

# Precarity: The American Way

**Panelists: Aislinn Pulley, Jessica Quiason, Gabriel Winant**  
**Moderated by Koki Mendis**

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**Koki Mendis:** Alright, we will go ahead and get started. Thank you for joining Political Research Associates today for our roundtable discussion: “Precarity: The American Way”

For those of you who are new to PRA, Political Research Associates is a national nonprofit celebrating its 40th year. We research, monitor, and publicize the agenda and strategies of the U.S. and global Right, revealing the powerful intersections of Christian nationalism, White nationalism, and patriarchy.

PRA produces investigative reports, articles, and tools; publishes the peer reviewed quarterly magazine, *The Public Eye*; advises social justice movement organizers, and offers expert commentary for local and national media outlets. Our core issue areas span reproductive justice, LGBTQ rights, racial and immigrant justice, civil liberties, and economic justice.

For today’s discussion, we are honored to be joined by [Aislinn Pulley](#), Co-Executive Director of the [Chicago Torture Justice Center](#), founded out of the historic 2015 reparations ordinance for the survivors of Chicago Police torture, and Co-Founder of [Black Lives Matter Chicago](#). [Jessica Quiason](#), Deputy Research Director at the incredible [ACRE: Action Center on Race and the Economy](#). And [Gabe Winant](#), Assistant Professor of history at the [University of Chicago](#) and author of *The Next Shift: The Fall of Industry and the Rise of Health Care in Rust Belt America*, published in March of this year.

So thank you very much to our esteemed panelists and to you, our wonderful audience for joining us today. Please note: the webinar will be recorded and our recording will be distributed by email and on PRA’s website next week. Our audience today also has access to live closed captioning, which you can toggle on at the bottom of your screen. Audience members feel free to introduce yourselves in the chat so we can see who all is with us today. We will also be taking some time today for audience questions, which can be dropped into the chat at any point in the discussion.

So we will go ahead and get started. I’d like for us to start our conversation with the relationship between economic precarity and the carceral state in order to center today’s discussion on the political economy of precarity– that is,

not just a discussion of economic precarity and its inextricable relationship to health and wellbeing, but on the specific politics of precarious social positions – the way that precarity has been engineered, perpetuated, and exacerbated in order to—in order to— with the clear intention of maintaining status quo formations of power. As we know, and as is brilliantly underscored by the ongoing abolitionist movement to dismantle the carceral state; criminality, incarceration, and police violence work to uphold centuries old stratifications of race and class, all under the rhetorical facade of criminal justice and law and order. Unemployment, debt, and inadequate housing all function to place low income, and particularly Brown and Black people, in the line of fire of police surveillance and interaction. Aislinn, you say this so powerfully in your piece [\*\*The Killing of Harith Augustus Shows How Police Violence and Capitalism Are Inextricably Linked.\*\*](#) You write, “Policing is capitalism’s answer to the economic and social crisis created by extreme divestment and gutting of services imposed by the prevailing neoliberal political order.” and [quote] “Faced with increasingly unlivable conditions, our movement’s politics must reflect the accurate reality that we are living under. We must be bolder in our analysis and fiercer in our demands. To end police killings, we must end policing as we know it, which necessitates the upending of capitalism.” I’d like for our panelists, beginning with you, Aislinn, to talk a little about this relationship between carcerality and precarity – two conditions, inextricably linked and working together to uphold White supremacy.

**Aislinn Pulley:** Thank you. It’s a really great question. It’s interesting—it’s an interesting question because precarity is part of...part of what sustains capitalism, and part of what capitalism relies on and necessitates. So it’s a little difficult to distinguish it from capitalism. I think it’s a byproduct of it. It’s part of its core. So I think—you know, the link with carcerality and precarity is interesting. You know, the multiple, kind of, stages of capitalism that we’ve experienced thus far, have shown the use—the multiple uses that incarceration employs for capitalism in its various stages. In the United States, you know, the kind of belly of the beast in terms of the transatlantic slave trade in some respects, right? But it certainly wasn’t the only site of immense horror and torture, as well as growth of global capitalism. Incarceration during that period, during the transatlantic slave trade, held a different function than it does today in terms of its racialized nature. Although the core functions were pretty identical. It housed most of the European immigrants, particularly those who were involved in organizing labor during the time of slavery.

And in Chicago specifically, there was...and this actually happened throughout the country as it was being settled, through mass violence and

genocide enacted on indigenous populations. There was a movement that was a nativist movement, right? Which is so...and Gabe can probably talk much more eloquently about this, but during that period, talked about, you know, there was a movement against the foreigners, that at that time meant the non-English, predominantly non-English people of descent. And in Chicago, many of the German and Irish immigrants at that time were involved in some of the seeds of the labor movement that then really took hold during the turn of the century. And were very famously incarcerated and fought back during some of the height of these very early labor struggles.

And so over the course of the uprising last summer, we saw our mayor lift the bridges. So Chicago is surrounded by the lake, and then we also have the Chicago River downtown. And so we have these big bridges which can limit access basically into the city center, into the business district. And so Mayor Lightfoot raised the bridges, trapping people inside. This was on... I want to say May 29th or 30th, during the height of the uprising when we had about 30,000 people downtown protesting. And this trapped thousands of people downtown. And then she invoked a curfew with 30 minutes notice, thereby criminalizing these people who had been abandoned downtown. And then I think we saw everyone—this happened similarly all throughout the country. And so then police used the guise of the—the cloak of the curfew to then enact massive, massive brutality. And so bad that our Office of Inspector General released a report outlining how immense the brutality was. And so this act has been universally condemned.

However, this wasn't the first time a Chicago mayor used the bridges in this way. In the late 1800s, we had a mayor that also lifted the bridges and trapped Irish and German immigrants. This was during what was called the Lager Beer Rebellion. After this nativist, very racial—racist, anti-immigrant movement was attacking Irish and German immigrants from organizing and in response to organized people coming—flocking the jails to free their comrades, this mayor also raised the bridges. So we've seen very similar tactics in terms of how carcerality has been used throughout history to condemn uprising, to condemn and quell resistance. And so that's been a constant through line. I think the racial manifestations obviously have changed over time. After the prohibition of slavery, then there was certainly, you know, the jail—the prisons and the jails, for the first time, held a very different make up. But the function of it used to protect capitalism against those who were identified as threats has been a constant through line.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Aislinn, I really appreciate the historical perspective, too, and showing the through line both of capitalist violence and carcerality in

that. Jessica, Gabe, would either of you like to chime in on this question?

