontline workers, jobs, no involuntary furloughs, continuation of healthcare, no cuts to hourly rates of pay and caps on executive compensation, and a ban on stock buybacks for two years after the relief ends.

Abigail Disney: Can you just say why you thought those last two things were important?

Sara Nelson: We know that the way that the economy has been constructed in capitalism is to extract more and more of the profits and the revenue to Wall Street and not to reinvest in the workers or the company that is creating those profits. Especially in a time of crisis, there would continue to be pressured like that. And there would be pressures to say that we're going to have a brain drain if we're not paying people more. So we knew from past experience that if we didn't put a ban on stock buybacks and a cap on executive compensation, that all of those pressures would lead to trying to take more from workers.

Abigail Disney: Right. So, you know, in other words, companies will always try to maximize their profits rather than invest in their workers, which reminds me of some things I've heard you say about how for labor, the fight really never ends. You described a sort of permanent struggle that needs to take place between workers and management. Talk about that a little bit.

Sara Nelson: Yes. So with unions, we can put a check on corporations because the workers right there, they don't have to ask for someone in Washington to help, they can

use their power right there to struggle. But if we don't do that all the time, our rights are never absolute. And when I go to the mineworker's picket line in Alabama today, and I hear what they're fighting for. And I hear that they're fighting for a living wage and they are fighting for the ability to not have to go into the mines six and seven days a week. These are things that we won almost a hundred years ago with those demands. And so we have to recognize that there is always going to be a struggle from the working class. There's this great Mother Jones quote. She says, 'The corporate elite want the most amount of labor for the least amount of money. And the labor wants the most amount of money for the least amount of their labor.' So I think that we have to recognize that at all times, in a capitalist society, there is going to be an attempt to take more and more and more. I mean, I often will say, you either have to beat it out of them or they have to remember the beating they're going to take to deal with you fairly. It's a very important thing to understand, that there's always gotta be a fight and there always can be. And it doesn't mean that there has to be a strike, but you have to be constantly asking that question. What do you want and what are you willing to do to get it?

Abigail Disney: I love Mother Jones. I think she's amazing. And an incredible life story, really, but a lot of people will be surprised to find out she's not just a magazine so can you tell us a little bit about Mother Jones? Who she was and what her role was in labor?

Sara Nelson: Yes, Mother Jones was an Irish immigrant, had a lot of hardships in her own life. Ultimately lost her husband and her children, and then furthermore lost her shop in a fire in Chicago. And working in the big mansions along the gold coast in Chicago and cleaning houses she would often look out of their windows and see the working class busily walking down the street and making everything work. And she saw this great divide and devoted her life to organizing. She became an organizer for the United Mine Workers of America. And she was often right at the heart of every fight. She is often credited with being the force that drove out child labor and demanded that of our government. She's also been court-martialed by the US military. So she spent time in jails and she went from fight to fight and lived with strikers and brought communities together. And usually, when people were getting dispirited and demoralized in these fights, Mother Jones would come in and rally the troops and get them excited and bring also the strategy to help them win. And sometimes that meant telling the men to take a day off and bringing the women in to chase the scabs out with them.

Abigail Disney: *laughs* Brooms being a universal symbol of bad-ass women whether they be witches or households.

Sara Nelson: *laughs* Yes.

Abigail Disney: So during the government shutdown in 2019 you called for a general strike.

Sara Nelson at the AFL-CIO awards: *Go back with the fierce urgency of now to talk to your local unions and your international unions about all workers joining together to end this shutdown with a general strike!*

Abigail Disney: So I guess first of all explain why you did that and why a general strike is a very provocative thing to call for.

Sara Nelson: In that speech what I did was I clearly identified the problem. We had people who were out of work.

Sara Nelson at the AFL-CIO awards: *For 800,000 federal sector sisters and brothers who are either locked out of work or forced to come to work without pay due to the government shutdown [...] These are real people who are facing real consequences of being dragged into the longest shutdown in history with no end in sight. No money to pay for rent, or childcare, or a tank of gas to get to work. The federal worker stretching insulin through the night and wondering if she's going to wake up in the morning.*

Sara Nelson: Our safety and security was becoming increasingly stretched. And we had the power to do something about it. And so what I said to all the unions in the room was go back to your locals and your internationals, and talk about the idea of a general strike, while at the same time planning for a strike within my own union, a safety strike. Because this was becoming untenable and increasingly likely that there would be an aircraft accident or a major security threat or something. Shutdowns are always bad, and a lot of people don't really pay attention to them, but, for example, flight attendants count on air traffic controllers being able to do their work. And it's a highly stressful job. And if anybody else has 99.9% effectiveness at their job, they're going to win awards. For air traffic controllers that means several flights going down a day. So, what could be more distracting than being forced to come to work and not getting a paycheck and not knowing if you're going to be able to keep a roof over the head for your families? Yes, it was provocative to use the words general strike. And to say that we needed to talk about that. Absolutely. Because there hasn't been a general strike in this country for almost a hundred years. Most people don't know what it is. But it was really about recognizing our power because what ended up happening was four days later, when the flight started to stop in LaGuardia, it only took a few flights.

CNN News Anchor: *The government shutdown ended after just ten air traffic controllers stayed home [...] The absence of those few workers [...] temporarily shut down travel at New York's Laganardia airport.*

Sara Nelson: When those flights started to stop we said, Mitch McConnell, can you hear us now? And I'll tell you, we had a resolution.

