



California's Approach to Recovery and Resilience: Centering Equity and Job Quality

Hosted by the Aspen Institute Economic Opportunities Program

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Description

Questions about the future of work have shifted in this time of pandemic, prompting overdue discussions about workplace health and safety, the unemployment system, health insurance, and fair wages and benefits. What policies can support a thriving future of work? What roles do we want private business to play? And what strategies will build a future of work that addresses long standing inequities and inequalities and provides opportunities for all to thrive? California's Future of Work Commission and Jobs and Recovery Task Force have been working on these questions since before the pandemic and have begun implementing innovative policies to address the critical challenges facing working people in today's economy and tomorrow's.

Speakers

Julie A. Su

Secretary, California Labor and Workforce Development Agency

Julie Su, appointed by Governor Gavin Newsom, is the Secretary for the California Labor and Workforce Development Agency (LWDA). The LWDA enforces workplace laws, combats wage theft, ensures health and safety on the job, connects Californians to quality jobs and career pathways, and administers unemployment insurance, workers compensation, and paid family leave. LWDA oversees seven major departments, boards, and panels that serve California workers and businesses by improving access to training, promoting high road jobs, eliminating barriers to employment, and creating a level playing field for employers. As California Labor Commissioner from 2011 through 2018, Su enforced the State's labor laws to ensure a fair and just workplace for both employees and employers. A report on her tenure released in May 2013 found that her leadership has resulted in a renaissance in enforcement activity and record-setting results. In 2014, she launched the first "Wage Theft Is a Crime" multimedia, multilingual statewide campaign to reach out to low-wage workers and their employers to help them understand their rights and feel safe speaking up about labor law abuses.

Angela Glover Blackwell

Founder in Residence, PolicyLink; Member, Governor's Task Force on Business and Jobs Recovery

Angela Glover Blackwell started PolicyLink in 1999 with a mission of advancing racial and economic equity for all. Through her writing, speaking, and leadership, Angela has helped to grow and define a national equity movement focused on innovating and improving public policy with a wide range of partners to ensure access and opportunity for all low-income people and communities of color – particularly in the areas of building an equitable economy, health, housing, transportation, infrastructure, and arts and culture. Prior to founding PolicyLink, Angela served as Senior Vice President at the Rockefeller Foundation, where she oversaw the foundation's Domestic and Cultural programs. A lawyer by training, she gained national recognition as founder of the Oakland (CA) Urban Strategies Council, where she pioneered new approaches to neighborhood revitalization. From 1977 to 1987, she was a partner at Public Advocates, a nationally known public interest law firm. She is also the host of the recently launched podcast, Radical Imagination.

Moderator

Meghan McCarty Carino

Workplace Culture Reporter, Marketplace

Meghan McCarty Carino is the Workplace Culture reporter for Marketplace, where she covers everything from gender and racial equity issues to the gig economy and workplace health in the face of the pandemic. Before joining Marketplace she reported on transportation and mobility for Los Angeles member station KPCC, covering the scooter explosion, transit expansion, and the effects of the housing crisis on commutes. She's a lifelong Californian who has split her life almost evenly between the Bay Area and Los Angeles, and attended UCLA and USC.

About

The Economic Opportunities Program's Opportunity in America discussion series has moved to an all-virtual format as we all do what we can to slow the spread of COVID-19. But the conversations about the changing landscape of economic opportunity in the US and implications for individuals, families, and communities across the country remain vitally important. We hope you will participate as we bring our discussions to you in virtual formats, and we look forward to your feedback. We are grateful to the Ford Foundation, Prudential Financial, Walmart.org, the Mastercard Center for Inclusive Growth, and the Surdna Foundation for their support of this series. Learn more: as.pn/opportunityinamerica

The Economic Opportunities Program advances strategies, policies, and ideas to help low- and moderate-income people thrive in a changing economy. Follow us on social media and join our mailing list to stay up-to-date on publications, blog posts, events, and other announcements.

Learn more: as.pn/eop

Transcript

Maureen Conway (00:00)

Good afternoon and welcome. I'm Maureen Conway, Vice President at The Aspen Institute and Executive Director of the Institute's Economic Opportunities Program. It's my pleasure to welcome you to today's conversation, California's Approach to Recovery and Resilience: Centering Equity and Job Quality. This conversation is part of the Economic Opportunities Program, ongoing Opportunity in America discussion series, which we explore the changing landscape of economic opportunity in the United States and the implications for individuals, families, and communities across the country. I want to know our deep appreciation to the Ford Foundation, Prudential Financial, the Walmart Foundation, the Surdna Foundation and MasterCard Center for Inclusive Growth for their support of our Opportunity in America discussion series.

