

Episode 31: Resisting COVID Capitalism with Ursula Price and LaToya Johnson | Transcript

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INTRO: A far cry from its laid back nicknames like “The Big Easy” and “The City that Care Forgot,” New Orleans Black and Brown hourly and low-wage workers have kept the city afloat for decades. Right now, they are fighting for survival and safety amidst the coronavirus and its economic fallout.

This past Spring public officials’ decision to host Mardi Gras festivities as the virus swelled triggered an outbreak that has not let up since. As of August 2020, Louisiana leads the nation in statewide per capita COVID-19 cases, with the highest rates of hospitalizations suffered by Black and Latinx communities.

So, for, nearly 1 in 4 Louisiana workers have filed for unemployment due to the COVID-19 fallout. While Black neighborhoods like Gentilly and the Lower Ninth Ward, among those hit hardest by Hurricane Katrina, grapple with some of the state's worst unemployment and coronavirus infection rates.

In response to this unprecedented crisis, New Orleans workers and worker-led organizations have come together to protect worker safety and economic needs, urgently advocating for full and fair access to emergency relief funds, legal rights, and long-term economic protections.

AISA VILLAROSA: Welcome to Hidden Truths, the podcast where we examine the root causes of economic and racial inequality. I am Aisa Villarosa , and I’m so pleased to be joined by our guests today, Ursula Price and LaToya Johnson. Ursula and Toya are both with the New Orleans Workers’ Center for Racial Justice — which serves as a vehicle for Black and immigrant workers to organize for racial and economic justice in Southern Louisiana and beyond. Ursula, Toya, thanks so much for joining me today.

URSULA PRICE: Well, thank you so much for having us, it's very exciting.

LATOYA JOHNSON: Yes, thank you, Aisa, it's so exciting to be here.

AISA VILLAROSA: So, let's dive in. We've been collaborating together for the last several months, and so much has happened since we first met in March.

When COVID-19 hit, it was pretty clear that—even early on—that there was, and still is, a disproportionate toll on the New Orleans Black and Brown community. Some folks are drawing parallels to Hurricane Katrina, including what looks to be a repeat of government indifference and inaction in the face of Black pain, displacement, loss... we don't want this to happen again.

From your vantage point, being deep in this work for so long, how is this point in time, COVID-19, and in addition to that, the local and nationwide uprising to stop police killings of Black people, how is this similar or different than Katrina?

LATOYA JOHNSON: Hi, this is Toya. To begin with, both Hurricane Katrina and the COVID-19 pandemic are natural events that are worsened by poor leadership.

In both instances, warnings were taken lightly, little was done to prepare marginalized communities for the coming difficulties or even to assist them during the thick of those difficulties, and responses to both were slow, lax, and just fell short overall. The outcomes of both were Black people being trapped and isolated by their poverty and disproportionately affected by a crisis.

Also, there are similarities in capitalism driving the discussion of recovery instead of humanity or justice. Government is more influenced by the business industry than the needs of the people, yet economic recovery in New Orleans was, and still is, dependent upon marginalized, low-income workers, who are mostly Black and Brown people that take on most of the risk, right?

However, the differences between Hurricane Katrina and the COVID-19 pandemic I'd say, would be our familiarity with the situations and our understanding of how to navigate through them. Post-Katrina, we were more engaged with social issues than economic issues. This time around, we fully expect the business community to be the driver of economic recovery in New Orleans, so now we fight to be at the same tables to have decision making power.



The current narrative around workers shows a growing respect for the importance of marginalized people, giving us leverage and opportunity to make economic investment match that fact. After Katrina we didn't have that advantage. So, now we have organizations like the Worker Center that organizes Black and Brown communities intersecting racial, social, and economic justice. And over the past 15 years since Hurricane Katrina, we've been able to build an infrastructure and capacity that gives the opportunity to partner with organizations like Insight, right, which are able to help us conduct the research necessary to scale the overall needs of communities and to build a case for developing policies that will build these communities economically.

URSULA PRICE: To just echo everything Toya said, our organization was founded just after Hurricane Katrina, and disaster capitalism was the driving force of why formed ourselves. We saw that capitalism was prepared to take advantage of our suffering, to take control of a number of systems.

And we're looking for COVID capitalism in this moment as well. We're already seeing that capitalism is a primary concern of everyone in recovering from this pandemic. And we anticipate that capitalism is going to try to advance its control over systems, and maybe even dismantle some of the progressive achievements we've accomplished over the past 15 years.

