

## #1368 Our Essential, Yet Disposable, Labor

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** Welcome to this episode of the award-winning Best of the Left podcast in which we shall learn about the dynamics at play for some of the most vulnerable people in America who are doing much of the most essential work under the most precarious of circumstances. Clips today are from Frontline, The Takeaway, the Uncertain Hour and at the Ezra Klein Show.

### Essential and Unprotected Part 1 - FRONTLINE, PBS - Air Date 7-22-20

**DAFFODIL ALTAN:** We were wanting to find out once the infections started how big the problem was, how many farmworkers, how many people in the agricultural sector, were getting sick, and most counties were not releasing that information. Companies were not releasing that information. So, it was difficult to get. So, Monterey, actually in May, began releasing industry data, they still don't release information about companies and where infections have happened, but they do break down infections by industry. And what that has told us and what a recent analysis found, because they have that industry data, they're able to see now that farmworkers are three times as likely to get COVID-19 than other workers. So that's significant.

**RANEY ARONSON - HOST, FRONTLINE:** Right. So, we really don't know what the rest of California or even the country looks like in that regard.

**ANDRÉS CEDIEL:** Yeah, we were looking for data all over the place, and at one point, we started asking all the top AG counties for the data and we were just getting a lot of responses that say, 'They don't release the data, they don't release the data.' So then, we started reaching out to some other researchers. But we also found some research out of U.C. San Diego. And this was a study that was done of all counties in the United States, anywhere that somebody had gotten COVID-19, and they overlaid it with various factors controlling for poverty, controlling for English as a second language. And what they found out is wherever there are counties where there are more farmworkers, more people are dying of COVID-19. But the more surprising part about those studies is what was missing in their data. And what their research showed is that there appears to be many more people who are dying who are completely off the radar. They're dying at home, and they're not being diagnosed. And what it's pointing towards is that there's a whole population that we're not seeing that's being affected by this pandemic.

**RANEY ARONSON - HOST, FRONTLINE:** So, Daffodil, I just want you to talk to me a little bit as you're starting to get this data, you're starting to investigate, what were you finding the most troubling or surprising, even?

**DAFFODIL ALTAN:** It was interesting because there's a lot of talk about protection and avoiding an infection at a worksite and PPE and what we need. But I wasn't hearing enough about what happens when you have an infection at work? What are you supposed to do as an employer? What are the rules or is there anything you have to do? And it turns out, there's nothing you technically have to do; there are just recommendations for what you should do. And so, imagine going to work and being in your office, and people start

whispering and hearing about somebody being potentially infected, you want your employer to tell you something, not necessarily who -- we understand there are privacy issues -- but you want to know something. And what we were finding was the workers weren't getting anything or they were getting denials, or they were being told everything was fine.

And I think that's what was provoking a lot of anxieties. You don't know what's happening. So, you don't know how many people are sick; you don't know your own degree of exposure. And just that fear and then having to go to work every day not knowing and not having answers is what was provoking a lot of the anxiety, the fear in the workers we were speaking to.

**RANEY ARONSON - HOST, FRONTLINE:** When you think of COVID coming in and really amplifying some of the issues this community has faced, what do you see in terms of Sinthia and the challenges she faced?

**ANDRÉS CEDIÉL:** I mean, there are a lot of people who don't have health care, just plain and simple. A lot of people who are here undocumented don't have access to care. If there are free services that are available to them, they don't know about them. They're scared to go and get medical care. And they'll just suffer at home and just keep working. So, Sinthia was different in that she was able to go. You can see her in the film, and she has all her pills, and she is going and getting medical care. But she's in a very precarious position healthwise. But for a lot of people who are working on the fringes, they don't have that time; they don't have access. They can't go and get it so they continue to suffer and their ailments get worse. And that's one of the problems, especially with COVID, is if you're not getting care early, it can progress until the point where you're in a dire situation. And so that's one of the scariest things for this population.

**DAFFODIL ALTAN:** Yeah and also, it's just economic. I mean, I heard from people who were like, 'How, this test, how much is it going to cost? I'm not going to go get tested, it's going to be expensive. I don't have health insurance.' And so, one of the doctors that we speak to in the film said 'don't be afraid of being undocumented, being deported right now, be afraid of the virus.'

**DR. MAX CUEVAS:** When our state and federal governments announced that the farmworker was a part of the essential workforce included with health care, first responders, police, — but it's not your middle class essential worker that people are talking about. Farmworkers, a lot of them, do in fact live in fear. They don't want people to know that they're here undocumented. There's that fear of, 'I could be gone tomorrow if I am taken away. And what's going to happen to my family?' It's a horrible kind of fear that people learn to live with, and it's understandable. You try to assure them that, well, don't be afraid of that one right now. Be afraid of the virus.

**RANEY ARONSON - HOST, FRONTLINE:** Daffodil, you're talking about Dr. Cuevas, and he's one of the most dynamic characters in your film. Tell me a little bit about him and what he was seeing in this landscape as COVID is coming on the scene and the work he was doing.

**DAFFODIL ALTAN:** Yeah, so, Dr. Cuevas. You know, his parents were farmworkers. So, he grew up in California as a farmworker, and so he truly understands the community because this is where he comes from. And so, he has been operating more than 20 years in the Salinas area. He has a whole network of clinics, and they're all kind of spread out in remote areas because

that's where you need to place health care and health care access for the farmworker population. So, the vast majority of his patients are agriculture connected or related, and they do a lot of outreach work. And they do a lot of work to educate and get people to get the services they need.

But what they were concerned with when shelter in place was put into place and they had to operate in a limited way was: what was going to happen with the harvest? Were people going to have the protection, enough protection to protect themselves? And so he decided with the staff to just start making, they set a goal of making 10,000 masks. And so they just started sewing and making these masks, but also started working with a coalition of stakeholders including the grower community to try to figure out how to educate the farmworkers, how to educate businesses about what you need to do at the workplace, to really mitigate, to contain, and he's a big advocate of on-site testing. And right now, actually, he's currently, with a U.C. researcher there, they've ramped up testing. So his goal is to test 5,000 farmworkers. And I think once that happens, we're going to know a lot more about the degree of spread among the farmworker community.

**RANEY ARONSON - HOST, FRONTLINE:** One of the questions that I had when I was watching Dr. Cuevas and his team making the masks and going to the trucks in the morning and handing out the masks is what is the company responsibility here and what are you finding companies are doing now? I mean, as the pandemic has been going on for months now, are you seeing companies start to provide masks, at least the companies that you guys looked at.

**ANDRÉS CEDIEL:** Yeah, there's a wide range in terms of what companies are doing. I think there are companies that are doing everything to the letter in terms of the recommendations and doing all that and more, and they're providing masks and they're instituting social distancing. They're giving people paid sick leave. So, there's a lot of companies out there that are really genuinely caring about their workers and the health of their workers and their families and doing the right thing. And then, of course, what we've found in this industry is that there's just a wide range of actors. So then, there are situations, in terms of where Sinthia was working and the contractor that she was working with, was not providing masks. So, even though there was a county order in which essential workers need to wear masks, it wasn't clear who was to provide the masks. So, it was Sinthia herself who brought the masks to the workers to help try to take care of their health and her health. So, there's just a huge range of what companies are doing.