**Jessica Quiason:** Well, thank you Aislinn, for that. I so respect your work, and I'm so happy to share the space with you, and same with Gabe. And thank you, Koki, and PRA, for having me today. Yeah, I mean, I think that Aislinn said it perfectly, that this is like fully—precarity is 100 percent a symptom of capitalism. And like, this is like a very—this is by design the effect of capitalism, especially as it is felt by Black and Brown communities across the country and the globe, really. And I think that...it's...I feel like when we're talking about precarity, it's really about control and who has it and who doesn't and who deserves it, right? So and I think that that has traces back to slavery as well, obviously, as the racial hierarchy there of understanding who should have control and who shouldn't. So I think that this is like, such a key part of our economy back to the very first days of colonization of this land. So I think there's nothing more to add than Aislinn set out.

**Gabe Winant:** Yeah, I'll just jump in. Thanks to you both. I really agree with what you said, and it's really nice to be here on this panel with everybody. The one...the one contribution maybe I would make is to think about, in particular, the incredible expansion of the state's repressive capacity in the last couple of generations. I think Aislinn's core point is absolutely right, that the trapping, and caging, and punishing, and policing of people has always been a core dimension of how a capitalist society works. But we also have to, I think, really take note of how that capacity has grown extraordinarily since the 1970s or so. And, you know, to kind of connect this to Jessica's point, which corresponds with that expansion and the kind of punitive and carceral capacity of the state, corresponds with declining demand for labor, right? And I think that that's a serious thing we have to take seriously: that the availability of good work has diminished, (for lots of reasons we can talk more about) and rather than deal with that through investment, and social investment in our collective human capacity, we've dealt with that through punishment and punishment that builds on and extends and deepens, and reinscribes the racial hierarchies that go back centuries in this country.

I'll wrap this up just by saying I was describing this to my students a couple of weeks ago, and I think that we often—a lot of people understand there's a relationship between labor markets and precarity and labor markets and the carceral state, but not sure that it's—at least my students, it seems to be new to them—the idea that if the welfare state is slashed, right, and so you don't have you don't have access to means of survival that way, and there's no good work and you don't have access to means of survival that way, if the only thing that's

going to catch you is the cops in the prison, right, then it means that you have to approach employers more desperately. And so I think just that core connection of how punishment and incarceration also discipline, the working class is also really important to hold in mind.

**Koki Mendis:** That's fabulous. I really appreciate bringing in the labor market question. And all three of your answers really setting the stage, I think, for this conversation, to think more broadly than sort of the last few decades, and neoliberalism's role in precarity, which is often I think that the time frame that's most often analyzed.

In that vein, I will continue with neoliberalism and the last, say, several decades and the last—and the state war of attrition on social programs. So the U.S. working class experiences significantly greater precarity today than the working class of the mid 20th century. The labor movement is at its weakest since the 1930s, yet interest in joining a union is exceedingly high, with surveys reporting interest in unionizing and approval for unions between 50 and 65%. What is the relationship between experiencing precarity and building solidarity? If poor working and living conditions are not enough to spur labor to coalesce into action, what is next for the working class as we face year two of the pandemic-induced recession and as the PRO act (Protecting the Right to Organize Act of 2021) awaits review in the Senate? Gabe, I want to start this question with you and the conditions you detail in your new book [\*The Next Shift\*](#). Can you give us a sense of what our contemporary working class looks like today and what are its implications for organized labor in building the social safety net?

**Gabe Winant:** Sure, I'll try. That's a big question. Well, I think the working class—so you referred to that moment in the mid 20th century that often gets talked about as a kind of golden age of relatively higher equality and social solidarity. And there's real truth in that, right? I'm sure we've all seen those graphs of inequality expanding over time. But, you know, I think it's important to understand that a relatively smaller portion of the population was engaged in formal wage labor. And in particular, women were at much lower rates than men. That expanded women's labor force participation expanded really rapidly, basically from the 70s to the end of the century.

Moreover, access to those protected and regulated, and organized, and secured labor markets, it was gendered, as I was sort of just saying, it really heavily racialized. So, you know, the big industrial unions at the heart of that, it's not that they were segregationist in the way that their predecessors, a generation or two before were. They had Black members, Latinx members, but

they still had internal segregation. Typically, you know, in an auto plant or a steel mill, African Americans would have had the worst jobs, would be the last hired and the first fired, the most exposed to various kinds of hazards on the job.

And so, you know, I say all that because I think it's important to understand that the working class was already divided in the 50s, by those structures that created that relatively higher level of the quality. And the shape of the working class that has emerged under neoliberalism since deindustrialization really has something core to do with that. Because where employment has expanded has been out of the unprotected sectors. So, I mean, a perfect example that everyone knows all too well, right, is like gig economy, uber driver type work, right? Where as a kind of work, that grew out of the kind of margins of the structure of regulation and the labor market.

What my book is about is the healthcare industry, which is the largest sector of employment in the country now. It's about one in six, one in seven jobs nationwide. And similarly, healthcare workers were never really part of that mid-century moment. They weren't covered by labor law until much, much later. They weren't covered by the minimum wage. It's work that was, and remains overwhelmingly assigned to African Americans, to immigrants, to women especially. And it's not a coincidence that those are the kinds of employment that have expanded really dramatically, the ones that are—that would have been on the margins or that were on the margins 50, 60, 70 years ago.

So I think if we start to think about it in those terms, then we can see the ways that race, and gender, and citizenship, national status are interlocking with economic pressure, and economic class to produce these kind of very stubborn kinds of precarity, right? Because they are reinforced in all of these directions. As you said, it's not really enough, it turns out, just to—for workers to organize, it's not just—it's not enough for them just to be suffering from stagnant wages and dangerous working conditions, and, you know, to hate their boss. They have to have some sense of collective...and to want to unionize...the majority do, right? But you have to have some sense of collective power. You have to have some sense that if you stick your neck out, it's not just going to get chopped off. And I think that is really the kind of missing ingredient across the economy today.

I think, you know, this way of thinking about this is that in the early 20th century, when the kind of classical labor movement was built, there was a layer throughout the working class that historians sometimes called the militant minority. This was people who were communists, socialists, anarchists, maybe none of those. But for whatever reason, were one of a couple of militants in their shop, in their mind, in their mill, in their garment factory, whatever, wherever they worked. And, you know, they drove their coworkers crazy by

agitating all the time. Everyone was always kind of annoyed at them. But when your boss sexually harassed you, or you got fired unjustly with no just cause or, you know, there was a wage cut, everyone gathered around and said, what should we do? Right? And that layer of people, it takes a generation to build that. And I think, you know, we are in the process of building it. I think many of us can probably think about workplaces we know where that person maybe exists now and didn't a generation ago, right? I think we think about the defeat in Bessemer of the union drive at Amazon. On the one hand, it's awful that those workers lost and I wish they had won. On the other, hundreds of workers identified themselves as versions of that person, right? And will continue to be that person. And it's the accumulation of that layer of people, more than the question of can our WDSU win an NLRB election at Amazon right now that we really need to pay attention to.