So, we see a bunch of parallels with Katrina. The difference, to me, is that we know what we're looking at now. We are much more experienced, we have, as a community, way more infrastructure and energy for influencing the decisions that affect our lives.

AISA VILLAROSA: When the recession hit, on one hand, folks would say about New Orleans and Louisiana, "Oh, it wasn't as impacted by the recession." But, of course, as both of you pointed out, it was because Katrina had been so devastating, especially to the Black community. And Toya, this issue of who recovers, right, is not equally or equitably distributed. So, I really appreciate you calling out both the similarities and the differences of what's going on.

And just to follow-up—because you partner with workers, you hear their struggle, you hear what's going on, on the ground—what are workers saying that they need most right now?

LATOYA JOHNSON: Foremost, workers are focused on their material needs, right, such as income, food, housing, medical care, cellular service, technology, and support for educating their children.

We also see workers fighting for the power to influence decisions impacting their lives, right? So, our program Stand with Dignity, we're supporting sanitation workers in demanding not just the wages and the PPE that they're entitled to, but also dignity, right, respect for the risk that they take every day, and compensation that acknowledges that they are performing a necessity.

URSULA PRICE: That's so dead-on, Toya. It's a really important moment for our democracy, right? I think people are starting to see that we can't entrust our lives and well-being to governmental actors unless we're sitting at the table with them, helping them make decisions.

AISA VILLAROSA: And it's wonderful to have you all fighting for both these short-term urgent needs—like you said, Toya, the material needs at this time—and also seeing that long-term advocacy strategy.

Ursula, I want to pick back up on something you said earlier, you talked about the buildup of progressive winds after Katrina, and how those progressive winds could be threatened with, be it this capitalistic culture that has on one hand, you know, seemingly built up New Orleans, but on the other hand, this city and so much of its history is also built on its exploitation of Black and Brown labor, of culture. Can you talk more about maybe one or two of the progressive winds that could be backslid at this time?

URSULA PRICE: The one nearest and dearest to my heart because I was part of the organizing for it, is that we had a long, hard fight to change policing in New Orleans.

AISA VILLAROSA: Mm, yeah.



URSULA PRICE: To get police oversight, but also to change the culture of policing, to change every day interactions happen between police and community. To reduce the amount of interaction that certain communities that were extremely targeted were having to have.

And since COVID, we have seen the city increase juvenile curfews, which people always think, “Aw, what's the big deal, kids should be at home.” But they forget that young people are also essential workers.

AISA VILLAROSA: Mm-hmm.

URSULA PRICE: And they also forget that police contact is, in and of itself, high risk for a young person of color. And so, these juvenile curfews have just resulted in increased police contact between young people and police, which often results in violence and arrests, and even fines and municipal charges against their parents with no public safety impact. There is no measurable public safety impact from curfews.

Our mayor decided to send police to do random stops of individuals, ostensibly to educate them about how to be safe around COVID. These stops are occurring when officers weren't properly equipped with PPE. They were random and not really legally sound, because there was no probable cause or reasonable suspicion. And luckily, we were able to push back and end that program, but just in the space of the first six weeks of COVID, folks were ready to sacrifice our liberty and our progressive winds out of fear.

AISA VILLAROSA: Wow.

URSULA PRICE: And I believe that we are going to see more of that happening in housing reform, in criminal justice reform, and the work that we have done to kind of reverse some of that extraordinary discipline that is happening in our 100% charter school system—

AISA VILLAROSA: Hmm, yeah.



URSULA PRICE: There's a lot that we have fought and won that we have to remain vigilant to hold in a moment like this. And I am personally a student of history, and I've very much appreciated NPR's work reflecting on the 1918 influenza outbreak—

AISA VILLAROSA: Mm, yes.

URSULA PRICE: I think there's some patterns.

AISA VILLAROSA: Yes. Yes.

URSULA PRICE: It has been very informative, even my 10 year old has been listening intently. There's some patterns that we can learn from and anticipate.

AISA VILLAROSA: For sure.

URSULA PRICE: And one of the predictable patterns of crisis is that capitalism responds with increased control, increased policing, and increased influence of their power. So, we at the Worker Center are very much trying to be prepared for what is going to be coming, but we've already seen signs.

AISA VILLAROSA: Along those lines with the NPR story and these parallels to the flu crisis, there was actually a yellow fever plague that hit New Orleans in 1853 and wiped out about 10% of the city's population. And seeing some of the anti-immigrant sentiment that folks were pushing at that time, the dominant fear mongering-narrative was, well this plague has been caused by immigrants, right?