**DAFFODIL ALTAN:** But what's lacking right now is any sort of uniform requirement for companies to follow, and that's in any industry, in this industry as well. So, you know, companies take it upon themselves to either be very forward thinking and try to do everything to protect the company and their workers, or they wait until an outbreak happens, and then they rush to try to give people PPE and put separators in place and try to contain the virus. But as we've seen, and as we see in the film, by that point, it's often too late. The virus has moved very quickly.

## **COVID-19 Presents Major Economic Burden for Domestic Workers - The Takeaway - Air Date 7-7-20**

**TANZINA VEGA - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** So Caitlin, you spoke with a number of undocumented domestic workers who had lost work at the end of March. What were some of their employers telling them at the time?

**CAITLIN DICKERSON:** It was coming quite simply, you know, in the form of a text message, maybe a phone call, saying, please don't come into work tomorrow.

That was the message that nannies received, that house cleaners received, that gardeners received, which sounds like a casual message, but it's a really big deal to somebody who really has almost no discretionary money, who has no extra money beyond what they need to make their bills. And it's only really continued, as you pointed out, when the country closed down, social distancing was the first rule of thumb.

As a result, people ask their nannies to stay home, asked their house cleaners to stay home. And these workers rely on handshake deals for their employment in many cases. They're often paid in cash, which means they didn't have any contractual or legal entitlement to anything like sick pay or vacation days.

And, the situation has only compounded by the fact that workers, especially those who don't have legal status, who work in the domestic sphere, were not eligible for federal stimulus money. And too, as the economy now contracts, domestic workers are really the first discretionary expense to go. And so not only did domestic workers lose their work first, but their hopes of getting it back, really for many feel quite low.

**TANZINA VEGA - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** Kimberly you coauthored the survey we mentioned at the top, of Black immigrant domestic workers in New York City, Miami and Massachusetts. Tell me about what some of the findings were in those three different areas with this group.

**KIMBERLY FREEMAN BROWN:** We surveyed 811 Black immigrant domestic workers in the three locations that you mentioned. 70% of those who responded to our survey in those three locations reported that they had either lost their jobs, or received reduced hours and pay. And in Miami, for example, it was the worst: 93% of respondents reported having lost wages or having lost their jobs.

Housing insecurity was another big issue that we saw. 65% of respondents said that they are fearful or at risk of eviction or utility shut off in the next three months, facing their worst fears of being without a home or without utilities.

**TANZINA VEGA - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** This is an industry that really is dominated by women of color. Black women, Latina women, Asian women, and many of these women are also undocumented.

Did your survey responses differ from undocumented versus documented workers in terms of their fears?

**KIMBERLY FREEMAN BROWN:** We saw, Tanzina, that in almost every area where we surveyed Black immigrant domestic workers, that undocumented workers reported even worse conditions. So for example, with job loss, undocumented workers were nearly twice as likely as documented workers to be terminated.

**TANZINA VEGA - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** Caitlin, did you find similar experiences in your reporting? Because you've spoken with a woman named Enriqueta, who's undocumented, who had been working as a house cleaner until the pandemic started. Tell us a little bit about her experience.

**CAITLIN DICKERSON:** Enriqueta, she lives in Austin, Texas. She and her husband were both house cleaners, and lost their jobs immediately in mid-March when the virus broke out with no sick pay or contingency pay or anything like that, it was just one day they were employed the next day they weren't. They had six and eight year old sons. And the rest of their life really falls apart from there. So she gets sick, and starts experiencing symptoms of the coronavirus immediately after her landlord starts knocking on the door, demanding rent money.

And there was a moratorium on evictions placed in Austin. But as I've reported in many places where these moratoriums exist, they don't necessarily apply to undocumented workers who have landlords who want to collect their money, and aren't really worried about their wellbeing, because the undocumented folks, they tend to be too scared to go to the authorities to fight back and say, Hey, my landlord is trying to illegally evict me. That was the case for Enriqueta. So when she was facing this immense pressure to pay rent, she was too scared to report it because she didn't want to be separated from her children and deported.

And so which she ended up doing was just fleeing with her kids. And she's been bouncing around from home to home ever since. She was living, sleeping in a living room of one of the cousins of her husband for a while on a blow up mattress. And basically her husband seemed to experience such extreme stress from the situation that he started drinking, she told me, excessively, and he eventually left her on her own to take care of the kids. She's had no income since then. Her kids dropped out of school for the last couple of months because the house they were staying in had no internet access. They were hardly getting any sleep because they were sleeping on an air mattress in a living room. People were coming in and out of the house. Every time somebody got up to get a drink of water would wake them up.

And eventually, the city of Austin did find out about her living situation. It was reported to the mayor's office by her son's school, and the city helped them move into a new apartment they were subletting, at the time my story published, a bedroom in a new apartment, but again, with no lease and no protection and no income already, that situation has become stressful. The landlord was beginning to pressure her, and demanding money that she didn't have. And so she's actually back now out, with her two children, staying with yet another friend and looking for another place to stay. Her situation is very precarious. And I should say this entire time of the pandemic, the family has been relying completely on school, on food donated by her children's school, in order to survive. So she's really got, at various times when I've been on the phone with her, no money in her purse, maybe five or \$10 in her purse, that's really it.

And she's really thinking about, not just how are we going to get through the next month, how are we going to pay rent, but how are we going to get through today? How am I going to get my kids enough food just to eat today?

**TANZINA VEGA - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** So Kimberly, Caitlin just expertly laid out what happens when a domestic worker loses their job. But there's also a risk that many of these workers face entering homes in this moment of the coronavirus.

Do you know whether or not employers are following the CDC guidelines when it comes to providing protective gear for their workers?

**KIMBERLY FREEMAN BROWN:** That was one of the questions that we asked in the survey, and what we found was very alarming. The women who responded to the survey reported that--73% reported that they have not received personal protective equipment from their employers.

And that percentage was much higher for undocumented workers.

**TANZINA VEGA - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** And what we're talking about here are things like having hand sanitizer available, right?. And having masks available.

**KIMBERLY FREEMAN BROWN:** Right. Protective clothing, anything that would really reduce exposure and prevent the spread of germs.

**TANZINA VEGA - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** Caitlin, some of this is--we've touched on this briefly--but some of this is reminded me of the public charge rule that's been implemented by the Trump administration here in regards to undocumented workers.

Could you explain for our listeners what that was and how it might factor into the services that these workers, particularly those who are undocumented, may not be able to access?