The last thing I'll say is I think there are three industry, or three sectors of the economy that are really worth thinking about in this regard because they potentially have some leverage. And it's when workers have a sense that they may have leverage, and they have a sense of their collective capacity that they will act. One is logistics like Amazon, where there's real economic power, right? Where if workers take action, they actually can freeze up the movement of commodities in a significant way. The second is the, you know, the industry that I work in, which is—the second area of the working class where I think we can see a lot of action is like downwardly mobile professionals. And we'll talk about this more later. But in tech, in higher ed, in journalism, which is like on fire right now. And their workers don't have a lot of economic leverage, but they have a lot of cultural power. And third are the industries of what we could call social reproduction. That's to say the industries that keep society functioning. And particularly that is healthcare and education. And I think the teacher strikes of a few years ago, a really good example of the potential political power. CTU in Chicago is like the leading example of this with these workers, because they keep society together, they have social and political power. So economic power, cultural power, socio-political power across these different areas of the economy, I think these are the workforces we should look to, and hope for that militant minority to kind of grow and allow people to have increasing collective confidence.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you. A remarkably clear, and succinct response to a very large question. I'm really...I'm very impressed with all that you managed to elucidate with your answer, and sort of the clarity too, and who is missing from the equation as opposed to just what is missing. Aislinn, Jessica, would either of you like to touch on the labor movement today?

**Jessica Quiason:** I think I can chime in. I think we might get to this a little bit later, but definitely as Gabe was pointing out, the ways that big tech is 100 percent, like, a huge perpetuator of corporate power in this, kind of like, creating a very disparate kind of like labor movement where it's very hard for workers to organize, and be in solidarity with one another, gather around, as Gabe was saying, when there's someone who is unjustly fired, et cetera, et cetera.

I think that...So in my work, I focus a lot on big tech and the ways that corporate power is leveraged by big tech and the ways that they further extract resources from communities of color. And I think that, like...I think big tech is fully built on an idea of like neoliberalism, but just take into a massive, massive scale of like, how can we just further kind of like monetize like every bit of a person's life and just kind of like...even kind of like, without their consent or full...full...full consent anyway. But how can we kind of extract as much from these folks as we can? And I think that that comes from kind of like algorithmic management of workers where they're not even interfacing with managers anymore. They're getting like automatic flags on their records because they weren't driving fast enough, or weren't delivering enough packages in enough time or whatever. So it's this way of like, again, like making work very precarious and just like systematically demeaning people on a more and more and minute scale, that really just takes away, really like disempowers people in such a fundamental level, that is a huge problem that we're seeing in the labor market and the economy. But is a part of a very long trend of ways that Black and Brown people have been systematically pushed to the margins, as Gabe was saying, to these jobs...where they...in the larger economy they've been boxed out of like more stable, like salaried work to these kind of gig jobs where it's just like basically everything is up for...is up for debate and is up for kind of like disruption. That really just means that folks are going to be exploited more.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Jessica. I'd like us to stay with big tech for a few more minutes. I'm really thinking, too, about sort of how invisible I think big tech is. Your coworkers no longer share the physical space with you. You share an app. There's very little ways to build solidarity interpersonally in the workplace. I'd love for you to talk a little bit more about some of the most significant ways, beyond sort of the ways in which big tech really capitalizes on labor precarity, that big tech contributes to precarity in other ways.

**Jessica Quiason:** Yeah, another really big question I'll try to tackle. I mean, I think that like...so on the economic side and with the workforce, think we kind of covered a lot of that. I think also just in terms of like precarity, I think that

another way the big tech has really been impacting our communities is through really monetizing surveillance, and also massive data collection on scales we've never seen before, which feeds directly into the carceral systems that Aislinn is working very hard to dismantle. And all of us are, really. And so for us at ACRE, we understand that it almost seems inevitable that these tech corporations start out as like, "oh, we're providing a service" and like "we're going to make the economy better and things better for people." But kind of like along the way somehow, like data collection starts cropping up and surveillance starts becoming part of business models like Amazon, for example, with their Ring cameras. And now all of a sudden they have partnerships with the police and they're feeding data to the police, right? So it's kind of like big tech is having it kind of like all ways. Like they're both like disrupting the economy in ways that further exploit from Black and Brown people. And they're also attaching themselves to very traditional halls of power, like policing and law enforcement in order to monetize also that, and the ways that folks are exploited in communities. So, I think that like big tech—with having data collection on such a massive scale, it means that folks who are ordinarily targeted by law enforcement—you know law enforcement has now even more data to target them, right? So I think that that also just contributes to how we see precarity play out, kind of like in a in an economic sense as well as a political one, and just like folks—folks will be more targeted by law enforcement.

**Koki Mendis:** Gabe, Aislinn would either be like to touch on big tech before we continue?

Pivoting us a little bit with our next question. One of Joe Biden's lofty promises made on the campaign trail was student debt forgiveness, which has not, as of yet, come to fruition, and which highlights one of the most ruinous impacts of privatized education. And yet, privatized college and predatory student lending are just one aspect of decades of neoliberal policies to divest in public education, directing public funding to religious and charter schools and away from most marginalized communities; a policy agenda that culminated in Betsy DeVos's four-year stint in the Department of Education. I'd like us to spend a few minutes on the impacts of privatized education and the system designed to ensure that low income, and particularly Black and Brown students, are undereducated, over-indebted, and competitively disadvantaged on the job market. How does privatized education contribute to precarity and who most profits? Who would like to start us off on this question?

**Aislinn Pulley:** I can take a little dive at this. [coughs] Excuse me, I'm recovering from a bug. I think there are many, many, many areas to focus in on when it

comes to why privatized education is so incredibly horrific. But what comes to mind most immediately, both the CTU, the Chicago Teachers Union, their historic wins that have been a beacon of light against the push to privatize public education. The unionization...the first three charter school unionization in the country happened in Chicago thanks to CTU's radical leadership. And so there's incredible excitement there in their ability to organize.