Our work at the Economic Opportunities Program focuses on advancing a more just and inclusive economy by expanding individual's opportunities to connect to quality work, to participate in business ownership and to build the economic stability necessary to pursue opportunity. The issues of racial equity and job quality have always been a focus of our work and have been growing in importance over the past decade. In the long recovery following the 2008 recession, we saw unemployment fall to historic lows, particularly among Black workers. And we saw stock markets reach new high. But we did not see working people gain much ground in economic terms. Income and wealth inequality reached historic levels. Housing, healthcare and education class soared, while earnings flatlined. Household budgets simply couldn't keep up. And meager safety net programs hardly filled the gap.

We became more economically divided than ever, but the disproportionate number of Black, indigenous and Latino households falling on the wrong side of that economic divide. And these are the households that have been hit hardest in our current crises. The pandemic and associated economic fallout have shown the light and the tenuousness of work and wellbeing for the least well paid. And it has also highlighted the degree to which our economy and society is dependent on poverty wage work of essential workers. As we seek to recover from our current crises, how should we rebuild in ways that reduce these damaging economic and racial divides? What should we do differently to improve the quality of jobs and the quality of lives for all working people?

At the Economic Opportunities Program, we were thrilled to learn that California and its work on jobs and economic recovery was centering considerations of racial equity and was focused on the need to improve job quality. As a bellwether state, California has long been grappling with these issues of equity and job quality. California entered the new millennium with a diverse population that does not have a dominant demographic group in the majority. The rest of the country should be similarly diverse by mid-century. California is home to some of our wealthiest and most innovative companies, but also to legions of working people who are struggling to afford the soaring cost of living in this state.

California is really out in front in dealing with some of these challenges. And it's now stepping out to find new solutions. On May Day 2019, California's governor established the Future of Work Commission and charged it with designing a new social compact for California based on an expansive vision for economic equity. This April, the Jobs and Recovery Task Force was established to build on this effort while tackling the immediate and urgent challenges of restarting the California economy.

So we're thrilled today to have the opportunity to hear from two leaders who have been deep in this work. Julie Su, Secretary of the California's Labor and Workforce Development Agency and Angela Glover Blackwell, founder and resident at PolicyLink. Thank you both so very much for joining us today.

And before we start our conversation with them, I want to just quickly review our technology. All of the attendees today are muted, but we welcome your questions. Please use the Q&A box on the bottom of the zoom window for questions or comments. We're thrilled with the participation in today's event. And we thank you to the many of you who submitted your questions in advance, and we'll try in the time we have to get through as many questions as we can. You can also upvote questions you see people submitting if you're interested in those. We also encourage you to tweet about this conversation. Our hashtag is #talkopportunity. And if you have any technical issues during this webinar, you can chat with Economic Opportunities Program or you can email us at eop.program@aspensinstitute.org. This webinar is being recorded and will be shared via email and posted on our website following today's event.

And now I'm really thrilled to introduce our moderator for today's conversation, Meghan McCarty Carino. Meghan is the Workplace Culture reporter for Marketplace, where she covers everything from gender and racial equity issues to the gig economy and workplace health. And she's also a California Native currently based in Los Angeles. So Meghan's just the perfect person to moderate today's conversation. So Meghan, really happy to have you with us today and over to you. Thank you.

Meghan McCarty Carino (05:25)

Thank you so much for having me. And I'm actually back in the Marketplace headquarters in downtown LA today. We're in the background for the first time since March 13th. Never in my wildest dreams could I have imagined what covering the workplace for Marketplace would have come to mean when I joined a little over a year ago during, as Maureen mentioned, this period of record low unemployment. But so many of the issues that have become so painfully exacerbated by the pandemic were there before. Every time we were reporting on these really positive indicators at Marketplace, it was always a little bit of whiplash because I was talking every day to workers who were struggling to pay skyrocketing housing prices or to manage work and family, who were routinely went to work sick or endangered their pregnancy because they had no paid leave.