**CAITLIN DICKERSON:** Absolutely. It's definitely related. So your listeners may remember the public charge rule the Trump administration introduced is one that's designed to penalize anybody here in the country without legal status for using any type of public benefits, really. Whether it comes to housing or it comes to food stamps, or it comes to anything related to their healthcare, any use of public benefits and support can be used against an immigrant who is later trying to adjust their status and become legal and obtain legal, permanent residency. And so this created a chilling effect, which we've talked about all over the country. And it really affects every sector of American life because it highly discourages the use of public benefits. That's definitely coming into play right now.

But even beyond that, some nonprofit group culled together money to try to issue grants, to fill in the gaps where the federal money just didn't exist for certain populations of people. But there's a real fear of taking advantage of any of that support, because the thinking is that it could later be used against someone.

## **Essential and Unprotected Part 2 - FRONTLINE, PBS - Air Date 7-22-20**

**RANEY ARONSON - HOST, FRONTLINE:** One thing I wanted to talk to you guys about, of course, you looked at farmworkers but you also looked at the meatpacking industry, and, of course you guys have experience in that area, as well. So, I was hoping you can give us a picture of what's going on there.

**ANDRÉS CEDIEL:** Well, the meatpacking industry was hit very hard by the pandemic very early on with some of the biggest outbreaks in the country happening at meatpacking plants. And when we were reporting in Monterey County, we heard about one of the biggest meatpacking outbreaks in California not far from where we were. We went to go look at what was going on there, and what we found was very similar to what was happening around the country, and that is that workers were coming in, and there were not protections available for them at the beginning of the pandemic. The virus quickly spread throughout the plant, and people were getting sick in dozens, hundreds at a time. And what was going on was they would also bring that virus back home to their families, so that the communities around the meatpacking plants were experiencing some of the fastest infection growth rates in the country.

**ARCHIVE:** At least 138 employees tested positive for COVID-19 at a meatpacking plant... Meat processing plants around the country have become COVID-19 hotspots... Outbreaks... At least 10,000 meatpacking workers... At least a dozen plants in eight states have either closed or reduced hours in response to the outbreak...

**ANDRÉS CEDIEL:** You know, this is one of the reasons why it's important to pay attention to what's happening at these workplaces, because those workplaces then affect the community. Then we found in meatpacking plants that we were looking at that we could see that there was these huge outbreaks happening. But we also know, in the same way that in the farming community that there's a range of actors, there's also a range of actors in the meatpacking plants. In our previous reporting, we were seeing workers who were employing child labor, who were working the night shift, who are being trafficked. These are off-the-radar, small, non-unionized meatpacking plants. Even at the big ones where there's a lot more transparency, where some of the companies were actually releasing the data, we were seeing these huge outbreaks. Now that there's some level of protection being given to the workers, the numbers aren't, haven't spiked as high but the numbers haven't gone away. So one of the things, the few numbers that are out there that are tracking outbreaks at meatpacking plants actually show that the outbreaks are relatively consistent. Because what happens is when the workers get sick, and they go home, and they take two weeks off, somebody else is hired to come and take their place. And then those people are getting sick. And it's just a continuous cycle right now people going in and getting sick and going in and getting sick. The problem hasn't gone away at all.

**RANEY ARONSON - HOST, FRONTLINE:** Dr. Cuevas also said something that really struck me, the idea that, you know, the average American doesn't necessarily know what it takes to get the food that's actually on our plates. Talk to me a little bit about what you think Americans think about these workers out there.

**DAFFODIL ALTAN:** How many farmworkers do you personally know? I mean, have you ever just spent time with a farmworker or someone who works in a meatpacking plant? Have you ever had coffee with them? Do you know anything about their lives? The accountability, understanding the scope of the problem is critical.

**DR. MAX CUEVAS:** No one has ever focused on what a farmworker is or does. All of a sudden, they're being called essential workers, and a lot of people out there right now are saying what does that mean? Why are people taking that much interest in what we do? It's

not known how many exactly of that workforce are undocumented, so they've got that added dilemma and stigma that they're living with.

**DAFFODIL ALTAN:** Just knowing who it is. Who is it that picks the lettuce? Who is it that picks your broccoli? What is their life like? Aren't we all in this COVID situation together? Aren't we all afraid for our children and our family members and [of] the unknown? And so, I think part of what Dr. Cuevas is saying is because he's of this community, because he was a farmworker, is understanding just the work alone: just seeing and being there on the worksite at four in the morning, what has to happen to get to work, to begin the work, how much you've done by nine, 10, 11 in the morning and how far that food travels.

We're disconnected from the human being who's making that happen. Dr. Cuevas also said this is not unskilled work; it's actually skilled work. It's difficult work. It's learned work. Growers value the crews that they have, they rehire the same people often because they really value the skill that they have. And so I think we just don't understand that universe. There's so little in the way of protection still for the farmworking community.

**RANEY ARONSON - HOST, FRONTLINE:** Yeah, I'm glad you landed there because I wanted to know -- you guys did speak to Fed OSHA -- I want to know what could be done for these workers right now at the federal level.

**ANDRÉS CEDIEL:** So right now, they've issued recommendations for companies to follow. The theory behind that is that each workplace knows their workplace best and will know what they can do and what they need to do to keep their workplace safe. But we see that there are problems happening right now, and there's no enforcement. There's no standard for everybody. So, that's something that Federal OSHA could do right now which would then require employers to provide these protections. And then if they're enforceable, we would know if people were actually being protected or not. Right now, the hot spots are happening in low-wage work. The people who have to go to work right now are the people who are vulnerable and who are not being protected. So, if we can stop the pandemic there, that's going to help all of us in society.

**RANEY ARONSON - HOST, FRONTLINE:** One of the things I was hoping you guys could both comment on is, because you have been covering this community for a long time, what do you see that's different now?

**ANDRÉS CEDIEL:** I mean, I think on one hand, I want to say that things are getting better in this farm-working community and that there are more protections over time, because clearly, they are. But at the same time, there are so many serious systemic issues with how farmworkers live and work in all the challenges that they have that there's a lot of ways in which it's not getting better. There's a lot of work being done in California, but it's really incremental. And at the end of the day, this community is still down at the bottom economically and in terms of protections, and especially because so many of them are undocumented. So there hasn't been a lot of progress made.

**DAFFODIL ALTAN:** With the undocumented part, that's still the biggest elephant in the room. I mean, at this point, when the pandemic started in California, the situation was that there were worker shortages. Growers, processors, producers did not have enough workers. So, I think what has shifted and what had happened just before, in December, is that a House Bill had passed that had a lot of industry support for putting undocumented farmworkers on

a path to citizenship, eventual citizenship, to increasing the number of H-2A workers because growers understand now that you can't keep an undocumented workforce like this forever, because it affects them, as well. And so, that's still the biggest and central issue because from that stems so many things. And if you are living here undocumented, you're going to feel like you're criminalized. Even if you're called essential, you can still potentially be deported. So, what happens is, just like we found in our other films. When you're in that situation, you're not going to speak out if you're sexually assaulted, if you're being labor trafficked, and again now, if you have COVID-19, you're going to be afraid to speak out. So, I think keeping an entire workforce that technically has rights but doesn't always know that they do because they're being simultaneously criminalized is what's at the heart of this problem.