And I think we're seeing very much the same repetition of a system that has been here this whole time. And then—

URSULA PRICE: And you know the funniest part that I learned from your podcast is they think—they called it the Spanish flu, but it probably originated in like the Midwest of America.

AISA VILLAROSA: —Right, right.

URSULA PRICE: Just like the so-called "Chinese virus."

AISA VILLAROSA: Yeah.

URSULA PRICE: It's just irony, not just irony, right, it's the reality behind what we see.

AISA VILLAROSA: We must be more vigilant than ever about these new tools to police whether it's surveillance technology, facial recognition—what could be interpreted as safety really isn't safety for community at all.

LATOYA JOHNSON: A lot of the time when history repeats itself is because little is done to educate people about the history. I think a lot of what's going on with the response to the COVID-19 pandemic is that people either don't remember or haven't learned anything from Katrina.

AISA VILLAROSA: Absolutely. And thinking of a history like New Orleans where it's wrapped up in a business—the hospitality industry—that literally rose from the slave economy, looking at unemployment data, and of all of New Orleans major industries we found that hospitality was the hardest hit by COVID-19. Almost a 48% decline in industry jobs in May 2020, which I believe was double the next closest industry decline.

So, thinking about this a bit more how the city's economy has been built around tourism, and more specifically on the backs of Black and Brown workers who have kept the industry afloat through Katrina. Now, we're talking to folks who are at the hotels and casinos, some

of them are reopening, some of them are reporting some really unsafe conditions. So, how does this reality need to shift if we are to really overcome this pandemic? What policies do we need to really change the game?

URSULA PRICE: Yes, our hospitality workers are very much on my mind right now because they are hit very hard. And unlike Katrina where they were able to go somewhere else and continue to work, there's no options now.

I think to understand the plight of hospitality workers and workers in general in New Orleans, you have to understand that our economy was plantation based and still sort of functions that way. By that I mean, like there's a very large barely compensated workforce that's controlled by a very small number of people who are profiting. And whether it's tourism or construction, that same fundamental imbalance of power exists. And it's exacerbated in Louisiana, because the number of people who are profiting aren't necessarily even local people.

AISA VILLAROSA: Absolutely.

URSULA PRICE: And it's a lot, a lot of national and multinational corporations controlling our fates, and not at all invested in our community or our economic growth, right?

The good news is that our hospitality community is increasingly better and better organized. And so, they have already named a platform of structural changes that need to happen in New Orleans to save our hospitality industry.

They've already named that the racist practice of tipping needs to be ended and that we need to provide a minimum wage for hospitality workers that matches the minimum wage for all other workers. Tipping was an outcropping of slavery. It was a practice where in Black workers who were not given a wage had to shuck and jive for tips, and that's where it comes from and we see no reason to continue it.

They've also called for an end to tax breaks to major corporations for so-called economic development without public discussion and decision making. For instance, the Hard Rock Hotel that everyone heard was being poorly built here in New Orleans, and then collapsed and killed a number of workers.

AISA VILLAROSA: Yeah. Yeah.

URSULA PRICE: They got a huge amount of tax breaks from our city valued at millions of dollars that could have been used for our streets, or schools, or public safety. And that was not done with our consent.

They've also called for decriminalization of informal economy workers, particularly street musicians, and an end to these efforts to zone people into these narrow districts in which they have to pay high licensing prices to do what they do. Not only do we value our young people tap dancing and that spontaneous music in the streets, these folks are not just here for the tourists, they are supported by the locals. And they need to be able to perform where local people can find them not just where the tourists can find them. And local people can't necessarily pay a \$25 cover charge on Bourbon Street, they want to go to their local bar room and also be able to, you know, catch the spirit.

Music is part of people's spirituality here, it's a part of how we, our whole, it's not just about entertainment for us, it's also been a big bite—I don't know if that's familiar to everyone, right, but we go to Second Lines to get right with God not just to have a good time, right?

AISA VILLAROSA: You're speaking so much truth right now, I just, I could listen to you all day, Ursula. Yes. Yes. Yes.

URSULA PRICE: And of course, Airbnb. We've got a huge number of out of town Airbnb owners, and meanwhile, a shortage of affordable housing. So, where are our cultural workers meant to live? Many of them are sent to the outstretches of town in New Orleans East where you cannot get into the city without crossing major bodies of water, and they can't even reach their jobs in less than an hour and a half because there's nowhere that they can afford to live.