But also, I'm drawn to talk about my experience in New Orleans and specifically in relation to the question and the decimation of their public healthcare, or public education system. Which was a part of the the parasitic response after Katrina, that happened immediately where the majority of their teachers were fired. And prior to Katrina, New Orleans had a really robust and strong teachers union. And the governor was able to enact the emergency provisions and law that eradicated and decimated their union contracts and the labor laws that protected them prior to Katrina. And what that then emerged—and what was immediately put in place were private projects. Under the guise of Teach for America and other types of private ventures that have made big money, as well as working directly with corporations who sponsor a school and whose role is literally to train these young students to become possible cogs in their system, to work in their factories. And then are—and regulate and mandate that the food and the drinks that they eat are produced by that company. And they—the children get in trouble if they bring in juices and sodas from the outside that are not made by, let's say Pepsi or Coca-Cola or Gatorade or whatever.

And so this extreme privatization that has decimated what was one of the strongest Black teachers unions in the city, in the country. Has done such incredible damage to a city that already was suffering just based on the huge environmental trauma of Katrina. That, of course, was also fostered by policy neglect. However, while there, the...I was working with an organization that is working against this and is trying to work to save public education, which has been virtually decimated. And they've been working on really, really innovative ways of connecting with the community that still has experienced such a massive PTSD from everything that happened. And while I was there is when the Chicago Teachers Union announced their historic wins against the attempts to cut back. And that was such a light of inspiration for the folks down there that after all of this barrage of betrayal and disaster capitalism happening in the flesh before their eyes, that they were able to live vicariously through the win in Chicago. And so while Katrina still is ravishing and—public education, it is really almost virtually decimated in New Orleans. The fact that there are these pockets happening nationally have enormous impact.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Aislinn. Exploitative responses to Katrina knows no bounds. Jessica, Gabe, would either of you like to continue on this point for a second.

**Gabe Winant:** Sure, I can—I just want to add, you know, public education, in this country, is kind of an anomaly, right? It's something that we have provided publicly going way back into the 19th century, unlike almost all other kinds of social services. It's like...it's the kind of core of the American welfare state in some way, although we don't necessarily think of it that way. But, you know, for a long, long time, right, there has been a kind of baseline expectation that this is something that the public does. It's part of what makes us a society. It's the reason that when African Americans were freed, their...the core of their political struggles during Reconstruction, was to extend and construct a public education system that could serve—that would serve them, too.

And I think it's worth thinking about how high—this is one area, I guess, a policy where the public really has high, high standards actually for itself. Still, right. I mean, that's not to say that horrible things don't get done in New Orleans at all over the place, right? But people actually, to a significant extent, still expect that this service should exist, should be public. They'll fight for it. You know when teachers fight for it, they'll stand with teachers. And there are lots of other social services that we all here think should be democratically controlled and publicly provided, but that nobody has any social expectation of because they never experienced anything like that, right? And I think that the reason that public education has served as the kind of...a kind of core around which it's possible to mobilize and struggle successfully in the way that Aislinn is saying, in Chicago and elsewhere. And, you know, I think that that really kind of forms a key bulwark to kind of build upon in terms of the principle of democratic and public social services.

**Koki Mendis:** Oh, go ahead, Jessica.

**Jessica Quiason:** I can just add on since [my piece](#) was thrown in here from 2018. Yeah. So I feel like—like I was explaining to some friends who live in Europe that, like, they're trying to privatize like this—this push to privatize education is really strong in the United States, and it's literally perpetuated by the Walton family. Like Wal-Mart is literally trying to privatize our education system and they are just like “I don't understand how that's possible.” And I was like “me either.”

But I feel like it's very emblematic of the fact that, like, the ways that corporations are so invested in us privatizing our public education system is for reasons that Aislinn and Gabe both laid out. It's kind of like—it is the last

tenant of ways that people totally understand, like a public good that is actually funded. I mean, not nearly as much as it should and quickly becoming less funded. But like we need to fund this thing because it will teach our children how to be good citizens, and give them an education and all that.

But I think that, yeah, it's what I did in this report here is also sketching out kind of like the—how the corporate power mapping kind of like keys into being able to create the kind of like think tank world that makes someone like Betsy DeVos have a lot of prominence nationally, and able to push national policies that really make sure that privatization and charter schools become part of the bedrock of how we think about public education.

**Koki Mendis:** Great, thank you all. You know, I think continuing maybe with the up note in our last question on sort of whether teachers unions being a way forward, a model for labor organizing, the place of locating solidarity when that is such a difficult thing to do. I'd like us to continue with this question of like, what do we do about precarity? What's next? And you touched on this briefly earlier on Gabe, but in your piece, [Professional Managerial Chasm](#) in *N+1 Mag*, you write, "In the lower strata of the professions—where career advancement often appears a cruel joke, skill goes unrewarded, and debt permeates everything—millions are in the process of falling out of the class: its distinctive mores and aspirations are losing their meaning, the aura of its institutions fading...As the PMC's [Professional Managerial Class's] disintegration continues, with layer after layer flaking off its underbelly, it presents a historical task: to articulate to those getting their first taste of precarity why their alignment with the existing order betrays their own ideals—and to articulate it on their own terms." In thinking through the evolution of the working class and now the disintegration of the PMC, as you explain it, how does this slow and steady fall out of neoliberalism across classes, exacerbated now by, or exacerbated first by a global recession, followed 12 years later by global pandemic, raise new possibilities for social organization? And if we put it in conversation with the mass mobilizations calling for racial justice and systemic change, what's next for political and labor organizing in this great awakening? So here we can be a little positive for some time.

**Gabe Winant:** Well, maybe I'll speak from my own experience, that kind of is in the background of that essay that you were just quoting from. So I was in graduate school. I got really involved in the graduate student union organizing campaign, which has been a kind of increasing movement in the last decade or so. Something like 40, 50 thousand new union members come out—in the last decade, come out of out of graduate schools. Teaching and research assistants.

And I did my PhD at Yale and there we were—the graduate students who are part of the same organization as...we were part of the same larger umbrella union as the custodial and service workers, and cafeteria workers on campus, and also the clerical and technical workers. So all together, all of our members, that was about 7000 people spanning quite broad occupational range, right? Quite broad ranging in terms of both incomes and also class backgrounds. Although those didn't always go together. I would very often tell graduate students like "the custodian who cleans your office is paid much, much more than you. Don't look down on them, you should want what they have." But, you know, there are a lot of differences and complications and contradictions inside that coalition. But it seemed to me that what made it possible was the fact that in a university you have a kind of big complex institution that has a very big footprint in its local labor market in New Haven, where Yale is. You know, it's by far the—University of the Hospital, University Hospital together are by far the—one and—the number one, and number two employers in town. And that's a common pattern. But the people they employ are spread out, you know, and dispersed by occupation, and skill, and profession, and class, and race, and gender, and a whole bunch of complicated patterns. And it seemed to me that, you know, there's a lot that is distinctive about that environment. The basic fact of downward pressure on my profession and my career track as an academic (because labor market was disintegrating) it's not the same problem as the worker in the hospital who...her unit is understaffed, and she's really stressed out, and she hasn't gotten a good raise in a few years. It's not the same problem as the custodians who are working in unsafe conditions. It's not the same problem as the cafeteria workers who haven't gotten big enough raises to keep up the payments on the house. But we can compare all the problems to each other, right? And we could recognize while these might be different from each other, I can see what you're saying in what I'm experiencing. You can see what I'm saying in what you're experiencing, and moreover where we all share a common boss, and a common potential antagonist.