## **Unemployment benefits are hard to get. That's on purpose Part 1 - The Uncertain Hour - Air Date 5-27-20**

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** Peter and I hopped on a Zoom video call with Larry Katz to chat about unemployment. Larry, by the way, was also Chief Economist of the US Department of Labor under Bill Clinton. And the thing he told me that kind of blew my mind was that even just the concept of being unemployed didn't really exist until the 1800s.

**LAWRENCE KATZ:** You know, in a largely agricultural economy, there had been depressions and panics, but there was more of a sense of work sharing going back to the farm and doing other things and not the modern term unemployment that really came up with the growth of a modern manufacturing sector and larger employers and mass layoffs.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** Are you sort of saying the idea was before the industrial economy, we weren't so tied necessarily to what companies were offering jobs. So it was more of like a hustle, we could figure things out or go back to the farm.

**LAWRENCE KATZ:** Yeah. I mean, people were thought of as self-employed running their own businesses. There were hard times when business was lower or better, and maybe we would provide some food or some support, but the notion of unemployment and that you might tide someone over until work returns, really is a modern concept.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** Before in history, Larry says, if you didn't have work, it was kind of seen as your fault, that you weren't working hard enough to find a job. You weren't considered unemployed, you were considered idle, lazy, and not really deserving of help. And that idea of deciding who deserves help, that's going to be key to our story.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** Like super key. Because the idea that some people deserve help when they're out of a job and others don't is baked into the whole concept of who's considered unemployed, and eventually who gets to get government unemployment benefits, even today.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** So back in the 1800s, if you were out of work there were poor houses and Oliver Twist sort of charities where you could get reformed. But by the middle of the century, as an agrarian economy was rapidly transforming into an industrial capitalist economy, this guy you might have heard of named Karl Marx and his friend Friedrich Engels, they said often people were out of work not because they were lazy,

but because capitalists like factory owners hired and fired workers based on how much profit they could make. That argument started to take hold when a recession hit in the 1890s, and lots of people lost their jobs.

**LAWRENCE KATZ:** Then you start seeing mentions of the term unemployment, but we had no way of really measuring it.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** Fast forward a few decades—the great depression hits. Huge numbers of people are out of work and the government decides to try to count how many people are unemployed, and that means it has to define unemployment. And we start seeing this division of people into two groups, the ones that count as unemployed and the ones that don't.

**LAWRENCE KATZ:** So unemployment in the way we currently think about it is the state of not having a job, but looking for a job. Like you actually contacted some employers then you would be considered unemployed, and if you said, well, I sat around and I read job ads but I didn't contact anyone, you would not be considered unemployed, you'd be considered out of the labor force.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** Even under that narrow definition of unemployment, things were bad. As the Great Depression worsened and the unemployment rate ticked up to 23%, 24%, that couldn't be ignored. Politicians had to do something.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** At the federal level, President Roosevelt, FDR was a big believer in work. He thought people were better off working than getting cash for not working. So he thought the government should just straight up hire people, and we got the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Works Progress Administration.

**FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT - ARCHIVAL AUDIO:** Employment has been provided for thousands of skilled and unskilled workers engaged in the preparation and equipment of parks and playgrounds.

President Roosevelt makes his first tour of the Civilian Conservation Corps camps in the Shenandoah Valley.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** But this was the Great Depression. Historian Alice O'Connor from UC Santa Barbara says it was clear that FDR's work programs couldn't hire everyone who needed work. So he decided the government should go farther.

**ALICE O'CONNOR:** To protect us against what FDR famously called the vicissitudes of this very unstable capitalists system.

**FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT - ARCHIVAL AUDIO:** We can never ensure 100% of the population against 100% of the hazards and vicissitudes of life, but we have tried to frame a law, which will give some measure of protection to the average citizen and to his family against the loss of a job.

**ALICE O'CONNOR:** The other thing I should point to here is that there's a sea change in economic thinking at the time embodied in the person of John Maynard Keynes.

**JOHN MAYNARD KEYNES - ARCHIVAL AUDIO:** It a wonderful thing for our businessmen, and our manufacturers, and our unemployed, to taste hope again.

**ALICE O'CONNOR:** And Keynesian economic thought essentially said, it is in the interest of everybody that these newly unemployed workers have some cash so that they can not only feed themselves and keep their families going, but so that they actually can circulate money in the economy and get it going again.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** So at FDR's urging, Congress passed the Social Security Act in 1935, which included not just a social security system for old people, but this other system designed to help unemployed people. You can actually hear FDR hyping it up during one of his fireside chats.

**FRANKLIN DELANO ROOSEVELT - ARCHIVAL AUDIO:** The unemployment insurance part of the legislation will not only help to guard the individual in future periods of layoff against dependence upon relief, but it will by sustaining the purchasing power of the nation, cushion the shock of economic distress.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** And Chrissy, I will have, you know, that is super hyped by 1930s, politician standards.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** Back when American sounded like we had British accents.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** Exactly.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** So here's a quick rundown of how the system that they landed on works—the system we basically still have today. Every state designs, their own unemployment insurance system. The benefits are funded through a tax on employers, which goes into a trust fund just for unemployment insurance. And the more a company lays off people, the more that company gets taxed—to a degree.

Unemployment

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** benefits are available to people for a set amount of time, but only if they lose their job through no fault of their own and can prove they're looking for new work. So it doesn't cover everyone who's out of a job, but even so, the creation of unemployment insurance was a huge deal.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** Let's pause for a second and think about what was accomplished here. For the very first time our country had a system specifically designed to give cash payments to people who'd lost their jobs.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** And it wasn't a one off temporary relief measure like the Civilian Conservation Corps. This was a system designed to last. For people who lost their jobs because their company went under or I don't know, a pandemic happens.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** Sounds familiar. And that is kind of amazing. Here's the economist, Larry Katz.

**LAWRENCE KATZ:** This was the foresite for today that we actually have an unemployment insurance system if millions of people lose jobs, we can actually provide support to them. If

we'd had to set up a new institution to do that, we would be even more distressed than we are today. It really has been there for millions of people.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** So our unemployment insurance system has been kind of world changing for the people who can use it, but from its very creation, a lot of people have not been able to use it. And that had huge impacts too. More about that after a break.

## **Why “essential” workers are treated as disposable - The Ezra Klein Show - Air Date 5-20-20**

**EZRA KLEIN - HOST, THE EZRA KLEIN SHOW:** As people try to imagine, how would you unionize a McDonald's franchise-oriented workforce, or gig workers who work for Uber or Lyft or whatever it might be in this sort of modern fissured economy? What are the innovations or the approaches from some of these that chart a path?