And we know that these burdens then fell hardest on women and people of color. And we're seeing that trend just intensified today. In some ways, the ways this disaster has really laid bare so much of what wasn't working for American workers, I'm really excited to kind of hear what our guests have to say about a possible way forward. So I just like to start kind of asking each of you a bit about your work and what brought you to this work. Julie, you've been working on addressing issues in the workplace long before you came to head the California Labor and Workplace Development Agency. Can you tell us a little bit about what led you to your current role and exactly what the agency does?

Julie Su (07:07)

Yes, Meghan, thank you so much. Thank you, to you and Maureen, for the excellent framing of this conversation. I spent my career fighting alongside working people for basic protections in the workplace. Actually in Los Angeles, Meghan, so kindred spirits. These basic protections include minimum wage over time, the right to breaks and enforcement of and the ability to speak up without fear and retaliation, as well as the rights of all workers, regardless of immigration status. And then as an attorney, I also litigate cases against race discrimination in employment and in education.

As we have seen throughout the crises that we face, these issues are really fundamental to questions of equity, justice, and economic security. Currently we face not just one major challenge, but three that are forcing us to react, reinvent and recover in new ways and different ways. One is obviously the COVID-19 public health crisis. Two is the unprecedented levels of unemployment. It's just one symptom of the pandemic-induced economic crisis. And three is the exposure of blatant racism and specifically the continued anti-Blackness that's ingrained in our society, in our health system, in our economic structures and in our institutions of power.

As has already been even said, Meghan, this pandemic has really further exposed and exacerbated those fractures in our society, along the lines of race, class, and gender. During the COVID-19 pandemic workers of color have been overrepresented in many of the low wage jobs that are most vulnerable to layoffs, including hospitality. And at the same time, Black and Latino workers make up a disproportionate share of the essential workers who have faced additional health and safety risks. Black workers, the studies show have also been more likely to face retaliation for raising COVID-19 safety concerns at work. So all of these questions about workplace protections, like you mentioned, paid leave, also childcare. Who needs childcare? Who are the caregivers? As well as those who are most negatively impacted when schools close. All of these are part of the challenges that we face right now.

As labor secretary, I oversee several California departments and I really like to think of our response to these crises in three ways. One is that we ensure that benefits are paid to the unemployed, making sure the unemployment insurance benefits of the pandemic, really the benefits are paid out. And that's been a real challenge, not just here in California, but across the nation. The second is ensuring the health, safety and welfare of workers who are employed. That's the Cal/OSHA, the labor commissioner enforcing basic standards in the workplace, which they become more important in times of crises, not less.

And the third is the challenge looming before us, which is workforce development reemployment. And now, we're not just talking about reemploying people one by one matching. We're talking about the need to reemploy people and looking at the kinds of jobs that are going to be reemployed into which will define our economy going forward. And that's really our third and big challenge. And it's a privilege to work on these issues, but also a really, really difficult time. I think we'll meet these challenges, but I'm excited to be part of a conversation where we're talking about what California is doing to lead the way.

Meghan McCarty Carino (10:35)

And Angela, you're the founder and resident at PolicyLink, where you've really focused on advancing racial and economic equity in all sorts of arenas. Can you tell us a little bit about why you founded PolicyLink and what exactly the organization does?

Angela Glover Blackwell (10:51)

Thank you, Meghan. Maureen, that was an excellent framing and always happy to join a stage with Julie. My whole adult life has been devoted to trying to build a fully inclusive society and to achieve racial justice. I've been an organizer, public interest lawyer, foundation executive, community builder. But 21 years ago, I started PolicyLink to try to bring all of those approaches to change together under a banner that was explicit about race and that upped the ante in terms of how able to build a fully inclusive society. Equality and equal rights and equal opportunity are certainly important, and this nation has fallen way short in terms of achieving that.

But it had become clear that just talking about equality, only talking about equality, was not going to really solve the problem. That we needed to ask what do we want for everybody? And then what do the investments have to be in order to get there? And that's equity, just and fair inclusion into a society in which all, including low income people of color, all can participate, prosper and reach their full potential. So when we started PolicyLink in January 1999, we wanted to bring several things forward. One was the extraordinary voice and wisdom of local leaders. Local leaders are national leaders. They are the ones who are solving the nation's problems, and yet local leaders are the last ones to be consulted as national policy is put forward. Usually only brought in to add a bit of color to a policy that was already fully developed.

