



## The Guarantee: Inside the Fight for America's Next Economy — Transcript

Hosted by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program, May 2024

### Description

The myth that hard work pays off in the US, and always leads to a better and more economically prosperous life, has come unraveled in recent years. Many jobs simply do not pay enough for workers to meet their basic needs, much less do things such as save for retirement, fund their kids' education, or allow for leisure.

In her first book, "[The Guarantee: Inside the Fight for America's Next Economy](#)," Natalie Foster asks us to imagine a new economic framework that casts aside the failures of the trickle-down approach to embrace one that builds economic security and well-being from the bottom up. Foster — co-founder of the Economic Security Project, a leading voice for guaranteed income, and senior fellow at the Aspen Institute's Future of Work Initiative — explores a bold vision in which housing, health care, higher education, dignified work, family care, and an opportunity to build generational wealth are guaranteed for all by our government. Through real-life experiences, collaborations with prominent activists and thinkers, compelling narratives, and analysis, Foster forces us to dream big and ask tough questions about why we provide so many government-backed guarantees and supports to the private sector, but very little to the people.

In this book talk — hosted May 15, 2024, by the Aspen Institute [Economic Opportunities Program](#) — Foster discusses what a New Deal could look like for the 21st Century. [Dr. Manuel Pastor](#), distinguished professor of sociology and American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California, provides opening remarks. [Maureen Conway](#), vice president at the Aspen Institute and executive director of the Economic Opportunities Program, moderates the discussion.

For more information about this event — including video, audio, transcript, speaker bios, and additional resources — visit our website:

<https://www.aspeninstitute.org/events/the-guarantee-inside-the-fight-for-americas-next-economy/>

## Speakers

### **Dr. Manuel Pastor (Opening Remarks)**

Distinguished Professor of Sociology and American Studies & Ethnicity, University of Southern California

Dr. Manuel Pastor is a distinguished professor of sociology and American studies and ethnicity at the University of Southern California (USC). He currently directs the Equity Research Institute at USC. Pastor holds a doctorate in economics from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and is the inaugural holder of the Turpanjian Chair in Civil Society and Social Change at USC.

Pastor's research has generally focused on issues of the economic, environmental, and social conditions facing low-income urban communities and the social movements seeking to change those realities.

### **Natalie Foster**

President and Co-Founder, Economic Security Project; Senior Fellow, Future of Work Initiative, The Aspen Institute

Natalie Foster is a leading architect of the movement to build an inclusive and resilient economy that works for all. President and co-founder of Economic Security Project and Aspen Institute Fellow, her work and writing has appeared in The New York Times, USA Today, TIME, Business Insider, CNN, and The Guardian. Natalie speaks regularly on economic security, the future of work, and the new political economy. An unstoppable builder,

Natalie previously founded the sharing economy community Peers, co-founded Rebuild the Dream with Van Jones, and served as digital director for President Obama's Organizing for America, a leading partner in winning transformative health care reform. A daughter of a preacher from Kansas, Natalie draws on the values of community, dignity, and optimism to build a better America. She lives in Oakland, California, with her husband and two kids. "The Guarantee" is her first book.

### **Maureen Conway (Moderator)**

Vice President, The Aspen Institute; Executive Director, Economic Opportunities Program

Maureen Conway serves as executive director of the Institute's [Economic Opportunities Program](#) (EOP). EOP works to expand individuals' opportunities to connect to quality work, start businesses, and build economic stability that provides the freedom to pursue opportunity. Maureen founded EOP's [Workforce Strategies Initiative](#) and has headed up workforce research at the Aspen Institute since 1999.

Maureen also curates a public discussion series at the Aspen Institute, [Opportunity in America](#), which brings together voices from business, labor, policy, human services, media, academia, and others to discuss the challenges experienced by many in today's labor markets and new

ideas for addressing these challenges. In addition, Maureen oversees EOP's leadership development programs, which connect innovators, both within communities and from across the country, to peers working to help low- and moderate-income Americans access opportunity.

## Transcript

### Maureen Conway (00:00:09)

Good afternoon, and welcome. I'm Maureen Conway, a vice president at the Aspen Institute and executive director of the Aspen Institute's Economic Opportunities Program. And it is my pleasure to welcome you to today's conversation, "The Guarantee: Inside the Fight for America's Next Economy," a book talk with Natalie Foster. This conversation is part of the Economic Opportunities Program's ongoing Opportunity in America discussion series, in which we explore the changing state of economic opportunity in the United States, what it means for workers, businesses, and communities and ideas for change that promote shared prosperity and race and gender equity. I am super excited that today we not only have Natalie here to talk with us about her inspirational new book, but we also have the brilliant Dr. Manuel Pastor who will provide some brief opening remarks for our discussion and then will join the latter half of the discussion with Natalie. And as always, we'll have time for your questions, so please keep them coming.

And before we dive into all of that, I just have to do a quick review of our technology. All attendees are muted. We welcome your questions. Please use the Q&A tab on the right side of your screen to submit questions. We also encourage, we know we have a terrific audience, lots of folks with lots of expertise in the audience, so we really encourage you to share your perspective. If you have ideas, examples, resources, experiences that you want to share, please do so. Share those in the chat. We always appreciate your feedback at the end of the session. Please click the survey tab on the left side of your screen and share your thoughts with us. We also encourage you to post on social media, our hashtag is TalkOpportunity. If you have any technical issues, please message us in the chat or email us at [eop.program@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eop.program@aspeninstitute.org). That's [eop.program@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eop.program@aspeninstitute.org).