**MARY KAY HENRY:** I think one innovation is that we have to be as big and bold as the employers are.

And so we don't think about one state or one franchise owner at a time. We think about the entire fast food sector. And that's why we wanted to back the fearlessness and courage of the "Fight for 15" in the union leaders. And we want to combine political power with the workers' power to see if we can force a change in behavior of the corporations, who I think in this moment now more than ever, Ezra, we have to call corporations to their social responsibility. It is not okay that they've lobbied against paid sick. It is totally unacceptable that they won't call the President out for not enforcing the Defense Protection Act and getting the supplies that we need to the frontlines of this pandemic. And they need to invest in the essential workforce and change the value of work across the entire service and care sector.

So I think thinking big about what's possible, one; two, recognizing that in the US these multinational corporations get away with murder. And murder is no longer an expression. That's an actual reality that's happening in the course of this pandemic. And they need to be held to account in our nation in the way that Europe does, Australia, some countries in Africa. Those corporations are required to pay jobs that people can raise their families on.

It's an ethos by the politics and by the systems and structures for working people to bargain through sectoral councils or works councils. There's all different names for them. But elected officials and working people don't allow corporations to do to working people in communities what we have tolerated in our country.

And I think workers are demonstrating that they've had it, and we're not gonna let this be the way it is anymore. And because of the pandemic disruption, I think this reckoning is going to lead us to addressing this pain and inequality once and for all.

**EZRA KLEIN - HOST, THE EZRA KLEIN SHOW:** You say workers are showing that they've had it. Tell me a bit about what you're hearing. I imagine that the conversation, the reclassification is essential workers is giving many workers a sense of the crucial role they play that maybe they didn't have before. On the other hand, I'm sure there's fear about hurting people. If

you're in care work, it's gotta be very hard to strike under those conditions as you think about the people you care for. Or if you see a lot of people in your family being unemployed and a period of incredible economic strain and terror.

So how do these things come together? What are you hearing from workers and what are their considerations as they think about whether or not to flex some of this power?

**MARY KAY HENRY:** Lynette Jones is a nursing home leader of our union in Chicago, and she was just part of a hundred-person bargaining committee that served a 10 day strike notice on the nursing home sector in Chicago, for all the reasons we've discussed: no personal protective equipment, pay that was adding an additional strain. She was getting to \$15 because of the minimum wage law, not because the employers wanted to invest in her. And they decided to strike, Ezra, because they care deeply for residents, but thought that the best way they could advocate for residents was by insisting on conditions changing in the nursing home, so that there was enough staff, there was enough cleaners, there was enough personal protective equipment, both for the staff and for the residents to reduce the spread of the virus. And they won before they had to strike. So she's an example of a good story.

I just dealt with the Mobile Workers Alliance, a leader in Southern California. She's driving for Uber Eats. She's been on repeated strikes with other drivers because she's trying to force Uber to make good on their public claim that they're going to raise wages and provide personal protective equipment, but she's seen no evidence of it. And so she's fighting for that.

So I know what you're speaking of about the conflict for the care workers especially. But I think the care workers are being pushed to the brink by employers that are not creating the mechanisms for people to do problem solving, and get what they need to the places they need it most in the hospitals, which is what's happening in our unionized hospitals. There's a stark difference in Pittsburgh between Allegheny General Hospital, where Michelle Boyle works as an RN, and University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, where we've been trying to organize a union for seven years across six hospitals. And the employer refuses to treat the service and care and tech workers with the same respect as the registered nurses and doctors in that facility. And the registered nurses and doctors have been terrific and saying, wait a minute, the environmental service people need masks. All the dietary workers need masks and personal protective equipment. And I think that we're going to see more and more. And there's been walkouts from those hospitals in Pittsburgh. There was a spontaneous walkout in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, when a nursing home worker was told by her supervisor, don't wear a mask in there, the resident we'll be upset. And the nursing home worker looks at the supervisor and says, are you kidding me? I've cared for this man for 15 years. We love each other. I'm going to go explain to him why this mask is a way for me to protect myself and my three children who I've shown him pictures of, and him.

So there's these absurd situations that workers are having to contend with. And I have to say, Ezra, as every week unfolds and we still don't have what we need to get the job done, people are saying I'm not essential. I'm disposable. I'm sacrificial. So there's a tide turning that I think is going to catalyze more and more worker activism, because the words are not being matched by deeds. And corporations are sitting on the sidelines and they're witnessing ridiculous things come out of 1600 Pennsylvania [Avenue] and from the Republican Senate, and people are mad about it.

It's just wrong.

**EZRA KLEIN - HOST, THE EZRA KLEIN SHOW:** So something you will hear from sort of traditional economists is that workers are paid the value of their marginal labor. And then these jobs that aren't paid that well are because are low-skilled jobs and many people can do them and the workers are easy to replace. And this is just distortion in the marketplace.

What is your answer to that kind of neoclassical theory of wage setting?

**MARY KAY HENRY:** I just say back, let's look around the world and understand that other countries have shared economic prosperity and way less economic inequality, and pay people a living wage. And I just think that economic argument is completely outdated and not sustainable, certainly in this environment.

And when you are an 80% consumer economy, which is what the United States of America is, you have to pay people more. Not just because it's moral to do that, but it makes good economic sense. We've seen in the places in the nation where wages are going up because the minimum wage is rising and other workers who were above it's wages are also going up.

People have more money in their pockets. There's more small business growth. We had a motel owner in SeaTac that threatened the city council, when we moved the first \$15 initiative, say I'm going to close my business. I won't be able to operate. And three years later that man added on an addition to his motel, 'cause business was booming.

So there's plenty of evidence that contradicts that poppycock from my perspective. And that's why it's time to rewrite the rules and transform both our economy and our democracy. So people can work hard for a living and lead a decent life. It's a very basic human right. And it's a value that I actually think employers in this country share. But employers have got to get the same guts that workers have and step out of the shadows and challenge a politic that is allowing people in this nation to be more exposed to the pandemic, get infected and die. And it's just, it's wrong that essential workers are dying at higher rates, and that those jobs are done more by people of color and women. And that horrendous, outrageous number of deaths in those communities has to end.

## **Voting Is Not Enough: Take Part in National Voter Registration Day on Sept. 22nd - Best of the Left**

**AMANDA HOFFMAN - ACTIVISM, BEST OF THE LEFT:** You've reached the activism portion of today's show. Now that you're informed and angry, here's what you can do about it. Today's activism: voting is not enough. Take part in National Voter Registration Day on September 22nd. As of the publishing of this episode, there are exactly 46 days until election day. That's six and a half weeks, less than 2 months. To make sure every one of those days counts, we've launched our 2020 Election Action Guide, which we're calling "Voting Is Not Enough." Because...it's just not.

