**Tuck:** Queer Candle Co. is a queer- and trans-owned business making small-batch, botanical-topped, soy wax candles. Look, here’s the thing about me. My nose does not work, so I can’t really smell most candles, but I’ve been burning a Queer Candle Co. candle called “Fig and Vine.” And, I gotta say, I can really smell it, which is great! That’s, like, the entire point. Queer Candle Co. contributes 10% of monthly profits to the Sylvia Rivera Law Project, and you can use code GENDER10 at checkout to get 10% off your first order. Learn more at queercandleco.org or on Instagram or TikTok at @queercandleco.

[theme music]

**Tuck:** Welcome to Gender Reveal, the podcast where we hopefully get a little closer to understanding what the hell gender is. I’m your host and resident gender detective, Tuck Woodstock.

[theme music ends]

**Tuck:** Hey, everyone. Hope you’re all hanging in there. We’re doing things a little bit differently this week. Ozzy and I are whipping up a special two-part labor week episode, so this is the first interview and then we’ve got another one coming out later this week. Today, we are speaking with a barista and organizer with Starbucks Workers United. In this episode, Spencer and I talk about organizing the longest strike in Starbucks history…

**Spencer:** They brought the cops in a bunch of times. They brought Pinkertons in, literal Pinkertons.

**Tuck:** How customers can best support Starbucks unions, and what Spencer has learned through their organizing...

**Spencer:** I didn’t think that unionizing would give me hope for people.

**Tuck:** But first, I just want to do a quick plug for last month’s Gender Conceal episode. Gender Conceal is the bonus podcast that we make exclusively for Patrons, and folks really seemed to love last month’s chat, which was with Morgan Givens, who you might remember from Episode 49 of Gender Reveal. So, I thought I’d play you a little clip of that conversation here just to give you a taste of a Gender Conceal episode. This episode is called “Surviving the Workplace with Morgan Givens, King of Boundaries.”

[music plays]

**Morgan:** All of these companies are trying to foster this idea of hey, we’re really looking out for you but, at the end of the day, what I remind myself is that they are looking out for their bottom line. They don’t care about me, they don’t care about really the work I do. They care about what I can generate for them revenue-wise. As long as I keep that in mind, I don’t take anything they have to say to me to heart. I don’t really pay half-attention to them. I say, I’m just here for the check, you know? But, I think that’s a tough place to be in as a young person or, not even a young person, as anybody trying to enter this industry, trying to figure out where’s my foothold, what does that look like, who are the people who will genuinely reach out and help me, and a lot of it is figuring out, stumbling blindly in the dark.

You know, the one thing I really truly always come back to is make your own shit. You can learn so much making your own shit. You’ll learn to make it in your voice, you’ll learn to make it in your style, and you’ll probably do it in a way that is far more creative than you’ll ever do than if you went somewhere and they beat the creativity and personality out of you, because that’s what they do. So, it’s also about deciding what type of art you want to make, and I think that’s another difference. I call my shit art. The stuff I make is art. The stuff I make for the companies I work for is content.

[music plays]

**Tuck:** If you’d like to hear more, you can find the hour-long episode at patreon.com/gender. Because we have a double interview for you this week, we are going to skip the “This Week in Gender” segment, but I do have two Theymail messages for you. The first message is from Craft or DIY and it says: Looking for cheap gifts? Craft or DIY has pins, stickers, zines, and more. It’s the home of the “How to Support Your Nonbinary Family Members” zine, which I believe is also available in Spanish, and it also has over 100 pin designs and a growing collection of stickers shipped with zero plastic involved. Shop queer art junk for sensitive punks at craftordiy.art. And, by the way, not to editorialize, but that shop absolutely rules and you should check it out.

Okay, our second message is from Chris Angel, but not the magician, a different one, and it says: Do you want to practice allyship toward the LGBTQ+ community but get stuck? Do you enjoy listening to LGBTQ+ stories from people of various experiences? The Allyship is a Verb podcast humanizes allyship for the LGBTQ+ community and beyond. Each episode features a guest sharing their stories and an allyship tip. Learn more at allyshipisaverb.com.