This event is being recorded and we will post it to our website and share it via email after this event. Closed captions are available for this discussion. Click the CC button in the bottom right corner of the video. For materials related to today's discussion, including a link to purchase Natalie's book and a list of upcoming events, click the materials on the left side of your screen. Okay, so now we get to dive in. And it is my great pleasure to introduce Dr. Manuel Pastor. Dr. Pastor is a distinguished professor of Sociology and American Studies and Ethnicity at the University of Southern California. He currently directs the Equity Research Institute at USC. Pastor holds a doctorate in economics from the University of Massachusetts Amherst and is the inaugural holder, and alas, I didn't ask about pronunciation so I'll do my best, of the Turpanjian Chair in Civil Society and Social Change at USC.

Dr. Pastor's research has focused on issues of the economic, environmental, and social conditions facing low-income, urban communities, and the social movements seeking to

change those realities. He's the author of numerous books, many of which I recommend, and including most recently, *Solidarity Economics: Why Mutuality and Movements Matter*, co-authored with Chris Benner. Dr. Manuel, we're so happy you're here with us today and let me turn the mic over to you.

**Dr. Manuel Pastor (00:03:44)**

Great. I'm glad to be with everyone and glad that apparently the mic is now working. Adam, you can shoot some panicky moves in my direction if it's not, but assuming it is. So great to be with you, I can't tell you how excited I am about this book, and partly because of what this book is bringing to us analytically by talking about the guarantee, talking about the importance of thinking about security as well as equity, but also because this book is a remarkable personal journey. We really started with Natalie as a child living through her own challenges and sometimes deprivations, being able to see the challenges that face others, finding her way to really her soulful mission of beginning to understand what it is we need to do to heal as a society from the racism and inequality that has plagued us for centuries and plagues us today.

And how she moved from working in early digital efforts to get out the vote, to working on the Obama campaign to what it is that she's doing today and along the way making so many friends who are my dear friends as well. So this is a remarkable journey and one of the reasons why I think that's important is because getting to something that at times seems maybe new, the idea that our society would function better with guarantees rather than with the insecurity of the market, that the whole mythos of free to choose is really just free to lose. And that our society performs suboptimally when we are terrorizing people with the level of insecurity that exist in an economy that doesn't have guaranteed income, that doesn't have guaranteed jobs, that saddles people with too much college debt, that saddles people with too much medical debt, that that's no way to run a society.

Beginning to understand that as a different framework means that we as readers need to take a journey, and Natalie takes us through her journey itself. So I was asked to set a little bit of context. And when I think about the moment we're in, I think about the fact that we really face three interconnected crises. One is the crisis of multiracial democracy. We haven't had it for that long. Really, it just got secured in the '60s and we've got a tenuous grip on it and people are now trying to take it away by stripping away the right to vote of so many people just as the nation is becoming majority people of color. We've got a crisis of economic inequality where the 1% has run away from the rest of us in a fashion that is so dramatic we haven't seen it since the Gilded Age. And of course, we've got a climate crisis in which we're really cooking the planet and erasing our future.

Now, the thing that connects all three of those crises is disconnection. The disconnection that our society feels as we're becoming a place where every community is a minority community. The disconnection that's profoundly there when you see someone who's houseless on the street and don't think they're but for the grace of God go I, but rather think, well, that's really just what the market delivered in terms of that person's own performance. And of course the crisis of disconnection from Mother Earth and from future generations when we allow our planet to be in

the situation that it's in. And the way to address all of those crises is to create a new politics of connection. And for that, we need a new economics of connection.

Now, I am an economist by training. I got my PhD in Economics, but I walked away from the field because it was so hard to be in a field that denied that racism could persist. It was so hard to be in a field that valued efficiency above equity. It was so hard to be in a field that ignored the common sense that if we treat each other better, we'll actually get a more productive and prosperous society. So I walked away, but in recent years I've begun to walk back to economics, including with the book that was mentioned, *Solidarity Economics*. Why have I walked back and how does this book play a role? I walked back because our society began to realize and others began to realize that economics is too important to be left to economists.

And it needs to be filled with sociologists, with political scientists, with activists, and with people like Natalie Foster who just bring common sense to understanding that designing a society in which insecurity is the norm is designing a society that's bound to fail. The second reason I walked back is because there's a new generation of economists who have begun to be really interested in issues of inequality and also begun to realize that an economics of insecurity and scarcity breeds a politics of hoarding and polarization, and that that politics of hoarding and polarization, of disconnection dooms us all. So I have a lot of faith in this new generation of economists who's coming forward. The third reason why I've come back is because there's a new attention to empirics in our field of economics, and that is a beauty of this book.

Economists have generally taught that raising the minimum wage costs employment without almost any evidence at all. And we've also taught that if you guarantee people that they will not fall to the floor, that they will not have the incentives to work. And what this book shows is that when you offer a guarantee, when you tell people there's a fallback position, that their debt will not sink them, that they will be not be left with insufficient wages, that they begin to become more entrepreneurial, they invest in themselves and their families, and in fact, we wind up guaranteeing prosperity. And that's the other myth that's been taught in economics, that too much equity is actually going to shipwreck prosperity rather than investing in equity, reducing this level of over incarceration, eliminating the insecurity that people who are undocumented feel in a broken immigration system.