We felt we needed to be doing policy from the ground up for people who were struggling with racial issues, with how the distribution of resources was not even designed to be able to achieve what people wanted, bringing forward those local voices, understanding that we live in a nation in which where you live is a proxy for opportunity. So focusing on race, but also focusing on place. And then focusing on the infrastructure investments that have to actually invest in places so that the people who live there can fully participate. And understanding that through it all, we were coming up against a nation that was founded on a narrative that reinforced a hierarchy of human value.

And you couldn't pretend that that wasn't there. You had to talk about it. You had to bring it forward. You had to know that you were pushing against the narrative and not just policies. So all of those things helped us to form PolicyLink, helped us to develop a deep agenda in all the areas that I talked about that could create a policy platform. And then this hits, you've described it, Julie's described it, Maureen referred to with, the laying bare of all the injustices and problems and inequalities and dysfunctions of a society. It wasn't that people of color didn't know about it. It wasn't even that a lot of people who were white didn't know about it. But people of color were able to put their heads down and act like they had to work without removing all of the narratives. And other people just thought, we'll get better if we just change our hearts.

But what we see now is that we won't get better just changing our hearts. We're going to have to change everything. And so this is an exciting moment to be in policy, to be alive, to tell you the truth, because the possibilities are so great, but it is certainly an exciting time to be in California that has crossed the threshold of being majority people of color decades ago. And clearly, they have to have an understanding now that California will not thrive if the people who make up California don't thrive.

Meghan McCarty Carino (14:45)

Julie, let's talk about the Task Force on Business and Jobs Recovery that California has convened, of which Angela is apart. Who are the other stakeholders that are a part of this task force and what are your guiding principles?

Julie Su (15:00)

Thank you. Yes, the governor appointed a Task Force on Business and Jobs Recovery in April. There are 108 leaders from business, labor, community-based organizations, philanthropy, the tech world. And we are made up of five subcommittees ranging from climate to small business, to the subcommittee that Angela and I co-chair, called Economic Equity and Workforce. And I do want to note that when the governor announced the task force, Angela was one of the members that he highlighted as embodying both the substance and the spirit of what we want to accomplish.

So the goal of the task force is really immediate recovery, but we're looking at recovery as something different than going back to where we came from. I often say, we want to recover better than we entered. So we're focused on a High Road Recovery that can put California back to work, that will honor the governor and this whole administration's commitment to equity and what he always calls California for all. And that really recognizes that a strong economy has to be premised on equity, on quality jobs, on making sure that no one is left behind.

What does that mean? A High Road Recovery rejects the idea that any job is a good job. And I think that there is a mistake that is often repeated in times of prices that well, we just need any job. People should be grateful for anything that they get to do, which is premised on the idea that working poverty is an inevitable characteristic of our economy. It's just not true. We reject that and we are intentional about building an economy that is premised on eliminating working poverty and making sure that

people who want to work can work and can work in jobs that are worthy of their talent and of all of California.

It also involves building pathways into those jobs, being clear, as Angela mentioned, there have been historic and including present day inequities to access, and we need to be deliberate about breaking those down. That is through education and training, but not just through education and training. About a third of California workers make less than \$15 an hour. That is about a third of our California ... This is before the pandemic, that we're working on what could be characterized as low wage jobs. A full 20% of those workers had a college degree. So it's not just about more education and skills, although that has to be part of the solution. I just think we need to stop repeating the idea that if you just give more skills, that somehow equity will be inevitable and that opportunities will be distributed more equally. We have to be intentional about that.

We also want to focus on increasing worker's share of prosperity as well at the same time as we focus on competitiveness and a key part of that is making sure that workers have a voice in the workplace. And another part of this is investing in underserved regions and communities. Governor Newsom says all the time, "California is a nation state, but each region has its own challenges, its opportunities, its abilities, its skills, its needs, and we need to pay attention to those." So the task force is very cognizant of that California's not a monolith. And we need to look at infrastructure growth, resilience, and economic recovery region by region.

And finally, a big part of the task force is what Angela led the way in articulating, which is a body of principles for equity and inclusion that puts people first that is explicit about racial and ethnic discrimination and disparities as you've seen throughout the pandemic. We in California have been very much open about the disparities on the health side, on the economic side and we're going to be really deliberate about that on the recovery side as well. So looking at how those, we have to infuse everything we do, all of our solutions with those kinds of equity principles. So that's very much a part of the task force and very much, again, a part of what Angela brings and what the governor is very much committed to.