[music plays]

**Tuck:** Spencer is a Starbucks worker and union organizer from Boston, Massachusetts. Their store recently won changes to their workplace after a 64-day strike, which is currently the longest in Starbucks history.

[music ends]

**Tuck:** The way we always start the show is by asking, in terms of gender, how do you describe yourself?

**Spencer**: Oof. I am a nonbinary trans femme, but I try keep it as vague as possible because I want everyone who thinks I’m hot to feel gay.

**Tuck:** [laughs] Yeah. So, this is a little bit different than normal in that we’re doing a sort of single topic interview, but I’m very excited about this topic. We’re talking about unionizing and specifically at Starbucks, and I was just curious how long you’ve worked at Starbucks and how long it was between when you a) heard about Starbucks unionizing and b) when you got involved in the unionizing effort yourself.

**Spencer:** I’ve worked at Starbucks for about two and a half years. I was initially in talks to unionize my workplace at the very beginning of Covid. We didn’t have any idea how to go about it, but I was kind of reaching out to a couple of people and one person quit, another got fired, and the other people got spooked by the other people dropping out. So, that kind of stalled, which was super disappointing. I was kind of like, that’s my shot, this is the only shot I’m ever going to have, and that was in June of 2020. And then, last August I believe, I heard about the Starbucks in Buffalo petitioning to unionize and I was instantly following it. Every time there was an update, I was on it, like how can I get involved? I still had no idea; I didn’t know who to reach out to or anything. But eventually, a couple of other stores in Boston also petitioned to unionize.

It was actually really tied to my own personal gender journey because, literally, they petitioned to unionize like the day that I started HRT, so, like, one and the same. My union journey and my fucking medical gender shit has been totally parallel, which is really neat, but that’s a bit of an aside. So, as soon as that happened, they had this get-together celebrating like, yeah, we’re gonna have a union, and so I talked to some people there, and I got introduced to who I had to get to to go through all of the legal hoops to get the store on board, and our vote was on June 3, and we voted unanimously to unionize. Things have kind of spiraled out from there.

**Tuck:** Yeah, well tell us more about the spiral, because people listening won’t necessarily know what store you work for or what famous thing has happened.

**Spencer:** Oh, fair enough. Okay, so I work at a store across the street from the Boston University campus. We’re on 874 Commonwealth Ave. and we were the longest strike in Starbucks history, and we technically shut the store down for longer than that but, as far as like doing the whole marching and chanting and keeping people there 24/7, it was 64 days. That’s the longest in Starbucks history, and I think that’s really cool. I’m super, super proud of my whole store and what we accomplished. Less than a week after we voted to unionize, Starbucks brought in this really atrocious manager who instantly started committing all sorts of unfair labor practices, saying that people had to expand their availability or basically be pushed out. She was demanding that these people who had previously been getting like 12 or 14 hours a week instantly expand their availability to 36 hours a week. But, at the same time, she was saying that people would only get up to 18 hours a week, so it was more demanding on the people who couldn’t expand their availability and it was impossible for the people who relied on this for like, rent and stuff. We had people who were going from 36 down to 15 or 18 or in one case like 12, and it was just like, one week it’s 36, the next week it’s 15. You can’t budget for that.

And, on top of all of this, on top of these blatant illegal hour cuts and demands, she’s also just super bigoted. She has consistently misgendered people. Starbucks likes to portray itself as that kind of company like, oh yeah, we’re cool, we love gay people, and then they brought in this manager who—it was June 9th, so it was kind of like the beginning of Pride Month—less than two hours into meeting everyone, she tore down one of our Pride banners and, it’d be one thing if no Starbucks does that, but like the Starbucks up the street on the same road also has a bunch of super gay stuff, and, suddenly, as soon as we get this new manager, we’re not allowed to be gay publicly. In addition to this, she was being super fucking racist, commenting on like our Black partners’ hair, confusing our Asian American partners, and then she was also very critical of the appearances of Black and trans partners and like how they dressed at work and stuff. Things that had never been an issue before.