That beginning to invest in black and brown youth in schools that have been left to be under invested in, that that's not going to shipwreck our prosperity. That's going to deliver prosperity. So Natalie's book documents her own journey to these ideas. She talks about how the field has made that journey and she talks about the friends, Darrick Hamilton, Solana Rice, Michael Tubbs, Dorian Warren, Ai-jen Poo who have walked with her on that journey. And most of all, she talks about the fact that we need to come back to our soul, to come back to that fundamental connection. That if we want to have a strategy about what to do, we first need to heal ourselves and heal this rift that's existed. It's a remarkable book. It's a remarkable journey. I look forward to talking a little bit more about it.

**Maureen Conway (00:12:03)**

Fantastic. Thank you so much, Manuel. That was perfect. It is a remarkable book and Natalie is a remarkable person. So I am so delighted now that I get to formally introduce Natalie. Natalie

Foster is co-founder of the Economic Security Project, which advocates for ideas that build economic power for all Americans. She served as digital director for President Obama's Organizing for America and the Democratic National Committee. She built the first digital department at the Sierra Club and served as the deputy organizing director for moveon.org. Natalie, I think we first met in 2014, I think you were at Peers and we were talking about gig economy stuff and even then, you're looking at that and you're going, okay, portable benefits, let's think about how do we bring stability and security to people in their working lives and their economic lives and their lives?

So I think you've just been thinking about these issues for so long. You're such a powerful thinker and doer, and I'm just so grateful that you're here. We are grateful all at the Aspen Institute that you are also a senior fellow with the Future of Work Initiative here. So thank you so much for writing the book and thank you for joining us to talk about it today. And just to jump right in, as I mentioned, you've been doing organizing and advocacy for a while and even Manuel talked about this, this book is your story of your life. And so I'm wondering just to start, if you could talk a little bit about the things that shaped your worldview and drove you to focus on these issues, essentially this goal of economic freedom and self-determination for all. What drives you for that?

**Natalie Foster (00:13:59)**

I will answer that absolutely. But first I just want to say thank you Maureen and Matt and the team at Aspen Institute, the Economic Opportunities Program for hosting this. It's a real honor to be here. And Dr. Pastor, I really just was jotting down all of your one-liners in that opening remarks session. The freedom to choose is the freedom to lose. It just makes me think so much of the corporate concentration that we're living in and your books, the State of Resistance and Solidarity Economics have been really influential to me. So it's just an honor to be here. Thank you. And Maureen, your question is about what brought me here and I grew up the daughter of a preacher. I found organizing in college. And a preacher's daughter takes pretty quickly to organizing because it's all about bringing people together for shared purpose and creating a community of people who want to see the world differently.

And I got the opportunity to hear Dr. Cornel West on campus when I was in college, and he would say that justice is what love looks like in public. And that helped me understand that part of what I want my mission to be is to create the justice that we believe is possible in this country. So I would start organizing and I would organize in a variety of ways. I'd use technology to bring people together. I'd think about organizing, as you point out, in new spaces then called the Sharing Economy. And have over the past decade thought about how you organize around ideas and organize to build economic power for all Americans regardless of race, religion, or zip code. And I've been heads down building the guaranteed income work, which we can talk about.

And I was really reflecting on Dr. Pastor's comments about economists because it would be an economist, Darrick Hamilton who I would be sitting with in a room full of other economists who do exactly what Dr. Pastor was saying, and it focused on the numbers and the data. And it would be Dr. Hamilton who would say, "What is the purpose of the economy? What is the

purpose of the economy?" It was like crickets in the room. He'd say, "I think it is for human flourishing, that we could create an economy that would allow for and support human flourishing." And as we stand now on this precipice of the age of AI, of the many crises that Dr. Pastor laid out, that couldn't be more important than ever to build an economy that supports human flourishing as well as stability for the American worker.

**Maureen Conway (00:17:09)**

I love that. That is fantastic. I love that purpose focus. And because I feel like in those spaces, what Darrick's doing, what you are doing is really challenging what you get so often in those conversations, it's no, we can't. And you're saying, yes we can. Yes we can. But anyway, we will get to that in a moment. I really did want to ask you, so I asked you what drives you personally, but also with your organizer, strategizer as you always are doing, why this book? Why now? So why was it important to get it all into a book and why is now the right time?

**Natalie Foster (00:17:57)**

Well, I think now is the right time because it has become more clear than ever that the last 50 years of economic policymaking haven't worked for most people. We live in the aftermath of that. We know that 25% of Americans have nothing saved for retirement. We know that four out of 10 of us can't pull together \$400 in an emergency if we needed to. Americans are overworked, stressed out, and our democracy is on the brink. All of that is exacerbated along racial lines as communities of color disproportionately bear the brunt of this economy that is not working for most people. So I think now is the time because there is widespread consensus. And that wasn't true for most of my life. There was a different consensus.