Meghan McCarty Carino (19:29)

Angela, do you want to tell us a bit more about your role on the task force and kind of what you are hoping the task force can accomplish and your subcommittee, particularly?

Angela Glover Blackwell (19:40)

Well, I was delighted to be asked to be on the task force because one of the things that equity really has forced, helped, induced so many of us who wanted a more just society to understand is that you don't get there without a focus on the economy. The economy isn't just something that we can try to join as we try to be included because it's not a good economy. The way that it has been focused, the way it has put profits first, the way it's based on extraction, the way it's based on exploitation, all of those things mean that you have to have an economic analysis if you really are serious about trying to achieve a just and equitable society.

And we've been talking about that a lot. We haven't just been talking about it in abstract terms, but Manuel Pasteur and I about a decade ago really put forward a notion that as we looked at the shifting demographics and we looked at the problems of inequality, particularly the toxic inequality, this baking in poverty, making it very difficult to have a robust middle class and making economic mobility all but extinct, that we had to look at those things together. And it turns out that the equity agenda was actually leading to the right kind of growth frame. We said equity is the superior growth model.

So because of that, we've been looking for multiple ways to be able to join with people who only think about jobs and the economy to be able to blend these notions together. So I was pleased to join. I was even more pleased, once I did join, to find that there were so many people who were curious about and open to thinking about, how do we lead with equity? The governor was really quite magnificent and the way that he underscored that this had to be as much about equity as anything else. And so people knew coming in that the rhetoric was there, but after they joined, it became more than rhetoric. It became what are the principles that we're going to use? And as we have gone through the period of being on the task force, we have actually been pushing to make sure that those principles are applied.

I see my role as one of being a full participant, having to understand what the challenges are for businesses, large and small, understanding what the challenges are for health, both in terms of how we get out of this, but understanding how we got into the situation that we're on and how to blend all these things together. The murder of George Floyd was a pivotal moment for the task force because it happened right in the middle of the task force thinking about its role, already in a conversation about race, looking at the health impacts, looking at the economy, understanding that Black and brown around people don't go to work, California doesn't go to work. All of that was a part of what was there and then came this really heightened racial moment.

I was pleased that they quickly adopted the principles. Julie started talking about them, putting people first. That's easy to say, hard to do when you're talking about jobs and the economy, particularly when employers are hurting, when the economy seems to be taking everybody down. People just want to get back to work. They just want to open up again. Making people stop and ask the question are our recommendations putting people first? And how do we know that that's making a difference? Explicitly talking about race, explicitly understanding discrimination and talking about how we open jobs, how we frame the challenges, how we make our decisions so that we're looking to eliminate racial discrimination, that we don't put anything back in place, that is predictable based on the color of someone's skin or the origin of where they've come from, where they're going to be on the economic realms. We've got to deal with that.

But also focusing on places. You heard me say earlier where you live is a proxy for opportunity. We know where the transportation is going to be inadequate, where the schools are going to be struggling, where the toxins are going to be prevalent. And so how do we understand all of that, including the kind of livelihoods that people have in certain regions, like agricultural regions. And we want to make sure that we are expanding opportunity in those places, not just coming back to what was there and then making a priority on shared prosperity. The economy that we want is one in which we share prosperity.

And therefore, we have to think about economic inclusion in ways that understand the particular challenges of businesses that are small and owned by people of color and women and how their challenges are different from larger businesses and that we do this opening in a way that gets them the resources that they need to open, but the special attention as well as an outreach effort to make sure that people are aware of the fact that when you think about the businesses you want to support, you want to support the small minority women-owned businesses not just because it's just and fair, but also because those are the people who were employing so many people of color who have been hit first and worst by this and will be the last to come out if we don't make a special effort. So all of those things have been front and center and taken seriously.

Meghan McCarty Carino (24:55)

These terms, job quality and equity, they can mean a lot of different things and sometimes nothing at all, depending on the situation. Julie, how would you like the audience to understand what you mean when you talk about job quality, and I think the key point, how does California measure success on those terms?

Julie Su (25:18)

Oh, such an important question. Job quality has really been a core principle and a guiding light for us at the Labor Agency as well the administration since the beginning, since before this pandemic. Maureen announced at the beginning, in May of 2019, the governor announced a Future of Work Commission. And the idea was to really look at what jobs in California could be in the future. There was analysis there of the intersection between technology and work, but the whole idea of what jobs could be embodies the notion that it's not preordained. It's not that like the economy is headed in a certain direction and we just all got up buckle up and ride along. But that we have a say, we can shape what that economy looks like.