And that logic, I think, writ large is like the logic by which you can imagine it, kind of left-wing challenge precarity emerging, right, as all kinds of different experiences of neoliberalism and a precarity. They don't have to align, but they can align, right? There is a way that we can say tech workers who, you know, are experiencing frustration with their jobs in various ways and also don't want to maybe produce, you know, technology for the Pentagon, and the CIA, and ICE, can imagine (and have imagined, this has happened) solidarity with the people who work on their Silicon Valley campuses. And all...like in the schools, in the Chicago school system to return to that example, the teachers and the custodial staff, right, don't have the same problems, but also have similarly been

able to identify the city government and the mayor and the, you know, the public school administration as their antagonists together.

So I think if we think about the categories of like manager, debt collector, cop—cop and prison guard, you know, lender (ultimately behind the debt collector,) you know, we could all find—I mean, landlord—we can all find a couple of these, right? That maybe one, maybe two, maybe three, that we have a problem with in some way, that we can sort of recognize a shared problem with someone else who has a problem with a couple of same ones, and a couple of different ones. I think that's like the basic political, and ideological principle by which you can imagine, (and I think this, again, sort of is happening somewhat) pretty, pretty diverse social block of people gradually cohering, you know, around economic justice and redistribution, and abolition, basically. And I think, you know, those don't have to go together, but—in theory, but it's important in practice that they do because of the way that they work together, the way that, as we're saying, precarity and punishment, work together. And so I have some optimism, actually, that we're doing a better and better job of articulating what the different kind of problems across these different factions have to do with each other and actually starting to do a lot of the work to cohere ourselves politically.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Gabe. I, similarly, in preparing for this webinar, kept feeling like this little sense of optimism and was a little surprised to be having that response.

Aislinn, I want to follow up with you on this question and sort of you bring to your racial justice organizing a very clear and deep sense of political economy. And I'm wondering if you're seeing that sort of framing resonating in the movement and how you think sort of economic justice, awareness raising, consciousness building can relate to this, to the trajectory that we're now on as people contend with the word White supremacy for the first time, and maybe the next term they'll start to think about is racial capitalism. How do we continue that momentum? And is there a relationship there that you already see?

**Aislinn Pulley:** Yeah, I mean, I think the example of CTU is is really, really tremendous. In they're...they were preparing to strike last year and they were able to win their demands without striking. But when they did strike a few years ago, in 2019, they...for the first time were able to include in and were very deliberate in including in critical race analysis in part of their demands, right? In understanding that Black and Brown students were disproportionately affected by the conditions in the classroom. And so part of their demands included provisions that specifically spoke to those realities, and spoke to

homeless students, right, who, of course, are also disproportionately Black and Brown. And so that consciousness is in part a reflection of and a response to the movement over the last decade, that has put at the forefront an analysis that understands racial capitalism as being directly connected to the rise of mass incarceration, and the rise of militarized policing, and the disproportionate amount of violence that Black people experience is not a mistake, right? And is not an aberration, but is actually part of the design of policing, which is part of the larger project of the U.S. racial capitalism as a whole, right?

And so that consciousness is absolutely reflected in how CTU was able to strike in such a unique and historic way, and partnered with SEIU. That for the first time, and they were able to use—work around the labor constraints that were imposed on them, which necessitated or limited their ability to strike only about wages. And were able to use that...that—used their partnership with SEIU Local 73 in order to incorporate wider demands. That was an ingenious move on their part and a way of really pushing back and punching back at the project of neoliberalism, which as...you know...which part—in part seeks to decimate all unionization, and labor movements, and public education. So that was that was tremendous. And it led to a win for SEIU Local 73 during that strike. And then last year, just months after the height of the uprising, SEIU workers, healthcare workers went on strike all across the city, and in smaller sections of the state, who were connected specifically with the UIC healthcare system. Who were using loopholes in their contract to avoid the wage—the minimum wage increases that have been mandated by the City of Chicago. So instead of paying their workers at least \$15 an hour, many of them were barely making minimum wage. And during a global pandemic, right? These are healthcare workers, during a global pandemic, had to go on strike to demand wage increase, PPE, and other lifesaving protections. And they won. And they won in part because of the direct connection with the movement, that in part was inspired by CTU, but broadly was inspired by the movement as a whole. And so BLM Chicago, many other groups walked the picket line with them, were in the strategy meetings, were posting about “these are Black workers.” The SEIU healthcare workers were 70 percent Black and Brown. These were Black workers who were barely making it during a pandemic, and risking their lives. So that consciousness was able to permeate into both the intersection of having a racial justice analysis along with an economic justice consciousness.

And I think the, you know, another inspiration out of the last 16 months is the fact that, as Gabe was talking about, and crystallized by these—the Amazon workers attempt to unionize where the multiple strikes, and work stoppages, and shortages that happened, by essential workers, who are gig economy workers. And who were like, “no, we’re risking our lives and we demand these

provisions in order to be able to do this work.” And that was encouraging. That was encouraging, and really a sign of a developing class consciousness that has been intentionally blunted.

**Koki Mendis:** I don't want to get ahead of ourselves, but if we can continue on this class consciousness building and marrying racial and economic justice so explicitly and demands with the passing of the PRO Act, I mean, it could really be I...I feel like I'm going to jinx it actually, I'm going to stop right there.

I want to continue our discussion today, borrowing from Sophie Lewis's brilliant recent work, and Marx and Engels before that, arguing for the abolition of the nuclear family. So moving from that, “public” to the “private” sphere: a core function of the nuclear family under neoliberalism has been in providing economic security for those with access and privilege in lieu of comprehensive, equitable and accessible public social programs. This argument has been most compellingly demonstrated by the mutual aid networks that emerge en masse beginning of the pandemic. Those networks which were built on existing community relationships that have long provided a form of security for those most poised on the precipice of isolation and ruin. How can community and sociality thwart precarity, providing an alternative to waiting for welfare reform to occur in our exclusionary White supremacist state? I recognize that this question remains—continues the focus of the movement to defund law enforcement and would certainly be interested in touching on community alternatives to policing as well. But thinking, too, about mutual aid and sort of a more...bracketing, perhaps the community policing alternatives and thinking through economic alternatives as well. Anyone like to talk about mutual aid or other models or alternatives?