The consensus for my lifetime was that actually we should have total faith in the market, zero faith in government, and people should pull themselves up by their bootstraps. That was the economic orthodoxy of the time. And it was assumed to be like the weather, something that we can't change, so we just have to put up a bigger umbrella. But that has changed over the last few years. I think that really has changed since the 2008 financial crisis when we saw 10 million homes lost and we saw Black and Latino families lose half of their collective wealth overnight. And we saw the government support the banks but not the everyday people. And that really has precipitated something different.

I would also say it's not only that we can do this, but that it's already starting to happen. Part of what I've been very inspired by is the proof of concept of a guarantee economy that I see being built across the country, often piloted in cities and states, but actually now happening at the federal level where we're guaranteeing things. I'm talking about housing, healthcare, homes, the basics that we need to live a life of dignity and freedom and self-determination, as you said, Maureen.

**Maureen Conway (00:20:17)**

That's beautiful. So you are an expert in guaranteed income and we're talking about guaranteed income. You and I have talked about this over the years and you've really very much influenced how I think about guaranteed income and what it can do and what it can mean for people. So I'm wondering if your thoughts, how you think about guaranteed income and what it can do and what it can mean for people has changed over time and if you could just talk about that for a little bit.

**Natalie Foster (00:20:53)**

I think one of the biggest changes is that it is real. It is possible and it is right here. So let me tell you a quick story over the last eight to nine years. There was a student at Stanford University sitting in the library reading Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s last book. He would take notes in the margins and that student was Michael Tubbs. He would take that dog-eared book of his to Stockton where he would become the youngest mayor in American history. And he would take an idea that Dr. King talked about in his final book, a guaranteed minimum income, and he would demonstrate what it would look like if the United States took this guarantee seriously and he would give \$500 a month to 125 families with no strings attached. My team and I at the Economic Security Project were really honored to work with him on that.

Around the same time in Jackson Mississippi, you have Dr. Aisha Nyandoro building the Magnolia Mother's Trust, which gave \$1,000 a month to black women in Jackson to build lives of economic resilience. And so these pilots started to get noticed and the media came into Stockton and Jackson and Aisha and Michael started getting texts saying, "Hey, I want that in my city." And they open-sourced their playbook, they invited others in and we saw it replicate to 12 cities, 30 cities, 100 cities, all demonstrating what this guarantee would look like. We're up to 140 pilots now around the country. And then when the pandemic hit, lawmakers would reach for a tool that was already tried and tested. They would send stimulus checks to families. They would pass the expanded child tax credit, which is a guaranteed income for families with young children. If you have two young children for example, that's essentially \$500 a month with no strings attached that was sent to bank accounts of parents across America.

So it was like political warp speed to have an idea to be reintroduced back into circulation and move into the mainstream. And so as I put my head up, part of this book is realizing it's not just guaranteed income, that it's the guarantee of housing, of healthcare, of family care, of college. All of these are moved into the mainstream and we've seen glimmers of what it would look like at the federal level, leading us to believe that this is possible in the United States. So I think that's one answer to your question, which is how I've moved on. And I think the second answer is just, really it's in the title that I chose for the book, of the guarantee, that that was the most fundamental aspect of it. And we may start by targeting who gets it.

In the case of the child tax credit, it's parents with children, it may be targeted by income. That is okay as long as it is guaranteed with no strings attached each month. And that has been one of the shifts that I've made and leads me to really be supportive and excited about the guaranteed income movement around the country.



**Maureen Conway (00:24:26)**

That's really great. I want to bring in a question that came in from our audience around this because I think that idea of a guarantee has really shown its power and effectiveness in giving people confidence in their ability to participate in the economy and have more agency and freedom in their lives. But there's been some backlash. And so there's a question about what your take is on moves to ban guaranteed income programs and how we should respond when these big ideas are so staunchly opposed by people who would even oppose non-controversial ideas like giving kids free lunch?

**Natalie Foster (00:25:10)**

Well, it's interesting to talk about the progress that we've made at a moment where we're also feeling and seeing and experiencing so much being rolled back of our freedoms and other things we take very seriously. And so I think we have to both hold the progress and the size of the problem at the same time and that can sometimes be a real challenge. On the guaranteed income front, there are now four states that have passed preemption bills basically banning pilots from using public dollars in cities in those states. And I actually think it's how you know this idea is serious, because those who want to oppose progress are spending time and energy and money to try and ban it, but you can't actually ban an idea whose time has come. So I see a lot of fight back and pushback in those states and I think that will grow.

**Maureen Conway (00:26:09)**

That's great. Okay, I want to switch back to something you were starting to bring up in the last part, the guarantee, as you were saying. There's guaranteed income, but there's other ways to shape it and other types of guarantees that you can have. It can be housing, it can be healthcare. So for folks who haven't read the book, can you just briefly note the range of guarantees that you touch on? And then when we were talking before this conversation, I was saying, what do you think is the most meaningful? And you went right to housing, so maybe you could also say why you think that one is the fundamental bedrock one.

**Natalie Foster (00:26:54)**

In the last few years we've seen meaningful momentum on all seven. I traced seven in the book. Now, I'm not suggesting the guaranteed economy is limited to those seven. I just found very meaningful progress on the seven guarantees that I tracked. So it's housing, it's the guarantee of income, healthcare, family care, good work, college, and an inheritance, also known colloquially as a baby bond. I live in California and my kid is 11. Over the last 11 years we've seen the housing crisis explode in every corner of our state, and I think we're seeing that in cities across this country. What used to be invisible poverty and insecurity is now widely visible in streets

across this country. And so I do think housing is one of the most important ones and it is something that we've left entirely up to the private market for decades.