Those are just a few things that the cultural community has named that are like concrete policy changes that can be implemented right now that can change the game for them. And

the biggest call is the one that I have to renew is that the fundamental change we need to make is that those folks need to be part of the decision making.

AISA VILLAROSA: Yes.

URSULA PRICE: All the people who are talking about zoning and economic development are not even consulting the workers. And we know our workers should be part of economic development bodies and worker safety councils. We know that our community should have a democratic say in economic development packages, especially tax breaks, when they're giving our resources away to corporations.

And we know that the informal economy is a major part of our economy. The informal economy sustains so many people and it needs to not only be recognized, but be part of the workforce and economic development programs that we're creating. You need to decriminalize the informal economy, make licensing affordable, and recognize how much the people who make music, make food, cut grass, care for children and elders, are important to our survival and not just people on the margins.

That structural change will fundamentally change the kind of policy that we set. Ultimately, we need democracy, that's our only real solution.

AISA VILLAROSA: Yes! So much, so much there Ursula! We could end the podcast now, but just to go back to a couple things.

I mean yes, Airbnbs, after Katrina, right, we did see the rise of these short-term rental issues where, absolutely we have a housing crisis. Most of the profits go to out of community, out of state corporate interests.

And, Toya, I want to bring up work that you've been championing. And for those listening, the reason that Insight partnered with the Workers Center is this survey that is happening right now. We talk about how to make visible the struggles of so many workers who are at the core of the city. And data, for better or for worse, is one way to do it, right?

We have the census going on right now, we know that there are issues in reaching our Black and Brown communities and getting folks to take the census especially with federal

pushback and the administration. Can you talk a little bit about what brought about the survey and how folks can get involved, and why it's important?

LATOYA JOHNSON: Like I said before, if we don't know our history, then we won't learn from it. Also, if we don't know the numbers—if we don't present the numbers and actually provide the community, and officials, and the nation as a whole, provide them with numbers so they can have hard evidence. They can actually see how communities are being affected, then it won't be such a sideline thought for them.

URSULA PRICE: You know, Toya its, listening to you—I don't know if you remember Johnetta Pressley. Johnetta was an important person in our community that worked at the Vera Institute, and she died a few years ago. I don't think her family would mind me saying that she died from suicide. And one of the things she said, she actually posted on Facebook within hours of her death, "Why do we have to conduct studies to prove what we already know?"

Right, it—I've come to accept the fact that we have to do surveys and things like this to make the reality that everyone is experiencing real to policy makers and decision makers, right? It wasn't until we did a survey and showed how many people had a negative experience with NOPD, that folks would listen to the problem that folks had been naming for decades.

But the beauty of that process is that we get to be in conversation with a whole new group of people. Through the process of proving what we already know, we get to build community. That's the most valuable piece of the work we are doing to collect this data.

LATOYA JOHNSON: When the pandemic first hit in March, we knew what was going to happen, right? We know what these numbers are and why that is. And I think providing that hard data for some, it makes it a little harder to ignore.

It pushes folks to actually want to have that conversation. Also, a little bit harder to deny, because some folks are in denial initially that the pandemic affected folks at a disproportionate rate, right? There were, like, everybody was going around saying, "This pandemic is not racist, it affects everybody." Which it does, but at which rate, right?

So, providing that data would make people less likely to ignore it, and more like to actually want to address those issues.

AISA VILLAROSA: Right on. It's frustrating that we are at a point where it's about “prove your humanity,” right? Quantify what, as y'all have said, what we know to be true in our bones.

Another great change point for the survey is, we can stand up to these really toxic narratives that have existed for centuries. One being this personal responsibility narrative, right? That oh, something is our fault because of the inequities that exist. Or the scarcity mindset convincing folks that, you know, \$250 in hazard pay is anywhere close to enough. Which, of course, no one thinks that, and yet the system is set up such that we are meant to believe, oh, this is it.

In turning to the topic of solidarity, especially with George Floyd's murder, with the racial uprisings that have really been a global event we're seeing more Black and Brown solidarity for this generation. In the year since Katrina, thinking about Louisiana's Latinx community, it's a community that's really grown. I believe right now Latinx New Orleanians make up about 7% of the city's workforce, and they are here to stay, but they are also facing many of these same issues brought on by structural racism, right?