**Gabe Winant:** Can I...maybe I'll say something to that. I don't mean to plug, but this is slightly a book plug. So you know, the reason I wanted to write about the care economy...As I said, you know, I mean— healthcare in particular has expanded a lot, but the care economy in general accounts for an enormous portion of, in particular, low wage job growth. I like to cite these figures from the sociologist—a sociologist at Ohio State, who showed that care work accounted for 56 percent of new low wage jobs in the 80s. 62 or 63 percent in the 90s. And I think 72 percent of new low wage jobs in the 2000s were care jobs. And if you think about what care jobs are, right, those are—it's not mutual aid because it's their jobs right, and they're—you know, it's typically, you know, in one way or another kind of part of the process of capital accumulation. But what that means is that we are still investing more and more and more of our kind of collective human capacity in taking care of one another through these

really perverse and weird ways often, right? The healthcare industry is an extremely good example of how messed up that can get. But it is still something that we're doing. It's more of our social capacity, more hours and more people's days every year go into, in one way or another, looking out for the old, the young, and the sick, and the poor, and disabled, and addicted and...you know, capital is finding ways to make money off of that and to in doing that, to kind of dehumanize patients and exploit workers and so on. I think actually that basic underlying fact, there's something really powerful about that, right? Because you could imagine, instead of more or less conscripting poor women to do it for everyone else, (which is basically our system at the moment for servicing this huge need for care) you can imagine a world where we we're responsible for our neighbors, and friends, and coworkers, kids, and elderly parents, and whatever, you know, whatever kinds of care needs exist in our communities, right? You could imagine a way in which we could—that enormous demand for care that exists, and that enormous supply of care that actually we do generate collectively could be something that we organized communally and collectively and democratically.

And, I want to say, and my book kind of tries to say, that that's actually sort of happening anyway, kind of passively. We're moving in that direction as it is. Not by anyone's design particularly. But it's just sort of a reality of how our society is organized, that there is so much need for care. And there is—there are so many people who are—provides so much of it out of their lives, out of their time, out of their energy, that I think it does prompt us to start to think about, you know, what would it mean to organize my life in such a way that, like—you know, I still got to be a professor. I like to do that. And I like to teach. I like to write, whatever. But like, I could spend more of my time, you know, like looking out for the old folks on my block, and looking over my neighbor's kids. And if we have kids, maybe they'll do the same for us, you know? I think it's actually that kind of sort of utopian imagination of what care might look like beyond the structure of the nuclear family. Sophie's book, I think, is a great example of—I think it's actually possible to begin to think those thoughts because of the transformation that we've already gone through, right? In the kind of both...a huge demand for care, the crisis, a need for it, and also the amount of it that we actually already are generating. So it doesn't really answer your question, but I think that's the kind of place from which we can kind of recognize why we ask this question that I think that's a good place we can start to think from.

**Koki Mendis:** Yeah, I think exactly. It's less maybe a model but more an opportunity to develop those models. Jessica, did you want to chime in?

**Jessica Quiason:** Yeah, I can chime in. I think that for me, like what was so inspiring about last summer and the uprisings around George Floyd's murder was like thinking about like, what does abolition actually mean? Like what does it mean when we say defund the police? When we understand that, like corporations, like big tech corporations, lots of other corporations are actively monetizing policing, it also means abolishing racial capitalism. Like they're both two parts of the same thing. And also makes me think that, like, we can't abolish the police while not also providing housing, and healthcare, and education, et cetera, et cetera, for people. Like, it's all part of a whole vision, as Gabe was saying, like imagining like what would it be like? And I think that for me, what's so inspiring is like thinking about the Black Panther Party, like movements for Black liberation, like this is essential. This is, of course, like the whole point of it. I think as a movement for us to take on this demand means that we really take on the model of the Black Panthers really led with an understanding that it's about mutual aid, it's about community, it's about organizing, it's about connecting with literally who is on your left and your right, like not just like who you're related to. And I think that that's really powerful. And I think that that's basically not how any systems of power is structured now. And so, like thinking through like what abolition really means, it really informs the way that all of our demands are formulated.

**Koki Mendis:** Aislinn, did you want to jump in here? We can also continue, because my next question, I want to start with you, too.

So I want to continue on the conversation of abolition—abolitionist movement and sort of the trade, the question of trade offs. So in a recent conversation that PRA had about abolitionist organizing, it was really centered on this balance between ameliorating the living conditions of the most marginalized, and maintaining the focus on the long game or the radical transformation of power relations and the end of systemic violence. Aislinn, I'm really interested in your organizing work. How do you balance this question of fighting for economic security and social safety provision now while working to dismantle the violent and systemically inequitable capitalist system? So put another way, is the perfect, the enemy of the good, or is it when it applies to the health and well-being of all, including successive generations, the only acceptable outcome? It's a big question, certainly, but I would be interested in sort of hearing all of your insights, like, how do we balance the immediate and the long term?

**Aislinn Pulley:** I think that's actually a really great question following up from the last question, because it's deepening that...that..the concept of mutual

aid, which is, as far as I know, is a recent phrasing. But the work of mutual aid has—we've been doing that, right? I think in many respects, and I'm not a scientist, although I'm very, very interested in neurology. I'm not a scientist. But humans are social beings, right? We require a certain level of socialization, in order to survive. Babies will die without having certain parental or guardian socialization, that we biologically need that. It's part of how...it's just part of the features of our of our species. And so in many respects, what we're calling mutual aid and just care, is our default in many ways, our default way of being with each other. And it's the systems of capitalism, of private property, privatization that inhibit that and are the obstacles to that. And require a disintegration of what are in many respects, kind of instinctual survival behaviors that we would otherwise embody. And that we do within a family system, whether it's biological or chosen. And I think we see that emulated in so many liberation movements, right?

And, you know, Jessica mentioned the Panthers, which was immediately the one that I thought of when you first started talking about mutual aid. And which—it gets invisibilized, I think, in this iteration, because we're using the phrasing of today, which wasn't used during the Panthers time, but that is actually what they were doing, right? They opened up free healthcare clinics and provided treatment to people in the community. They opened up free stores, provided groceries. I mean, that—they are why we have a breakfast program in public education. And...but they are not unique. Like this is also evident in...during Reconstruction and why we have public education in the way that we do, right? And so the human impulse and urges to create care, and to care for ourselves, I think are in many ways intrinsic. And it's how we can figure out given them the restraints of the systems of power and oppression that operate how we can figure out to live despite them, in many ways.