And there is a shift underfoot around that that's saying the market has failed us in so many ways and we're starting to see more arguments toward a guarantee of housing. I tracked Tara Raghuvver in Kansas City who was a researcher actually with Matthew Desmond and then started organizing tenants, built the Kansas City Tenants Union and is now going to launch a federation of tenants unions around the country. And she was the first to articulate the homes guarantee being an umbrella that would hold so many of the different parts of housing from evictions to rental assistance to protecting renters to affordability. It could all be wrapped up in the housing guarantee. And I think there's really three parts to housing. One is to protect renters and tenants who are the most vulnerable in the housing market, but two is to produce more units. We just haven't built in this country market rate or affordable housing for decades. And so we need to be building more.

And the third is to preserve the affordable housing that we do have in this country. And one place where we're starting to see all of these come together is in Montgomery County, Maryland. And the housing authority in Montgomery County, Maryland has now built over 1,000 units and there are thousands more planned that are kept permanently off the speculative market. They are for middle income Marylanders, they're built on the transit line. One building that they're going to break ground on this month is actually a carbon-neutral building and it means that rent will be stable and people aren't kicked out of the units if they end up getting a better paying job or if something happens in their life and they lose their job. The units are there and people can count on that housing. And housing authorities across the country are starting to take note of what's happening in Montgomery County, Maryland. So I leave that as one example of where we're starting to see the guarantee take shape.

**Maureen Conway (00:30:23)**

Great, thank you so much. I live in Montgomery County, Maryland, so I'm very excited about that. I wanted to dig in a little bit on the good work side, this is a big interest of mine. And I think that we have seen people trying to guarantee jobs, back in the welfare reform days there was some effort to make people work for benefits and there would be a public job people could do, but you know that guaranteeing a job is a far cry from guaranteeing good work, guaranteeing good jobs that provide basic economic stability, opportunities to grow, a safe and dignified workplace. So I'm just wondering how you see the guarantee to good work play out and how you see this idea of guarantees influence people's ability to find good jobs or to create their own good jobs. So where do you see progress on that front?

**Natalie Foster (00:31:22)**

I think that's a great question, and I've learned so much honestly from you Maureen, and the work that Aspen has put out over the years on this question of work and good work. You bring up work requirements and I think that that is an entirely different thing. And I want to point folks to the Maven Collaborative's report, very aptly titled Work Requirements are Trash to point out

why that's really a very different thing designed to hold people back. But what I know and what we are seeing with guarantees is that we invest in families and when we invest in communities, that people have the agency, they need the time and space and resources in their life to find meaningful work. Work that pays more, work that perhaps ends at three o'clock so you can pick up your kid, or allows you to just have one job in this country. That one job would be enough to put food on the table and pay the rent. That's the type of good work that we need.

And the other thing we know is that when we invest in people, that it functions like a trampoline, not a safety net. Venture capitalist Roy Bahat framed this up, that it's not just a net that holds people, but it's a trampoline that allows them to jump back and find the thing they're excited about and their potential. And we actually saw this play out in the pandemic. For decades, small business creation has gone down in America. As corporate consolidation has grown, as monopolies have grown, it's gotten harder than ever to start a small business and people don't. They're working two to three jobs to put food on the table. In 2021 and in 2022, we saw a 24% increase in small business creation, the first time we've seen that trend reverse. And I think it's because people had money in their pockets and they had just a little bit of a nest egg to be able to go out and start their own business. So that also is a part of the work question and how work and investment are connected.

**Maureen Conway (00:33:40)**

That's great. I want to bring Manuel back now because he's been thinking and writing about related ideas and where I wanted to go next was to talk about this fundamentally really, I think, a different view of government that you put out here. And I think one of the things I've just been reflecting on is you both mentioned this issue of what the ideas were 30, 40 years ago about the economy and how it works and also what the role of government is or should be in a successful economy. Really, we had this idea that the government shouldn't do anything in the economy, that it should just stay out of the way. And I think that the guarantee really fundamentally challenges that notion and puts forth the idea of government as a force for good in people's lives, as a way to protect freedom.

And part of protecting freedom is giving people the freedom to do things. And you can't do that if they don't have any resources or ability to make choices. So I think the view you're working with is so different. And I think Manuel was also talking about a different thing in his writing in *State of Resistance* in particular, I was thinking about how he talked about what the government had done in California and then what it could potentially do again. So anyway, I just wanted you to both think about that a little bit and talk about how you are thinking about just basically reinvigorating this belief that government action can make our lives better. And Natalie, I'll let you go first.

**Natalie Foster (00:35:32)**

I think that's exactly right. It's a new story that says the government has a responsibility for guaranteeing basic economic rights for everyone regardless of race, religion, and zip code. And that is a fundamentally different story than the one that we were told for so long and that we're

seeing the government do that across the board. Now, it also means that it has to work. And I feel like there's two stories in this particular moment. One is the story of FAFSA where students are entering college this fall not knowing what their student aid is going to look like because our FAFSA situation was dismal. So the government has to work for people. At the same time, we rolled out Direct File from the IRS, which is a free and fair filing tool that the IRS rolled out and it worked beautifully.