From now until election day, we'll be highlighting different ways you can be spending time and/or money to support a free and fair election, as well as Democrats down the ballot and all the way up to the Biden-Harris ticket. All of this information can be accessed from the

“Voting is Not Enough” banner at [BestoftheLeft.com](https://BestoftheLeft.com), or directly at [BestoftheLeft.com/2020action](https://BestoftheLeft.com/2020action).

We’re more than half way through September, which means we are rapidly approaching the voter registration deadlines for many states. Alaska, Rhode Island and South Carolina all have deadlines of October 4th for in-person registration, and 14 other states, including battlegrounds like Ohio, Florida and Arizona, have in-person registration deadlines of October 5th. That’s just a little more than 2 weeks away.

This is voter registration crunch time, which is why Tuesday, September 22nd is National Voter Registration Day. With many DMVs and city halls closed and in-person registration drives cancelled, voter registration has been hurt by COVID-19. But like many things this year, the strategy has adapted to our times. National Voter Registration Day is hosting and partnering with online awareness events, providing social media toolkits to share, email templates to send out to people in your network, and, of course a direct link where people can register to vote online. Head to [NationalVoterRegistrationDay.org](https://NationalVoterRegistrationDay.org) for details and resources on how individuals and organizations can take part in this massive effort.

The SEIU, one of the largest worker’s unions in the country, has deemed National Voter Registration Day one of their Worker Mobilization Days as part of their massive 2020 election effort to send Trump packing. They already have a calendar full of events, including virtual state-by-state phone banking and trainings to use the relational voting app VoteJoe. As we mentioned in a previous segment, relational voting -- or reaching out to people in your personal network -- has been shown to have a huge impact. To get the VoteJoe app now, text APP to 30330 to download it and watch the training video. Visit [mobilize.us/seiu](https://mobilize.us/seiu) to learn more about their mobilization effort and sign up to help.

And finally, it’s important to remember that voting is already underway. In some places COVID-19 has actually helped voters access the ballot, with some states like - gasp - Alabama offering a new “vote absentee in person” option. Once again, we encourage everyone to visit the “How to Vote in the 2020 Election” project from FiveThirtyEight to get the latest on the 2020 rule changes in each state. Just a heads-up that National Vote Early Day is October 24th, and we’ll be updating you with details on that as we get closer. The segment notes include all the links to this information as well as additional resources, and, once again, this segment is available on the “Voting is Not Enough” page at [BestoftheLeft.com/2020action](https://BestoftheLeft.com/2020action).

So, if making sure every eligible young person and worker is registered to vote in the important election of our lifetime is important to you, be sure to spread the word about taking part in National Voter Registration Day on September 22nd via social media so that others in your network can spread the word, too.

## **Unemployment benefits are hard to get. That’s on purpose Part 2 - The Uncertain Hour - Air Date 5-27-20**

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** There've always been people who didn't get access to unemployment insurance.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** The biggest example of that came right at the beginning, when Congress first passed the law that created unemployment insurance. Bill

Sprigs, an economics professor at Howard University who is also the Chief Economist for the AFL-CIO, explained that written into that law was this catch that certain jobs didn't qualify for unemployment benefits, including two big ones.

**BILL SPRIGGS:** Agricultural workers and domestic workers.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** Agricultural workers, you know, farm workers and domestic workers like housekeepers, nannies, which at first glance seems kind of technical and bureaucratic, like maybe you think, oh there must be something about those jobs that makes them harder to file paperwork on or fit into the system or something. But actually, the reason those two job categories were originally excluded from unemployment insurance goes to something much deeper and uglier.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** So, backstory on this one. In order to get any of the New Deal legislation passed into law, including unemployment insurance, there had to be buy in from politicians across the country, including the Southern Democrats. And they had a very particular world order they were trying to enforce—one of white supremacy.

**BILL SPRIGGS:** The signs were obvious. Literally, they would have above the water fountain "colored only", "white only", and the South did not want that disturbed. And repeatedly threw out every piece of legislation in the New Deal. They tried their best to ensure that system would not be challenged.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** At first, in early New Deal legislation, way before we got to unemployment insurance, white Southern Democrats were really explicit about what they wanted to put into the laws. It's in the legislative record. In one bill about allowing the president to regulate industries for fair wages, there, the white Southern Democrats pretty much just flat out said, we want most of this relief to go to White People.

**BILL SPRIGGS:** They wanted to have White wages and Black wages.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** Like really written out that way.

**BILL SPRIGGS:** Written out that way cause that's how they operated in the South. That was quickly defeated cause then the Northern Democrats just weren't going to go for it.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** So the Northern Democrats in Congress made what's been called a "devil's bargain".

**BILL SPRIGGS:** The compromise with them was, okay you can't say this only goes to White people. So the compromise is you can exclude certain occupations, that's okay and we'll live with that. So we will exclude agricultural workers. We will exclude domestic workers.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** And it just so happened that workers with those jobs were disproportionately Black, disproportionately women, and poor.

By the time the unemployment insurance system was being debated a few years later, instead of bringing up the idea of excluding Black workers explicitly, Southern Democrats just said, we want to be able to exclude farm workers and domestic workers, wink, wink.

**BILL SPRIGGS:** That's basically it. So we will say agricultural workers, but in the South that means we don't want Black people to get this. That's what they did.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** And just to play out why, historian Alice O'Connor's take is that it was also about keeping labor cheap. Like, say you owned a cotton farm and needed seasonal workers to come pick your cotton. If they get some money when they're not working, that might make them a little less desperate and give them a little more bargaining power to ask for higher wages the next season.

**ALICE O'CONNOR:** This kind of protection, it empowers workers. It puts them in at least somewhat less dire circumstances, such that they're not necessarily beholden to one local employer.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** From the moment farm workers and domestic workers were left out of unemployment insurance, civil rights and labor activists came out against that exclusion and after decades of pressure, domestic workers and agricultural workers were brought into the fold in the 1970s.

**KRISSY CLARK - HOST, THE UNCERTAIN HOUR:** But even though those categories of jobs that had at one point been disproportionately jobs that Black people had, even though those job categories were eventually included in unemployment benefits, the 40 years that those jobs were excluded left a lasting legacy of inequality—a generation of certain workers who didn't get the same safety nets that everyone else had. That had a huge impact on their ability to weather hard times, to build wealth, to climb up the economic ladder.

And by the time farm workers and domestic workers were included in unemployment insurance, there were plenty of other ways that Black people and other people of color were shut out of the system.

**PETER BALONON-ROSEN:** And there still are. Because yeah, the language of the law has changed, but we still see this idea that this is just for people who we think deserve it, play out in just about everything the unemployment insurance system does.

## **How Labor Organizing Can Help Women and People of Color Unemployed Due to COVID-19 - The Takeaway - Air Date 5-13-20**

**SHUMITA BASU - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** Lane, right now there's a lot of talk about essential workers and I'm sitting in New York and here, many of those essential workers are Black and Brown people. What might a recession look like for essential workers across the country?