So, about a month after she came in, everyone was like, haha, what if we went on strike for this? Now that we’re a union, what if we did that? And I was like, haha, hey guys, we can do that! This is what we should be standing up for! So, they all were like super stoked about it, they were like, we’re going on strike, we’re going on strike, we’re going to do this right now. So, like, we thought it was maybe going to go for a couple of days. It was actually supposed to be a weekend, but then it got pushed to Monday, and we were like, maybe it’ll go a week. Five days in we’re like, it’s gonna be longer than that. None of us thought it was going to be 64 days. That’s a touch long! But it started on, I think it was July 17, it was like the first day of a tragic heat wave and uncomfortable heat, but it was also the middle of the summer. There was a lot of teachers and stuff who kind of had nothing to do and were like, oh yeah, I’ll come out and picket with you guys. So, we had huge, huge support from the various teachers’ unions in the area. We had a lot of Teamsters, our deliveries are done by Teamsters, so all of the food deliveries are done by Teamsters, and they have it in their contract that they’ll never cross a picket line.

**Tuck**: That rules.

**Spencer**: We love it. They were so cool. So, as long as we had a 24/7 picket, they would never have time to deliver. People were coming out kind of in droves to make sure we had the support to keep the picket line staffed 24/7. That’s not easy to do. There’s only 20 of us who work at the store, so it was tough.

**Tuck**: Yeah. How did the twenty of you support yourselves financially during the two months on strike?

**Spencer**: We were lucky enough to get a lot of financial support from the union. It didn’t cover everything, but it covered a pretty good amount, and the Greater Boston Labor Council helped us set up a donation link so that people could just scan a QR code and send us money as they passed by. That was really, really nice. We had so many people giving us more money than I’d ever seen in my fucking life. It was so, so cool and like, more than that, more than the financial donations, we had, we still have, a lot of support from a couple of workers at the Target that is two doors down from us. Some of them would come over anytime they had a break and they’d be like, do you guys need anything? I can go grab you some water, I can go grab you some Gatorade or snacks or whatever. And then like a lot of people who were just passing by were like, hey, do you guys need lunch? Can I get you a pizza? So, a lot of it was really just the community taking care of itself, which is super great.

**Tuck**: Yeah, that’s awesome! Most people’s local Starbucks is not actively striking. If people who are listening to this ask, what is the best way that I can show up for Starbucks employees, is it only go to unionized Starbucks? Is it don’t go to Starbucks? Is it bring them something? What is a meaningful thing people can do to support the greater Starbucks unionization effort?

**Spencer**: So, if you actively go out of your way to patronize union Starbucks, it shows Starbucks their business isn’t going to die because they’re giving a modicum of respect to these people. So I think one of the best things people can do is show up at a union Starbucks and, if you’re feeling particularly brave, putting in your name as something like “Union Strong” or “Union Yes” or something vaguely pro-union. And, if the store is on strike, I would obviously say don’t go there.

**Tuck**: I was talking to a different trans person in a different union also for this show and I said the same thing to them, but I feel like union organizers are disproportionately trans, or else trans people are just disproportionately likely to unionize your workplace, and I’m curious what you think that’s about, why you think that is.

**Spencer**: Yeah, I’ve definitely noticed that as well. The amount of trans organizers that came out to help from all different unions blew me away. More trans people on the picket line than I’ve ever seen than anywhere that’s specifically like a trans march or something. It was so, so nice. But I’ve noticed a lot of trans people seem to be significantly left of center, probably because people who aren’t prefer that we don’t exist. So, that kind of politics sort of comes with this idea of like working-class solidarity and the best way that we have to legally fight class warfare is through organized labor. To be trans is to be constantly fighting an uphill battle in such a transphobic society. I feel like it’s just one more fight for a lot of people. I know that’s what it was to me. I was taking this on like, this is not even going to be top-ten stressors in my life.