You probably didn't read about it because when it works well, there aren't headlines about it, but it sits as an alternative to tax filing preparation that charges people, and it saves people millions of dollars and a lot of time to just file taxes for free. And so those are two examples of where we see the government working in people's lives and not working and knowing we need to make sure that it can.

**Maureen Conway (00:36:58)**

Yeah. Manuel, I'd be interested in your thoughts on this one.

**Dr. Manuel Pastor (00:37:03)**

So I think those are important points. Like any academic, I'm going to take a detour to the question I really want to answer, but it's related, which is I think that what goes on is that conservatives have for any problem, offered the solution of the market. That is if there's unemployment, but the wages fall, the market will take care of it. If there's insufficient housing free to markets, it'll get produced. Even if there's an environmental challenge, let's use market cap and trade to resolve the problem. Quite often the left will respond instead with the government. That the government needs to address racial discrimination, and it does. That the government needs to provide housing, and it does. And certainly that the government needs to constrain corporate pollution and protect our environment.

But I think that what we argue for in solidarity economics, and I think what's behind what Natalie is saying is that rather than turning to the market or to the government, we need to turn to each other. We need to understand the mutuality that brings us all together and now the government can be an instrument of that. And that's why democracy is actually so important. When you tell particularly communities of color that have long been left behind and kept behind, that the government is here to save them. The same government that over-policed, the same government that put redlining in place, the same government that under invests in schools in your neighborhood, that government's going to do it. It's a little bit like the reaction that happened during COVID when the government showed up, rightly so, with vaccines first in communities of color. And people were like, "Well, wait a minute, you've been neglecting us. Why are you showing up now?"

So beneath the idea of government has to be democracy, social movements and mutuality, bringing our communities together so that we can actually trust that the government is here for us. And then the point that Natalie is making is that the government actually has to deliver. Now Obamacare is popular. Imagine how popular it would've been if the website had worked the

first day. So we need to be thinking about effectiveness. We also need to be thinking about how we invest in social movements, community building, bridge building so people trust each other so they can trust the government?

**Maureen Conway (00:39:43)**

That's great. And I think that's exactly like people have to start to believe that the government is not some separate force, that if we really have a democracy, then the government is us. So I want to bring in another question from the audience because I think it also fits in nicely in this place. A number of folks are asking, do you think that there should be a guarantee for reparations for Black Americans? And how do you think about that within this framework? So Natalie, do you want to take that on first?

**Natalie Foster (00:40:20)**

Sure, and then I'd love to hear what Dr. Pastor says. Yes, I think there should be, and I think there's a lot of progress made. Reparations is a great example of something that has really moved into the mainstream in a meaningful way. And I think there's two parts to it. There's the truth and reconciliation, the healing that has to happen, but there's also the material payments that should be paid out. In California, there is a commission that the state has created to really look at reparations and how it would happen in California. And I just heard a report back on it and was very heartened by the reparative ideas that people are putting forward. And so yes, I think that is exactly the type of guarantee that could move forward if we had a paradigm of guaranteeing in this country.

**Maureen Conway (00:41:14)**

Great. Manuel?

**Dr. Manuel Pastor (00:41:18)**

Well, first concretely, that would be a very important step toward dealing with the persistent wealth inequality that exists in the United States. I want to highlight one other thing, particularly about the California example. If you look at the big reports that were done as part of the California Reparations Commission, I think the executive summary is 200 pages and the actual report's 1400. This commission was definitely an overachiever. But one of the things that I think is really important about it is that the commission's report points out that slavery was not an important feature of California. Certainly there were some slaves that were part of California's history 'cause they were transported from other states. But what they do is carefully trace the history of redlining, the history of labor market discrimination, the history of asset stripping, the history of placing toxic uses in Black communities and other communities of color.

That is that much of the reparations debate gets snagged in what does this have to do with slavery? That happened a long time ago. By the way, the effects of slavery persist today. But I think the brilliance of that report is tracing it through all sorts of policies that persisted way after slavery. It certainly impacted the ability to accumulate wealth and the kinds of cushions or guarantees that can be often privately provided when you've got a society that hands out benefits in a particular way. So I think it's really, really important to shift the reparations debate so we're talking about stuff that happened in the 19th century and before, but also stuff that happened in the 20th century, and if you look at Cancer Alley in Louisiana, stuff that's happening right now that is stripping the fundamental wealth of communities, both in terms of diminished property values from cancer causing pollutions nearby and also from people's health and ability to survive. We need to make this debate alive.

**Maureen Conway (00:43:38)**

Absolutely. Thank you for that. I wanted to also ask you both, Natalie, in your book you highlight all of these great leaders and organizers. You've mentioned a few of them, and Manuel, I know you have also talked a lot about different social movements and the folks who lead them and how they show up for each other. And so Manuel, maybe I'll let you start first this time just to mix it up a bit, but I'm wondering who really stands out for you as you think about activism, organizing, creating change, and what you've learned from them?

**Dr. Manuel Pastor (00:44:21)**

Gosh, I've learned everything from them. I've often said that the work that we do at the Research Institute, which I had, is that we listened to organizers and then we add a few footnotes so that it seems more academic and established along the way. But what I'd like to do is detour just a little bit, come back to this point, to talk a second about my son who's a musician who actually started as an actor. He went to theater school at UCLA. This is the kind of career choice that does make a parent nervous, particularly a parent that grew up in working class settings and didn't have a private cushion. You worry what's going to happen with your kid. So one day I was sitting with my son, Joaquin, and I said to him, "Joaquin..." It was a very intimate male conversation, which means we weren't looking at each other. We were looking at the sun setting.