The wage theft—Ursula you mentioned the Hard Rock Casino—there's been some issues with, with their treatment of workers. So, let's talk about the significance of this moment and of cross racial solidarity. How are you seeing allyship from the Latinx community, from other communities of color, showing up on your work?

LATOYA JOHNSON: I think the struggles of Black and Brown communities are different but they're similar, right? I think we all have the same goal to dismantle systemic racism and bring about change that will create an equitable and inclusive community. So, we show solidarity by taking care of each other.

URSULA PRICE: Our Latinx community, first of all, is a very old community. We certainly saw a lot—an increase in immigration after Hurricane Katrina, but the flow of Honduran



people in and out of New Orleans is 200 years old, right? And their status in this community hasn't really changed in all that time.

You know, this organization was founded in a moment where Black and Brown people were being pitted against each other intentionally as a way to lower the floor for workers' rights, right? And through our ability to see through that ruse, the Worker Center came to being. And overtime we've begun to learn together that as a unified force, we are strong enough to set a new economic agenda for our city and state.

Literally, together Black and Latinx people are a little more than half of Louisiana. And we have the opportunity to not just change the outcomes of elections, but to actually shape the policy. And this is an especially invigorating moment, because this survey, amongst other things, is going to allow us to demonstrate how much this economy relies on Black and Brown workers. That we're not the so-called "leeches" that people in Baton Rouge call us, but we're actually the foundation of the economy. And we also have the experience to name all the ways that our economy is not functioning well.

The Hard Rock was really illuminating for me because it became very clear over time that the lowest paid laborer on the worksite knew more about the structural flaws of that building—

AISA VILLAROSA: Yes.

URSULA PRICE: —than the general contractor.

AISA VILLAROSA: Yeah.

URSULA PRICE: Right? You want solutions, you need to talk to the people who are actually in it and who have some skin in the game, right? And there's no debate that Black and Latinx folks both have considerable skin in this game.

And I want to name how even in this adversity, this has been a great opportunity to talk about how America marginalizes its own people and how assumptions we have about one another aren't correct. You know, for instance, some of our Latinx folks assumed that every

person with American citizenship was eligible for economic stimulus. And so, we had an opportunity to talk about how many people are on the margins of our economy. How many people do have their "papers," but aren't eligible for a large portion of our social safety net? And, you know, Black workers had some assumptions that everyone always wants to hire Latinx workers, and if—as jobs are being lost the first being to work are going to be Latinx. And so, we've been able to have conversations about the fear and discrimination that Latinx workers face, especially when they dare to try to organize or protect their own rights.

So, it's kind of like the moment Donald Trump got elected when we had a surge in new membership. This crisis is an opportunity for us to build strength, right? And I am really humbled at the chance to lead and work with this extraordinary group of people.

I mean, we have folks amongst us who not just crossed the desert with their baby on their back, but survived war and deep violence, and a messed up asylum system. And they come to this country and face even more discrimination. We also have the opportunity to work with people who survived false incarceration in the horrendous conditions of Angola State Prison. And who had fought alongside the Black Panthers in the Desire Projects in the 70s.

And these extraordinary people are so much more when they are together, literally in a room together the energy is so powerful. And there's very little opportunity to do this sort of thing in the Deep South.

AISA VILLAROSA: Yes.

URSULA PRICE: The fact that we've been blessed with this opportunity is something that I intend to fully safeguard and nurture, and also leverage, because these folks deserve to make decisions for themselves, and they have a lot to offer this community.

AISA VILLAROSA: Oh! Ursula, thank you for closing us out with a history lesson that we all need. And you mentioned this is an invigorating moment, and I am invigorated by your work, Toya and Ursula. This work doesn't stop, and COVID has just held up a magnifying glass to what we know we have to do, right?



So, as we close out I just want to say, thank you, thank you, thank you, Ursula and Toya for joining us today.

LATOYA JOHNSON: Thank you Aisa for having us.

URSULA PRICE: Oh, thank you, it was so much fun.

AISA VILLAROSA: And thank you all for tuning into this episode of Hidden Truths, the podcast of the Insight Center for Community Economic Development.

To learn more about Ursula and Latoya's work with the New Orleans Center for Racial Justice, visit nowcrj.org.

For information about the Insight Center visit insightcced.org. And if you like what you hear today, leave a review for Hidden Truths on [Apple Podcasts](#), [Stitcher](#), [Spotify](#), or wherever you're listening. Thank you everyone.

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