I was really—one of the things that BLM started about five years ago—or BLM Chicago, (I always say that because it is distinct, because there's a lot) but we started a food box and we initially just had one and it was in...it's on 53rd and Prarie on the South Side of Chicago in a community garden. And so it's a recycled newspaper, Steelman's paper box that we would just put food in for the community. And we started with one and we got so much media attention for that. It was really shocking because it was like it's just one box, right? How much food can you actually put in? We kept getting questions about "how do you know of these people actually need food? Why aren't you providing some sort of mechanism to make people prove that they need food?" And we're like, no, absolutely not. Like, if you need it, it's here for you.

But we were very deliberate in how we discussed it, that this was being used as a way to shed light on the fact that there are neighborhoods throughout the

city that exist in food apartheid. And this is a systemic design and that the onus is on the state. And so while we do these harm reductive measures like food boxes and mutual aid and, you know, and providing healthcare in the ways that we can, in makeshift ways, the onus still is on the state. And is the response of— the state has abdicated its duty and has created not only food apartheid, nutrition apartheid, but healthcare apartheid, and pharmacy apartheid, all throughout the south and the west sides. And so the goal is in societal transformation. We have what we need, yes, and we are being prevented from accessing that. And so the ultimate goal is to do what we can, despite the state, in order to survive and to nurture our folks so that we can fight, and that we can love, and live with enough dignity as we can muster, given the conditions that we're in. But it is ultimately full societal transformation where we don't have to fight for the things that we need to thrive.

**Koki Mendis:** I think that's an excellent framing it brings to mind too, the through line of our—in our last webinar, which was on trans liberation and the assaults on gender confirming healthcare, sort of the through line of the lack of provision of services, the very deliberate attempts to dismantle social programs are designed to shorten life spans, reduce access to health necessary to thrive in a capitalist economy. And that design is not a...it's not a...it's not an accident. It's not a byproduct, right? It's very purposefully part of the system as it's designed. I also really appreciate the way in which you bring sort of the intrinsic human nature into the conversation, because on the Right, regular capitalism is natural, imperialism is natural, and sort of things like mutual aid and the ways in which communities have forever, when push comes to shove, provided internally for one another. I mean, that really demonstrates where human natural—natural relationships supersede sort of constructed systems. I would love to hear if Jessica or Gabe either of you want to to jump into this question. And also if you want to return to the sort of immediacy versus long term systemic dismantling.

**Gabe Winant:** I can say quickly. The...your comment just now, Koki, and Aislinn's previous comment made me think of a book that really, really changed how I think and I really recommend super highly, which is [\*Family Values\*](#) by Melinda Cooper. Which is an argument about how we might think of—and I think this remains even on the left a common idea—that we might think of neoliberalism as having nothing to do with social and cultural conservatism, right? These are kind of opposed, but actually neoliberalism has carried out an agenda to quite explicitly—she documents it really, really well, of not just cutting back the welfare state, but also reorganizing the population into dependance on normative family structure, right? And that is the explicit

goal of a huge amount of social policy reform over the last generation to compel people to depend on, you know, heterosexual couple relationships. Typically with men privileged in some form within them.

And we can see this across a whole area of social policy. I mean, so-called welfare reform is a kind of most infamous version of this, I think. But this is played out in things like the response to HIV-AIDS, and the accumulation of student debt, and the housing bubble, and the idea that the way that people should participate in the economy is through borrowing, acquisition of home wealth, right? That actually—that model I mean, it has many different problems, obviously, but one of them is that, in fact assumes, and kind of compels a certain kind of normative sexual relationship. And I think that's a really useful way of understanding, as Aislinn was saying, how...and as Koki was saying in the framing of this question, how certain ways of—certain kind of really intimate and basic forms of social relationship, like family, are not necessarily given right, but are in fact produced by social policy and how we think of our most intimate relationships develops in that context.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Gabe. Last night, I was actually standing in the kitchen, trying to do my best to explain the thesis of that book to my husband, I'm not sure I succeeded. But it is such a seminal piece. Incredible. Jessica, do you want to chime in here?

**Jessica Quiason:** I think just reflecting on what it is like to not—to be in this administration as opposed to the last is just like really understanding like the emotional weight too, of just like how people come at an idea of the economy and society with, like, so much fear and that there's not enough. And it's like we literally live in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, and Jeff Bezos is the wealthiest person on the entire planet. Like, there's no way there's not enough, right? It's just that I think the way that our structures are—or our systems are structured is that it creates this massive inequality. And I think it's like—we don't have enough because they have too much. That's the other part of this, that doesn't really come through a lot. And I think that, like, having that fear makes us think that, oh, well, Jeff Bezos deserved it somehow. And so we can't touch it. That's not true. Like who is able to create...I don't know how many...22 million dollars worth of value to the economy in like one minute. That's not possible.

So I think it's just like—yeah, I do think it is—I think everyone's touched on this, like radically reimagining what it literally means to relate to like another person, and what it feels like to do that. Like, literally, how do you feel when you are contributing to that one box that Aislinn was talking about? I mean, I feel like the reason why people are so drawn is like, “can you believe they're

just like putting stuff in a box? Like, I just like...some people can just take it." It's like, have you ever tried it? It feels great. Like maybe like if we actually did more of that, and I know this is like, very idealistic, but I literally need to believe this to continue to do this work. But like that is worth something. And that's actually what keeps people going, is when people reach out, not when people pull back.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Jessica. That's such a lovely, sort of, way to frame this last bit of conversation and sort of the mutual beneficial aspect of leaning into communities, the structures, and support. I wanted—This is a bit of a maybe left turn, but I think we're in a very interesting and unique moment in history, especially when it comes to thinking about political economy. I think political economy for a lot of people in this country has become more of an immediate thought and immediate thing to contend with in their daily lives. And so I would love to hear from the three of you, any reflections, interesting dynamics that you've seen play out during this ongoing Covid-19 pandemic? Any social or political phenomena that you expected to see maybe in March of last year that did, or did not come to fruition? And I know that there's sort of a conversation as to whether labor organizing occurred in the ways that was predicted at the beginning of the pandemic. And what can we learn—and thinking about political economy from a global pandemic, as you just mentioned Jessica, under two very different presidential administrations. So if anyone has any sort of interesting takeaways, nuggets that they have been sitting with over the last 16 months, I'd be interested to hear.

**Jessica Quiason:** I think I'll hop on really quick to just kind of continue on a point. And I do want to say that, like I'm not saying that this administration has...doesn't inspire fear in Black or Brown people. Absolutely. It still does. We still have problems. But I think that for me, one thing that was really encouraging was just—the uprisings in a lot of ways are really just like a total game changer for me of really understanding my place in the movement and how I contribute to it.