And I said, "Joaquin, why are you going to theater school? What is it that you want to do with your life?" And he said, "I want to make things of beauty with my friends." And what I have found is that when you work with these movement organizers who get highlighted, Dorian Warren and Ai-jen Poo, Deepak Bhargava and Anthony Thigpenn, so many names. Saru Jayaraman, Kent Wong, Linda Sarsour, so many names that I'm forgetting at this point, that what you're really doing is pursuing the goal of making a world of beauty with your friends, making a community of people who are committed to change and who are committed to creating a movement that is beautiful, that yields a world that actually generates beauty and joy for all of us who are in it. I'm reminded of our good friend, someone who's an inspiration to both our books, Heather McGhee.

It was a beautiful book both of us quote from significantly and really what she's trying to point out in there is that we have an economy that has traditionally been designed for some of us, but what would it be if we took that and instead designed an economy for the sum of us, for all of us to be able to benefit? And the only way you're going to do that, the only way you're going to create a world of beauty is with your friends. And that means listening carefully to these inspirational leaders who I think Natalie will agree with. What's on the pages of your book are ideas you might've come up with just a little bit, but it's really just that you are listening to the people that inspire me and the people that have inspired you.

**Natalie Foster (00:47:28)**

I think that's exactly right. I want to make things that are beautiful with my friends. Feels like a real life goal and wisdom from your son, so thank you for sharing that. And it actually reminds me, one of the things I read as I was putting this together was this concept of hope punk. And what this is saying is a lot of the stories we tell are grim dark, they're dystopic and humans are petty and greedy. And the opposite of that is noble bright, where there's a hero who comes in and saves the day, sometimes they have superpowers. But neither of those things are how change really happens, that it's done in a hope punk way, which is community coming together, building bonds, connecting, focused, stubborn, persistently focused on change, but knowing that there are sometimes moments where you don't go as fast as you want.

You have to take a step back. There's a negotiation you have to make, that it's not perfect. And so I carried that idea into hope punk economics, the idea of hope, punk economics being the way we're seeing these guarantees actually brought forward in the world. And it is precisely the work of so many of those you name including people like Ady Barkan, who would spend the final years of his life fighting for a healthcare guarantee alongside his co-founder, Jamila Headley, who now runs Be A Hero. And just his life being such an inspiration in what it would mean to create a healthcare guarantee in this country, but his life also being part of saying it is about every one of us who lays awake at night worried how we're going to pay the bills from the hospital knowing that we live in the richest nation on earth. And it doesn't have to be this way.

**Maureen Conway (00:49:21)**

That's really great. I'm still loving the idea of creating things of beauty with your friends and how to think about a career. That's wonderful. I want to switch a little bit back to guaranteed income, but I think this follows on the hope punk idea, Natalie, because there's the question from the audience of what have you found to be the most compelling arguments for guiding people to support guaranteed income initiatives? So do you have a "hope punk" messaging campaign?

**Natalie Foster (00:50:00)**

Yeah. Well, I think one thing we're finding is that one place we can all agree is the ideas of freedom and agency and dignity and presence. The ability to spend time with people we love, to make things of beauty with friends. And I think freedom is something I've actually been

thinking a lot about. My book shares a 'book birthday' with Nobel Prize laureate Joseph Stiglitz's new book. It's called *The Road to Freedom*. It's a play on the *Road to Serfdom*, which is one of the trickle-down economic early texts. And the *Road to Freedom* talks about the freedom picking up on FDRs, freedom from fear, freedom from want, and talks about the way in which true freedom is impossible when there's deep economic insecurity and precarity.

Now, Mia Birdsong out of Oakland who runs Next River, a new organization focused on practicing the future, she's been reimagining an interconnected freedom for this multiracial democracy that we are trying to build and how it is about coming together, not the individual notion of freedom that I think has so often been what we've held up. And so those two thinkers have really pushed me to think more about what it would mean when people have economic security and freedom to spend time with their families, freedom to build community. I was thinking a lot about that, Dr. Pastor, as you were pushing us to think yes about the government, but also about us. When our basic needs are met, we are able to connect with one another, be more civically engaged, and participate more in democracy. So that's one of the places I think that is really important, is that people deserve the ability to take care of their families and build lives of dignity.

**Maureen Conway (00:52:08)**

There's another question from the audience about now that we see that guaranteed income pilots work, how do we move beyond pilots to scale? What could that look like?

**Natalie Foster (00:52:25)**

Well, I can take that one too, and then I'd love to hear, Dr. Pastor, some of your reflections on where else we've seen things go from pilots to policy. But I would argue that we know exactly how to do it now, and we saw it in the expanded child tax credit. For six months, that was the law of the land. The IRS moved quickly immediately after Congress passed the bill to start moving checks into parents' bank accounts to help parents with the rising cost of living and to guarantee that check that would come in each month and just a beginning of economic security. So I think that is one step in how you would pass a guaranteed income, but ultimately it's policy. Policy is the way you scale this idea that's being demonstrated across the country.