**Tuck**: [laughs] Yeah!

**Spencer**: I would probably say that it’s like number 7. It’s not the hardest thing that I’ve ever done, but it is among the most fulfilling things I’ve ever done and, as queer people, we kind of have to have a sense of solidarity as it is to survive, so it’s a pretty easy step from solidarity with my trans comrades to solidarity with the people that I work next to everyday.

**Tuck**: Yeah, well, speaking of the transness of it all, when I am talking to companies about supporting trans workers, I do sometimes give Starbucks as an example when I’m saying things like, it’s really important to make sure that your benefits are supporting trans healthcare, because trans people literally decide where they’re going to work based on who’s going to give them healthcare. For example, Starbucks is known to have healthcare that supports trans people, which is why trans people sometimes work at Starbucks rather than in their field. But, as we have noted, trans people are also very likely to organize. Starbucks is doing something very specific about that with trans healthcare, and I want you to talk about that and about how they handled that.

**Spencer**: Oh my god, how do I talk about this without getting put on a list? [Tuck laughs] Oh, at this point I’m already on a list. But, yeah, I work with a lot of people who work at Starbucks for the trans healthcare. At this point, it is a big part of why I’m at Starbucks. It was a huge draw initially and, now that I actually pulled the trigger, I feel fucking locked in. But, of course, now that all of these trans people are kind of exercising their power, suddenly this trans healthcare is something that can be taken away at a whim. This is a really interesting move by Starbucks because, on the one hand, obviously they’re trying to threaten people by threatening people’s healthcare and, in a lot of ways, threatening their very lives by saying, if you unionize, we might just like, take this away from you. So that’s terrifying. But, on another hand, it’s kind of galvanizing because it’s like, well look, it was always up to them, they could always take all of this from us at any point. If we unionize and we have a contract, then they can’t do that. Something will be there to hold them responsible. So, when the boss is treating you like shit, when the boss is treating you as expendable, the two options are either to give up, cower in fear and acquiesce to whatever it is that they want, or you can use it as a galvanizing force to say hey, this is what they’re going to do to us regardless. Sure, they might try to accelerate it, like they have for the past decade or so, Starbucks has slowly been rolling back all of these wonderful benefits that they kind of have been known for. The trans healthcare is one thing in a long line of things that they have been slowly stripping away from us. So, in trying to threaten us, they’re kind of driving people towards a union so that you can make sure that’s in the contract.

**Tuck**: I don’t remember if I actually asked you to say what happened at the end of the strike. You stopped striking! So like hey, what happened?

**Spencer**: So much happened. They brought the cops in a bunch of times. They brought Pinkertons in, literal Pinkertons.

**Tuck**: Oh my god! [laughs]

**Spencer**: And like, not pretending to be something else. Like, you ask them why they’re there and who they’re with and they’re like, oh, we’re Pinkertons, we’re running security.

**Tuck:** Oh my god. Did you see that Pinkertons will put up rainbow flags with the Pinkerton logo for Pride Month? That’s like a real thing that happened!

**Spencer**: Oh my god. That’s gut-wrenching, holy shit, oh my god.

**Tuck**: So anyway, I’m glad they weren’t wearing a trans flag when they were threatening you because I could see it but, anyway, go ahead.

**Spencer**: Yeah, gun to my head, “what are your fucking pronouns?”

**Tuck**: Yeah, exactly! [laughs]

**Spencer**: Oh my god, that’s nauseating. Yeah, they brought in Pinkertons and they brought in the cops to muscle us off the fucking walkway and so, we were on a patio and walkway to the store. The cops came and said you can’t be on the patio. That was legally nebulous, but we acquiesced, because we did not want to be the ones starting shit even though Starbucks keeps breaking the law and nobody’s doing shit about that. And then, after like 50-something days, they’re like no, now you have to get off the walkway as well because it’s a safety issue. So, it’s like, where are we allowed to picket? They were very obviously just trampling all over our First Amendment rights and shit, but we maintained, we moved onto the benches alongside the store and stuff, but when the company kind of saw that we weren’t fucking around and were still gonna be out there, suddenly they were like oh, those bullshit hour requirements, you don’t have to deal with those anymore.