He appointed an extraordinary group of individuals who make up that commission. That work continues. And the idea is to reimagine a social compact for work and workers in California. A key part of that is job quality. So what does that mean? One of the things I want to say about that is that it may not mean the exact same thing at all times in all places and in all industries and that's okay. Many people come back with, "Well, if we can't come up with one universal definition, then we just can't do this." That's not true. It's important enough for us to think about, what are the basic elements of job quality?

It certainly includes wages that lift people out of poverty. It certainly includes something around health and safety. Nobody should have to put their life at risk to go to work. Everybody should come home safely at the end of the day. It includes an element of mobility, of satisfaction, of impact, of growth. And so we're looking at job quality in all of these terms, not just economic, but human. Much of what the commission's work will continue to do is to put some meat on those bones. How exactly do we define job quality in California? But I often say, we would love for California to be known not just for its tech, its entertainment, our beaches and our good weather, but also for quality jobs.

And right now, before the pandemic and certainly after, all of our initiatives, all of our goals are really opportunities to create quality jobs in the communities that need them the most. And to Angela's point, what's so really invigorating even in these tough times is that we have people like the commission, like the task force, who have been engaged in this effort for some time. And now we're bringing them all together to roll up our sleeves and concretely define what that means.

Let me just give a couple of examples of what we've done through the COVID crisis and the economic devastation that has ensued to push job quality. One is that as the state, procurement is one avenue. As we have met the numerous needs of California's during this time, the need for shelter, the need for places to isolate, the need for food delivery, we have added procurement standards to our contracts. As we build up testing and other kind of emergency, meeting emergency demands, our procurement standards includes fair wages, they include compliance with labor standards and there's preferences for hiring laid off and other unemployed workers, really trying to meet that workers who face the greatest barriers to employment and the many structural reasons why, how do we address those things.

A second initiative that we've had is we've had the privilege to work closely with Saru Jayaraman. She's also a member of the Future of Work Commission and developing a program called High Road Kitchens. And here it was, we stepped in as the pandemic was beginning seeing that many of the small businesses that Angela talked about were in jeopardy. And so how could we help support them not closing down, therefore, also maintaining jobs and really focusing, investing on those employers, those restaurants that we're doing right by their workers.

So we helped the restaurants to repurpose and move from their usual operations to creating meals that were packaged and delivered to people in need, which included the elderly and it also included other low wage workers and we helped to leverage some workforce funding for that. We have now 46 High Road Kitchens across California and kept a few hundred restaurant workers on the job and have stabilized these businesses that are so key to our economy.

Also, contact tracing is something people have talked about a lot in relation to the pandemic. It's a way to make sure that we stop the spread. So we've been working with our partners in public health, through the incredible leadership of Dr. Mark Ghaly, who's the Secretary of Health and Human Services here in California, to expand contact tracing throughout the state and making sure that we are hiring from those communities where they may not trust government at the outset, they may not want to be traced by someone they don't know. So if we hire from workers in those communities, who've been most devastated by COVID, we meet multiple goals, our public health goals and our desire to put people first when it comes to opportunities for jobs.

And finally we are really trying to reimagine how our workforce system works. We have great workforce boards here in California and we are really trying to work closely with boards to look at measuring their work not just by how many people come through, not just by how many get employed, but by the quality of the job that they get, by the impact on their lives in terms of getting more mobility and gaining access to a job they might not have even known existed. And so those are really concrete ways that we make job quality real and we're intentional about building that in to everything we say about what our economy should be.

Meghan McCarty Carino (31:37)

Angela, you mentioned the influence of the events of the summer around racial justice, the influence that that has had on the work of the task force. What kinds of opportunities does this moment, this national moment of reckoning over racial justice, what kind of opportunities does that present to kind of actually make progress on these equity issues?

Angela Glover Blackwell (32:03)

Well, the opportunity is to take what Julie just talked about in terms of the quality jobs and make sure that the people who need those jobs, who are least likely to get really high quality jobs, the people for whom the ladders of opportunity to continue to move up are often non-existent or weak and break, how we actually center the people who are left behind because of racism, current, historical, and predictable, that they are able to fully participate and move forward. Understanding that this nation has a racist history is the first step to people understanding that we have to be conscious of race as we think about this building a just society going forward.