And I don't think anybody believes that the demonstrations are the end. They're just the beginning. They are here to show us the way, to say, this is what it would look like. This is the data we get. People are less stressed, they are healthier, they go to the doctor more often. They find work at higher rates and are able to sock away a little bit each month. That is the results we're seeing over and over from cities across the country that are running guaranteed income demonstrations.



**Dr. Manuel Pastor (00:53:55)**

What I would add to that is that too often we think that a national strategy as a federal strategy, that is something we'll do in DC. In fact, quite often what you need to do is instead continue to build at a locality and state level and bubble that up to national policy. So I think we're going to get an era of bigger and more comprehensive pilots, a little bit like we did with the living wage loss, a little bit like we did with the minimum wage gains that started at cities, that went to states and demonstrated that the ill effects that many economists were predicting weren't really happening. I think we have seen a lot of that also with shifting attitudes toward immigrants, particularly undocumented immigrants within our communities.

The one thing I think we can't avoid is that ultimately part of this comes up, how do we pay for it? And we're a very wealthy society. We can pay for it. And actually, also, the security that it generates leads people to be more entrepreneurial, to take more chances in the labor market, to be able to get a little bit more education, to be able to have more secure housing and not be trying to go to work while you're living in a car. And all of that actually will contribute to GDP growth. And that's something we need to be lifting up, the gains that can happen to all of us from these guarantees. But inevitably, we're also going to have to cross the issue of taxation and the fact that we've created a tax system that systematically has created extraordinary benefits for the top 1% going down to the top 5% and actually put much of the tax burden in the middle.

And we really do need to understand that those who are wealthy have gained from the public infrastructure, from our community investments, from a stable society. And to those who much is given, much is expected.

**Maureen Conway (00:56:23)**

I love that. I'm looking at the time and I realize we don't have a lot of time left, so I wanted to ask you each one final question, Natalie, I'm wishing I had your book actually right in front of me, and maybe you do, because the last paragraph of your book... Yeah, hold it up. Let everybody see the cover. In the very last paragraph, you talk about the imagination to believe. And sometimes I think some of the questions we've gotten is, how do you convince other people that this works and that things can be better and so on? But I also think sometimes there's a question for ourselves. How do we convince ourselves? How do we hold onto that vision ourselves so that we can drive it forward? So I wanted to ask you both just what would be your final words of advice for our wonderful audience about how to hold onto that vision for themselves and keep their own inspiration for driving forward? Natalie, did you want to start?

**Natalie Foster (00:57:25)**

That's such an excellent question, Maureen. I think one part of it is really acknowledging that so much of what's happening around us is unprecedented, and it breaks with the policymaking of the last 50 years. We would've been laughed out of the room with the idea of abolishing student debt in the Obama administration in which I worked. And it is now a rose garden event in the Biden administration. It is saying the government has a role. We would pass a moratorium for

years where no one paid back student debt during the great crisis of the pandemic, and then the government would just abolish debt, billions of dollars, for students around this country. And so that is a new story and gets us closer to the idea of debt-free higher education. And then that is happening around us now. It's also happening at the same time that our freedoms are being rolled back and that democracy is right on the brink.

And so I think it is so important that we have to believe what it is possible we can build in this country. That there is proof of concept here, that there are advocates and activists who have been laying the groundwork so that in a crisis that would come, ideas would be picked up and they would be moved forward at the federal level in a way that would break with the policymaking of the past. So that's the story that I think it's important to hold. That's really what's at stake this year. And I'll leave with the final words that have been really meaningful to me. Advocate Mariame Kaba says, "Hope is a discipline." Hope is a discipline, so some days it doesn't just come naturally and some days it feels even harder than ever, but that it's a discipline we cultivate so we can leave a better life for our kids.

**Maureen Conway (00:59:25)**

Manuel?

**Dr. Manuel Pastor (00:59:28)**

Well, my kids give me hope. How I shared what my son said, my daughter's equally inspirational. One other thing that gives me hope is when academics like myself realize that they don't need to repeat what was brilliantly said by their colleague. So all I really want to say is ditto, offstage, on time, thank you for writing this book, Natalie.

**Maureen Conway (00:59:53)**

Yes. Thank you so much. Thank you Natalie. Thank you all of you for joining us today. Many, many thanks to my colleagues at the Economic Opportunities Program for helping and supporting today's event. And please do take a moment to respond to our quick feedback survey, which you can find in one of the tabs on your screen. You can also send us an email at [eop.program@aspeninstitute.org](mailto:eop.program@aspeninstitute.org). Let us know what you think. We always love to hear from you. We have a number of great events coming up over the next couple of months, which you can register for on the feedback survey. The next step is the Workers Behind our Groceries: A Book Talk with Benjamin Lorr, author of *The Secret Life of Groceries*. That'll be on June 21st, and we're doing that in partnership with our colleagues at the Food and Society program at the Aspen Institute.

We also have two events coming up as part of our Job Quality in Practice series. One is Tapping into Worker Voice to Improve Job Quality: Lessons from the Talent Pipeline Management Network on July 24th in partnership with the U.S. Chamber Foundation. And the next after that is Seizing the Moment on Worker Rights: A Toolkit for Organizers and Practitioners on September 4th

in partnership with Workshop. So please join us for those and we hope to see you again. Thank you.