**PROF LANE WINDHAM:** One in three jobs held by women are considered essential. So a recovery for essential workers could mean that they have jobs, they have work, but will the work be healthy? Will it be safe? Will it be jobs that they can go to with confidence? And I'd say right now, many of those workers are reporting to work and are really risking the safety for themselves and for their families.

And I think that, we have a long way to go before those essential workers who we depend on--those cashiers, those nurses, those EMT workers --are fully protected and are fully safe.

**SHUMITA BASU - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** I'm thinking about unions and labor organizing. Lane, have we seen a difference between how unionized workers and non-unionized workers fared during past recessions? I'm curious how labor organizing can possibly help Black and Brown people and women specifically.

**PROF LANE WINDHAM:** So there absolutely is a union difference in terms of wages. I mentioned before, there's a gender wage gap. There's a race wage gap. Unions close that. And so, a worker who has a union makes more money than those who don't. Women and people of color are even more likely to do better than their nonunion counterparts.

And so unions absolutely raise wages, increase benefits, and frankly, give workers more say at a time when they really need it at the workplace. You know, you saw that I think for instance, in some of the unionized grocery stores; those were the first ones to have the plexiglass up, to be making sure that there was safety for their workforce. And what we're seeing across the country is that there's lots more interest in unions. Lots of workers have been striking. Just since the beginning of March, there have been over 150 wildcat strikes. These are strikes that are not necessarily called by the union. They are from the grassroots when people feel that their safety is not being respected.

And so there have been a number of strikes, across the country. And I think there's also just been a renewed interest in general in the idea of organizing and unions.

In this country, it is very clear right now that the way that we do our social safety net is particularly poorly put together to deal with this kind of a massive pandemic, a huge crisis. A worker's health care comes through their employers; up to 43 million people may lose their healthcare in this crisis. In addition, our unemployment is bifurcated. It goes through the States. It doesn't go through the federal level at one system.

And so, we are particularly poorly suited to dealing with this level of a crisis.

**SHUMITA BASU - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** So in the absence of those kinds of social safety nets, like you said, Lane, what are some solutions that we can look to sort of soften the blow of this economic crisis?

**PROF LANE WINDHAM:** I think that in the immediate term, the federal government has to step up. There needs to be more stimulus. We absolutely need that cushion in this country.

And then I think that our leaders need to follow where the people are right now, which is that people are demanding a more robust social safety net. People fully understand at this point why our employer-provided healthcare system is not working. Why people need paid sick leave. Why even we need Medicare health care. I think it's very obvious to people. And I think over the next several years that we may see leaders stepping up and beginning to make some really fundamental changes in policy in this country.

**SHUMITA BASU - HOST, THE TAKEAWAY:** What have we learned from the past regarding the impact of recessions and rising unemployment numbers on elections? Like, how can we expect this to manifest itself at the polls this November?

**AARON ROSS COLEMAN:** I think one of the interesting things is just the way that this is kind of changing the way people are talking about elections and the way the candidates are talking about themselves. It was earlier last year that Bernie Sanders framed his democratic

socialism in terms of what FDR did. Earlier this week, you see Joe Biden in New York magazine, I believe it is, framing his presidential candidacy in the terms of FDR and wants to have an FDR-sized presidency. So like, I think that's one of the ways previous recessions, especially like even depressions is acting, just the kind of ways that politicians themselves are thinking about political economy and what they think it would take to move voters. And also like what they think would actually take to pick us up out of this crisis.

**PROF LANE WINDHAM:** It's interesting that Biden says he hopes to have an FDR kind of administration. You know, Roosevelt was pushed in many ways to implement much of the New Deal by working people who struck; there were major strikes throughout the country in 1934. And much of what Roosevelt implemented had actually been test driven in the states at a local level before it was ever implemented at the federal level.

And so I think that it's important to remember in the election that yes, of course, the power at the top makes a lot of difference, but there's also lots happening at the local level, at the state level, and among working people. And we have to take a broad look during the election season.

## Summary

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** We've just heard clips space, starting with *Frontline*, in two parts, exploring the plight of farm and meat packing workers during the pandemic, *The Takeaway* discussed a survey of domestic workers, *The Uncertain Hour*, in two parts, delved into the history of our deeply insufficient social safety net, *The Ezra Klein* show discussed the need to organize workers, and finally, we just heard *The Takeaway* describing the overhaul our system needs to manage emergencies like the pandemic, not to mention all the rest of the time and the political pressure required to get us there.

Members are going to be hearing a long riff I did. I have a couple of different stories that I ended up telling plus a bunch of bonus clips, so a full packed bonus episode this week. There's been interesting discussions about anti-racism happening behind the scenes. You may have heard lots of talk about racism on the show recently, but my research and discussions outside the show have been going longer and deeper than I ever expected, and so I have lots to say, sort of background behind the scenes information, on that. So that that's happening in the bonus episode.

So to hear that and all of our bonus content sign up to support the show at [bestoftheleft.com/support](https://bestoftheleft.com/support). And now we'll hear from you.

## Moving beyond the myth of the melting pot - Erin from Philadelphia

**CALLER: ERIN FROM PHILLY:** Hi, Jay! It's Erin from Philly. I just wanted to chime in with a little postscript, wrap up on the mythology discussion that I kicked off a couple of weeks ago, and I wanted to thank you and Naomi and Scott for your responses to it. I definitely learned a couple of things about the American myth in general, cultural myths in general, and the outsider perspectives to those myths. Whether it was Naomi's talking about a native people who consciously descended from being part of the myth or whether it was Scott describing

Black people who have always felt like they were kept outside. And those are some things I needed to hear as well. And it kind of made me realize, I think that my question made a supposition that actually has another, I'm sorry, that my question and my whole concept of it, do we need a myth, do we need a unifying myth, and so on itself was undergirded by one of the great American myths—that being the melting pot myth, which itself has a lot of problems. The idea that, culture should just all blend together into this great grey porridge instead of keeping all of its distinctions and unique contributions and that not everybody may want to participate in all of the same cultures, and that's fine too.

Thanks to everyone for pointing out some of my little oversights and for giving me some new things to think about. One of the reasons I love the community around this show. So thanks to everyone and stay awesome.

## Moving beyond the 'empirical' point of view - Chris from Littleton, CO

**CALLER: CHRIS FROM LITTLETON, CO:** Hey Jay!, my name is Chris, I'm from Littleton, Colorado. I just wanted to call about the myths that Erin brought up, I think Erin from Philly. I think the biggest problem when you talk about the American myths, I think the myth is that, at least nowadays, the myth is that we're a meritocracy. If you just work hard, you'll succeed and everyone is equal under the law. If you're guilty, you'll be found guilty and you'll be punished, and if you're innocent you will be found innocent and set free. And that is just not the case. That being said, in episode 1366, I'm looking at these awesome little transcriptions that you've got now.

You said maybe it's not that we need a new story, it's that we need the same story told from multiple perspectives, and that really hit me because I'm going for my masters in history and I'm majoring in 20th century U.S. Social movements and my minor is 20th century U.S. Foreign policy. So basically how the hell did we get here is in a nutshell what I'm trying to do.