NBC News Anchor: *The federal government opened this morning.*

MSNBC News Anchor: *Under intense pressure, President Trump backed down.*

Kristen Sze on ABC7: *After 35 long days, the government shutdown is over, at least for now.*

Sara Nelson: But we didn't have a resolution because it was a few flights that stopped. We had a resolution because those in power were so concerned that labor was going to get a taste of our power and understand the power that we have, and fundamentally we would change all the rules in the country if working people understood that.

Abigail Disney: You know, it's interesting. Cause I know you started in the union in communications and I can see how communications-focused you are and how empowering that is. How actually so many unions they lost a lot of their power over the years because they didn't attend to what people thought about them.

Sara Nelson: Absolutely. We have a lot to do to redefine ourselves to the American public because the polls show that people are favorable of unions. They're favorable of the idea that working people should have power, but they don't know how to go about getting it or how to engage in it. Or what unions really are. I think the biggest problem in the country, frankly, is that people think of unions as a club and not something that is owned by the working class.

Abigail Disney: And well kind of the only thing owned by the working class.

Sara Nelson: That's exactly right. The only thing owned by the working class and the only way to get recognition for what we provide to this economy. And more and more has been extracted. So if you've seen that chart where productivity has grown through the roof, essentially since 1980 and wages have remained flat, union density has gone the exact opposite direction, gone down. All of that productivity has gone into the pockets of executives or Wall Street. And it's unsustainable. So, you know, people who create the value in this economy, working people. The vast majority of people in this

country are also the taxpayers and they're also the consumers. And, they are also the drivers of the economy. And they also, when they understand their value, have the power to control all of that and set the demands and set the agenda for the country, instead of allowing the corporations to do that.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. Yeah and something happened over the last 40 years where unions increasingly got blamed for increases in prices for things, unions were blamed for people not having the right to work. I mean, 72% of people in 1965 approved of unions. And by 2009, that was 48%. But as you said there's a poll recently, that says 65% are now saying they're approving of unions. So how do you turn that into increasing membership? Because that's where the power ultimately is going to come from.

Sara Nelson: Well, and the positive results on those polls are even higher with Millennials and Gen Z because they see that the only way that they are going to change their conditions is if they band together and change the rules and take on the existential threats that exist. So we have a lot of work to do to help get unions in the hands of people because also unions are where people can congregate. It's also the only place that's not a self-selecting group in this country. So you're required to sit down next to people who may be from a different neighborhood or may have a different background, or may look very different. And, people who you think, or you assume, have very different ideas than you. And when you sit down and start to talk with each other, just like the immigrants who formed the initial members of the United Mine Workers of America who didn't speak the same language because the coal barons specifically hired immigrants from different areas so that they couldn't speak to each other. And so in the union halls, this really brings people together and gives us an opportunity to talk through the tough issues, but also find our common ground because we have common demands. And so that's really the only way that we're going to turn this country around or deal with all of the issues that we have today of, looking like a more and more divided country where you only get your information from your chosen, trusted source, as opposed to a place where everyone can talk on the same set of information and have guidelines to talk with each other and share each other's stories.

Abigail Disney: Yeah. I saw a quote from you saying, that 'Just in the organizing power is built.' I thought that was such an important thing because you may or may not succeed in this particular campaign, but every time you fight a campaign, you build on the organizing you did last time. That doesn't go away.

Sara Nelson: And Abby, let me just add one thing too. The most important thing about the labor movement is to recognize that it is a movement. It's not a thing, and it is all the

people that form it. So, if we don't have leadership, the new look of leadership, translate into leadership at all of our unions, then we're not there yet. I think it's really dangerous to start to look to one person in the labor movement when the power comes from all people. And we have this mandate really from the country with all of the positive response to unions, to organize in the millions, people want it. We have to figure out how to get it to them. If a corporation saw that they were only getting, you know, 10% of their product out and 60 or 65% of the public wanted it, they would change that so that they could get it in the hands of the people who want it. And so we have a lot of work to do to make sure that people know how to join unions, know how to claim this as their own, and also encourage other women to join unions and run unions.

Abigail Disney: So, speaking of women maybe running unions, Richard Trumka just passed away. Which is incredibly sad. He's a huge loss to the world. He was the long-time president of the AFL-CIO, which is the largest federation of unions in the country. And I've actually heard your name floated as a potential next president. Is that a job you'd be interested in?

Sara Nelson: I think it has to be a consideration because people are looking for leadership and they're looking for a new direction. And I think we're going to have a lively discussion about that. I'm not ready to make that decision right now. What I do know is that flight attendants can do more to lead the labor movement, and I'm going to be working very hard on the organizing campaigns that we have underway at Delta airlines and SkyWest airlines, and also on bringing workers together more to define our demands because the flight attendant demands look a lot like the demands that I heard when I was standing out on the GM picket line with auto workers. So we've got to do more to bring people together and understand our power together. And I'm all in on that, whatever role I need to play, whatever title you put on that. I think I'll figure out over the next couple months. But there's no doubt that flight attendants are going to play a leading role in bringing us all together.

Abigail Disney: Sara you're great. I just could talk to you all day long.

Sara Nelson: Well, that goes both ways.

Abigail Disney: Sara Nelson is the president of the Association of Flight Attendants-CWA and an incredible national voice on labor. Follow her on Twitter @flyingwithsara. Thank you so much, Sara.

Sara Nelson: Thank you so much.

Abigail Disney: All Ears is a production of Fork Films. The show is produced by Alexis Pancrazi and Christine Schomer. Wren Farrell is our Assistant Producer. This episode was engineered by Florence Barrau-Adams. Bob Golden composed our theme music. The podcast team also includes VP of production, Aideen Kane. Our executive producer is Kathleen Hughes. Learn more about the podcast on our website forkfilms.com. And don't forget to rate, review and subscribe wherever you get your podcasts.