But I think that for me, like watching the way that Amazon has also responded to—a bunch of corporations, specifically Amazon. Before the pandemic, they were building out this facial recognition arm of their business called Recognition that was—a lot of people feared that because they bought Amazon Ring doorbells that they were going to then use the facial recognition software in the doorbells, and then use those with their police contracts to just further identify people and further incarcerate Black and Brown people. But I think, like Amazon knew something was wrong because in response to the uprisings, they said they're going to have a moratorium on the facial

recognition. So “we’re not going to do that. Like we’re hearing...we’re responding to a moment.” And that happened because of organizing like it didn’t happen because Jeff Bezos is like, “oh, look, I really understand Black Lives Matter.” Like no. Like it happened because people were pouring out in the streets, cities across the globe, demanding that we defund the police. And that scared people. And I think that that’s what happens when you literally put boots on the ground. Talk about like looking to your left and right and thinking, what can we do together? That was like an amazing showing of what organizing is about. And when we really take on racial capitalism, it works.

And to continue to today, so we were coming up on the one year expiration of that moratorium. And again, like I’m involved in the Athena Coalition, which is an anti-Amazon coalition of a bunch of folks across the country. And we were building up towards having a huge week of action that’s actually just wrapping up this week to demand that Amazon extend the moratorium. Before we even started the week, Amazon put out a statement saying that they were going to extend the moratorium indefinitely. Again, these things don’t happen without organizing. And I think that that’s a really important lesson. I think it was a great moment for us and it did feel like things are working. But that’s not a win. It’s not the win that we want. So now we’re saying, well, if you’re going to put an indefinite moratorium, why don’t you cancel all the 2000 police contracts that you have with your Ring doorbells? Like, let’s keep going. Like, it just...it works. And I do want to really underscore that, like, you know, it all has to link back to organizing how we build power in our communities.

**Koki Mendis:** Thank you, Jessica, that’s such a great example. Aislinn, Gabe, would either of you like to jump in here?

**Aislinn Pulley:** Kind of letting the question kind of percolate a little bit. But I think for me, what I’ve been sitting with is, touches on what Gabe mentioned earlier on, the generational impact, and now historical knowledge and experience of the attempt to unionize Amazon workers, also exists in the 27 million people who took to the streets during the uprising. And that is a huge and radical experience, and potentially life changing experience. And so I’m really, really curious about what that then makes possible moving forward. That people were able to feel the possibility of really making transformative and substantive change and believed in it and did—and right—and accomplished—and some changes that, I think, are you know...some of what Jessica mentioned is a consequence of that. There are other consequences of that in birth Defund, right? A concept that we can actually change the hegemonic construct of society. That’s a huge consciousness shift that has happened to millions and millions of people.

I think also, in addition to the uprising, the experience of witnessing the rest of the world and how they responded to the pandemic, and how the United States did not. And what—and sacrificed millions of lives as a result. So I'm also curious at what those realizations and learnings will produce. So I think I'm excited. I'm excited to see what that means. And maybe that means we won't know for another generation, but I'm certainly excited at what that historical and experiential knowledge will produce.

**Gabe Winant:** Yeah, I really appreciate that point and I think it's the clearest kind of articulation of it I've heard yet and it's really, I think, profound and important. And it makes me think about...I mean, I think the phenomenon of people who participated in the uprising last summer is the most significant version of this. But another I would point to would be the paradox of the experience of the so-called essential worker. I mean, I'm sure many of you had this experience where you talk to someone who is in a kind of front line job in some way. And, you know, I think early on, in March, April, and May last year, people were scared, but they felt like, you know, the attention and, you know, honor that they were receiving meant something, and presumably would be accompanied eventually in some form with something more substantive. And now I think when you say the phrase "essential workers," you know, like a nursing assistant or whatever, I mean, they laugh at it, and they kind of roll their eyes at it. They take it as an insult and rightly so. And I think that insult of...I mean, I think what that insult consists of, actually, is that we've conveyed collectively how much we actually do depend on these workers, right? That they are essential, that the phrase is actually not a lie on its own terms. It's that we haven't followed up on any of the implications of, you know, once you assert that, that means a set of things that we haven't wanted to acknowledge and deal with.

You know, I think often about a CNA I [interviewed](#) for *Dissent Magazine* last year named Shantonia Jackson, who works in a nursing home right outside Chicago, that got hit really bad with Covid. You know, really understaffed nursing home, quite bad conditions. And Shantonia is a steward in her union, in SEIU, and described to me, you know, the kinds of confrontations that she would have with her manager. And at one point she said—she repeated to me something she'd said to him, which was, you know, "I'm a CNA," she is certified. "I'm certified to wipe ass anywhere in the state of Illinois," is what she said. And I often think about that because, I mean, it's kind of funny, but it's also—what she—what she's telling us, right, is that she understands her own value, right? She understands that what she does is in demand. She can do it anywhere, even though her boss treats her like she's completely disposable. And that is the

paradox of the essential worker. That's the thing that makes people roll their eyes when you say it to them. And that, I think, is really—I mean, this is just conjecture, I don't know if this is going to happen. But it seems to me like that contradiction is going to work itself out over the coming years, as people who have gone through that, like Aislinn is saying about the millions people on the streets, people who've gone through that go back to work right? Or they already are back at work. But you have to kind of keep living with that and holding on to the memory of everything that that phrase meant and that experience meant.

**Koki Mendis:** That's an excellent point, and I definitely remember in spring of last year, just being really afraid that the essential worker rhetoric was going to completely obliterate sort of knowledge and the logic of exploitation. And over the year, we've seen that veneer flake off and people in those roles really understand the difference between being valued and being exploited. So I think that's an excellent insight.

Well, wonderful. I think this was—any last comments before I close us? Today was a fabulous conversation. I'm so, so glad, I'm so grateful that three of you joined us today, gabriel, Aislinn Jessica. This is a terrific conversation. I mean, I could talk political economy all day, and I am so glad that you joined me today to do that. And I want to thank all of you out there in our audience.

Thank you for joining us for the penultimate webinar and our It's Not Over Yet series. We will be distributing the recording, and a transcript of today's webinar by email, and on our website next week. Please join us next month for our last roundtable discussion of the summer, "Mobilizing for Reproductive Freedom in the Battle Over Bodily Sovereignty." We hope to see you all there. And in the meantime, definitely check out [politicalresearch.org](http://politicalresearch.org) for some fascinating reads. I want to thank you again for coming. Gabe, Aislinn, jessica, this conversation has been—exceeded expectations, and I think we're seeing it in our chat that people are just as thrilled to have to partake—to partake in with us today. And so thank you.