And that's kind of what's happening with the study of history right now, and it's causing a lot of friction. There used to be back in the day, I guess back in the day, when you're looking at American history told in the fifties and sixties, it was told from what was called the empirical point of view. That there was this one truth and there was opinions about that truth, but there was always a one truth, and that was written by the victors, as you say— the people on top. And now we're realizing that that's not in fact the case. There may be an event, but there are multiple perspectives of what happened in that event. And that's where things like the *1619 Project* come up. And historians nowadays are trying to move to that different point of view or that different study of history and show, hey, it wasn't this one telling you the event and this is my opinion of it. They need to show, when you look at an event in the founding of America, well, what was the founding of America from the point of view of a White man? What was the founding of America from a Black slave? From all these different perspectives? And they all count, that's the big thing. There's no one telling of history—it's multiple perspectives.

And I guess we're kind of trying to do that, historians trying to do that, trying to change things, but we're encountering a lot of friction because it's breaking down a lot of long-held narratives that people don't want to let go of. Like George Washington and the cherry tree

and all that stupid stuff. And that this country wasn't founded on the backs of slaves it was founded on religious freedom, and there's a story in that too, Puritans and all this. But I just think that, to let go of our myths, it's a matter of looking at our history because there are so many different perspectives on it and that needs to be taken into consideration. The perspectives of the many people who make up this country and who have made up this country since its founding and before its founding, going back to 1492 and Columbus and whatnot.

Love to hear what people think about this. So thanks a lot, Jay!, keep it up. Bye.

## Final comments on the ironic origins of two of America's most cherished cultural pillars

**JAY TOMLINSON - HOST, BEST OF THE LEFT:** Thanks for listening everyone. Thanks to Deon Clark and Erin Clayton for their research work on the show. Note, that's Erin with an E. This sexist society we have probably made you think that it was Aaron with an A, I know that our transcription software is certainly sexist enough to always write it as Aaron with an A, and so we have to make sure to correct that.

Just a little observation for you, but just so you know, Deon is a dude. Not that it matters. Erin is a woman. Not that it matters that much, but not that it doesn't matter either. Anyway, thanks also to the monosyllabic transcriptionist trio, Ben, Dan, and Ken, for their volunteer work, helping put our transcriptions together. Thanks to Amanda Hoffman for all of her work on our social media outlets and activism segments. And thanks to all those who called into the voicemail line. If you'd like to leave a comment or question of your own to be played on the show, you can send us a voice memo by email or simply record a message at (202) 999-3991.

Now, I just want to bounce in a slightly, slightly askew direction from what we've been hearing on the voicemails. I think the conversation has been fantastic. As Erin said, lots of good perspectives and thoughts have been brought in, and it was Chris today who, I mean, he had plenty of good things to say about how we interpret history, but he also mentioned meritocracy. And I just want to take this opportunity, as long as we're talking about American myths, I wanted to zero in on a couple of big ones.

So the first is that meritocracy, as we are coming to understand more and more every day or year at the very least, is a joke. But. Not everyone knows that it was literally a joke.

The word "meritocracy" I want for everyone to know, was coined as a joke. So here's from the article--there're lots, but this one's from Boing Boing, and the article is, "How 'meritocracy' went from a joke to a dogma, and destroyed the lives of everyone it touched." And just the first paragraph is:

"The term 'meritocracy' was coined in Michael Young's satirical 1958 novel, *The Rise of Meritocracy*, where it described a kind of self-delusion in which rich people convince themselves that their wealth was evidence of their moral superiority. It's well-documented that a belief in meritocracy makes you act like an asshole, and also makes you incapable of considering how much of your good fortune is attributable to luck."

And I'm sure that wasn't the kicking off point, but the fact that satire is now dead, it's just clear that it's been dying a slow death for a very long time. Because, can you imagine writing a satirical book about meritocracy with that premise? Because everyone would say like, "But you're just writing the description of actual life and you're criticizing it, I guess, but it wouldn't count as satire. It literally couldn't count as satire because it's too true to life."

If you want to read more, a book that's got a lot of traction on it, is called *The Meritocracy Trap: How America's Foundational Myth Feeds Inequality, Dismantles the Middle Class, and Devours the Elite*. So you may want to check that out.

And then as long as we're talking about things that were coined as jokes, we can't not mention "bootstraps." So the phrase, "bootstraps -- why don't you pull yourself up by your bootstraps?" again was literally coined as a description of something that it's impossible to do.

So this is from a Huffington Post article, "Why the phrase 'pull yourself up by your bootstraps' is nonsense." And this is just about the etymology of the word. "Etymologist Barry Popik and linguist and lexicographer Ben Zimmer have cited an American newspaper snippet from September 30th, 1834 as the earliest published reference to lifting oneself up by one's bootstraps. A month earlier, a man named Nimrod Murphree announced in the Nashville Banner that he had 'discovered perpetual motion.' The Mobile Advertiser picked up this tidbit and published it with a snarky response ridiculing his claim: 'Probably Mr. Murphree has succeeded in handing himself over the Cumberland river or a barn yard fence, by the straps of his boots.'" Now quoting the linguist, "'Bootstraps were a typical feature of boots you could pull on in the act of pulling your boots on, but of course bootstraps wouldn't actually help you pull yourself over anything,' Zimmer told HuffPost. 'If you pulled on them, it would be physically impossible to get yourself over a fence. The original imagery was something very ludicrous, as opposed to what we mean by it today of being a self-made man.'"

So I will point out in the interest of fairness, that this article and logic would tell you that it is a logical fallacy to believe that any original definition of a word is inherently more correct than the current definition, if the definition has evolved over time. So when we say "pull yourself up by your bootstraps," by the original definition, we're telling someone to do something impossible. But the logic doesn't then follow that the way we use it now to say, "take individual initiative to get what you want or to better yourself," it doesn't logically follow that that is impossible. But I will say, that it, I think, really tells you something about America. That two of our most cherished concepts were both coined as parody, mocking the very idea that they're describing.

And just a bonus etymology, 'cause I love etymology: This is from phrases.org.uk. That is my go-to for interesting etymology, for wacky phrases in English. Talking about lifting one's self by one's bootstraps, this site says, "Some early computers use a process called bootstrapping which alludes to this phrase. This involved loading a small amount of code which was then used to progressively load more complex code until the machine was ready for use. This led to the use of the term 'booting' to mean starting up a computer."

Huh? Who knew? I always love learning new etymologies.

Okay. That's it for today. If you'd like to add to this conversation, I would love to hear from you. Keep the comments coming in at (202) 999-3991.

That is going to be it for today. Thanks everyone for listening. Thanks to those who support the show by becoming a member or purchasing gift memberships at [BestoftheLeft.com/](https://BestoftheLeft.com/) support as that is absolutely how the program survives.

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