And they won’t admit that this is because we went on strike but, at a certain point, another store went on strike for pretty much the same reasons, and it was only after that that they were like okay, we’ll roll it back. I don’t know if it was like a national thing or a regional thing when they rolled it back, but I know that it was something that was implied to be the new normal and then was like, oh no, that was always something that was going to be temporary, and so they’re trying to save face, but we know that they did it because we scared them. The fact of the matter is we went on strike for these reasons and then, when we came back to the store, many of these issues were resolved. If that’s not a victory, I don’t know what is.

**Tuck**: Yeah, absolutely. If there is anyone listening to this, and I have to assume they are, because they’re trans, who is like, I have thought about trying to unionize my workplace but I’m intimidated by this process or I’m worried that I could lose my job or anything like that, do you have any advice for people who are on the fence about getting started in organizing?

**Spencer**: I would say block out a day every week if you’re going to get into it, because it is a lot of work. It is scary; it is complicated at times. But there are so many people who will have your back every step of the way. This union has been one of the most welcoming environments that I have ever been a part of. It has been one of the nicest outlets for just venting my frustrations and knowing that I have something to do about these frustrations. Like, I have so many friends in the union that I never would have met otherwise that I can say like, we can have a Zoom call where we can just bitch and moan about our fucking jobs and that kind of real conversations that can fix these problems that a lot of people think can’t be fixed, it’s just like the way the job is. The benefits far outweigh the risks and we have so many fucking lawyers excited to fight on your behalf.

We just have so many resources to make sure that people are safe, people are treated fairly and treated well. The company is going to do what they can to gaslight you into thinking that it’s a bad idea and that the union is evil, but I’ve never met a kinder and more capable group of people, and I’m just excited. We’re trying to get into contract negotiations very, very soon. I’m excited for that, because then we will have something to show people, to say look, this is what the union can do for you, this is the way we can improve your work life. Once we have that, it’ll be so much easier to get people on board. So, yeah, I would just say it’s scary, it’s complicated, but there are people out there who will fight for you, there are people out there who will help you every step of the way, and there are people out there who will make it as easy as possible. It’s worth it, please do it, join the wave.

**Tuck**: [laughs]I love that. Is there anything else about unionizing and your experience that I haven’t asked about that you want to make sure we talk about?

**Spencer**: Yeah, I would say that, so I’m like the oldest person who works at my store, like I’m in my early 30s and everybody else is in like their mid-20s or younger. The amount of militancy and willingness to put themselves out there that I have seen from Gen Z and the youngest millennials is so stunning and so inspiring, and it’s not just at my store, it’s been on the picket line. People as young as 16 who were on the picket line every day, making it a part of their daily routine to stop by and make sure that everything is held down, which is wild. When I was 16, I was like, excited to vote for Obama.

**Tuck**: No, exactly, I completely understand what you’re saying! Yeah, it’s way ahead of where we were at that age.

**Spencer**: Yeah. And it’s radically shifted my worldview. I didn’t think that unionizing would give me hope for people. I guess I didn’t realize that I wasn’t a total misanthrope until I did this, and unionizing is just a truly inspiring process and collective action is as close to some sort of spiritual experience as I have ever come. Not to overblow it or anything!

**Tuck**: Well, I thought this was a single topic episode, but it doesn’t have to be, so my last question is, is there anything not about this that you want to talk about while we’re here about the wide world of gender and transgenderism? [laughs]

**Spencer**: Yeah, actually! I’ve been out as vaguely nonbinary to basically all of my friends and most of my younger family for like two years now, and I was just going to kind of address it once my dad started asking questions about like where these tits came from or whatever. [Tuck laughs] I was kind of just playing pretty fast and loose with it on that front, but becoming a sudden public figure, I’m getting like she’d and they’d in like the fucking New York Times and shit. So, it’s only a matter of time before somebody in my family says, “Hey, what the fuck is this? Yeah, they kept mistyping Mister, what’s this X here?” or whatever. At this point, it’s just kind of like well, you know, I’m coming out to anyone who’s paying attention and I was not super prepared for that. But, honestly, it’s kinda nice because it’s saving me a lot of trouble. Like, if anything, if somebody asks a question and I can answer it, if somebody would rather not have that conversation, I’m like, you know what, that’s fine.

**Tuck**: I mean, as someone who came out by starting a podcast, I do relate to this specific strategy. In fact, I relate to you more than most people who are like oh, this is the story of coming out to my family. I can’t relate, I just made media until people like put it together. [laughs]

**Spencer**: Yeah! That’s kind of how I’m rolling with it at this point.

**Tuck**: I love that. Well, so the way we always end the show is by asking, you know, in your ideal world, what would the future of gender look like, but I actually do want to ask you a slightly different question which is, in your ideal world, what does the future of labor look like?

**Spencer**: In my lifetime, I would like to see unions become the norm again because, for so long, a union job was thought of as the goal. That was what people worked for. They wanted to get that good union job with those good union benefits and they’d have that good union treatment and could go to their bad non-union boss and tell him to eat shit and die when the guy was like, no, you have to stay late tonight. I want a world where people aren’t afraid of their bosses. I’m kind of like a bitch sometimes... [Tuck laughs] when it comes to figures of authority. I definitely have some unresolved issues that I would take up in therapy if I could afford it. But, one good thing about it is that I know my rights, I know what a company is legally allowed to do, I know how to toe that line pretty well. So, I would like to get to a point where people aren’t afraid of their bosses anymore and they have some say in their day-to-day work in things like healthcare and vacation time or maternity leave. The fact that maternity leave is not…are you fucking kidding me?? Like, what do you expect people to fucking do where they’re pregnant?? Like, ahhhhh!

**Tuck**: Well, I would say that, something that you were saying before sort of put it together for me, where trans people are already used to standing up to authority, right, and saying that they’re wrong because what we have to do is we have to be like, excuse me, all of you are wrong about my gender. I’m about to go fight this huge system because I know that I deserve better than how I’m being treated by the system, and that is also unionizing. And so that actually makes a lot of sense to me that I’m already used to going to this space that everyone is afraid of and just being like, I actually have nothing to lose and much to gain by doing this.

**Spencer**: Yeah, absolutely! That’s so right on. Exactly. It’s like, this is going to sound really stupid. Do you know that Tumblr post where it’s a guy holding a gun to the mushroom and the mushroom is like, you can’t kill me in a way that matters?

**Tuck**: [laughs] Yeah! Yes, it literally is that!

**Spencer**: Yeah, exactly! That’s what being trans is like! It’s like being a mushroom with a gun to your head, and knowing that they can’t kill you in a way that matters!

[theme music plays]

**Tuck**: That’s gonna do it for today. Please share this episode with all of the Starbucks drinkers in your life. You can follow Spencer and her coworkers at Starbucks Workers United at @bostonsbwu on Twitter. We are also on Twitter and on Instagram at @gendereveal and at genderpodcast.com, and we’ve got merch at bit.ly/gendermerch. This episode was produced and edited by Ozzy Llinas Goodman and by me, Tuck Woodstock. Our logo is by Ira M. Leigh, and our theme song is by Breakmaster Cylinder. We’ll be back later this week with more feelings about gender.

[theme music plays and ends]

**Spencer**: It’s kind of like having a shitty boss where, um, I guess it’s exactly like that. That’s what it is I guess, yeah. CEO Howard Schultz is my boss in a depressing fucking way.