It's hard for people to grasp this when they are ahistorical in their orientation and in denial about what's right in front of them. What the murder of George Floyd did for millions of white Americans, is it made it unavoidable to see state-sponsored violence being perpetuated against a Black man because he was Black, and his life did not matter. This is not a new thing for people who are Black. They know it. But for too many people who are white, they just didn't want to see it. But because people were on lock down, they were sitting in front of their cable televisions hour in and hour out, they all saw it and they saw that police officer looking in the camera, hand in his pocket, casually killing a Black man because of this is what he does and you couldn't deny that's what you were looking at.

We have to take that insight and apply it to work, jobs, housing, education, democratic participation and understand that same disregard that they witnessed exist in the workplace, exist in the educational space, exists in the democratic space, exists in the infrastructure investment and do something different. One of the things that we are concerned about, particularly in California, 75% ... I bet it's 75. It was 73% not long ago, but let me just stick with the data I know. At least 73% of all children in California under 18 are of color. Young people in California are of color. This crisis will devastate them for years and years to come.

Not only does it mean that they're coming into the workforce without a lot of jobs being there, but that means they don't get started on time. That means that they don't start in the jobs that they were training for. They take whatever they can get. It impacts their lifelong earnings. It impacts their ability to start a family, even determines what their life expectancy would be. If we care about equity and inclusion and justice and racial equity, we need to place a priority on young people and make sure that we're using public resources and private resources and public policy to get them the start that they deserve. We've got to focus on that and understand that the racial dimensions of discrimination and all of the other things have to be taken into account. You can't just say, "Open it up to people under a certain age." You've got to say, "What are the challenges for the Black community? What are the challenges for the indigenous and the Latin X community?" And make sure that they're being addressed.

It means that we cannot pretend that just having a transportation system means that everybody's going to have access to it. People of color disproportionately dispense on buses and public transit, but they don't have as many riders. And so they're cutting back, but yet, it's people of color, low income, who are the frontline workers that have to get to work. We have to place a priority on making sure that our public transit system will actually meet those needs. We know who the care givers are. We know who the frontline workers are. We know who the cleaners are. We don't have to guess where we have to make sure we have living wage jobs to be able to help the people who are going to suffer most.

That's what equity requires. Those are the kinds of things that we need to focus on. And we need to take the outrage that we felt about the murder of George Floyd and know that that murder is a slow murder that is happening for Black and brown people all across this country in every realm of which they are participants. And if we want to find a move beyond it, it's going to take race consciousness, it's going to take investments that are going a little beyond what we would ordinarily do. And we're going to have to measure how we're doing in terms of how the people who are disproportionately left behind are making progress.

Meghan McCarty Carino (37:10)

Julie, I know there are so many issues that the task force is tackling. There are too many to probably talk about, but I thought we might drill down on one of the initiatives called High Road Partnerships that California is undertaking. What is this program and how might they help advance job quality?

Julie Su (37:29)

Great. Yes, you're right. The range of issues is really broad, reflective of obviously the range of need. It's everything from dealing with broadband and access to broadband, which is squarely in all the issues that we've just talked about, especially who doesn't have a real access, how that affects different regions of California, to real attention to small businesses and providing small business support. So the task force did launch a campaign around shop local to try to support local businesses in the economic recovery, but on High Road Training Partnerships, again, something that predates this pandemic, but is something we've doubled down on as a solution to many of the challenges.

And the idea behind High Road Training Partnerships is that all of our workforce strategies have to start with demand. They have to start with where the jobs are. And I think there's what Angela's comments in this conversation really highlights is there's at least two elements to that. One is that there are good jobs already. And we need to look at where those jobs are, where they're growing and ensure that there is equity in those jobs. Who's getting those jobs? Who even knows that they exist? Who's getting the proper training and the access to them? And how do we deliberately break down racial barriers, especially as they apply to African Americans and Latinos, into those jobs.

And an example of that is in the state. We want to make sure that we are living by the principles that we espouse for others in California. So the state as an employer has tens of thousands of good jobs with vacancies and we're being very deliberate, including launching a specific pilot in Los Angeles to ensure that we are getting more Black and brown candidates for those jobs and candidates who have experienced other kinds of barriers, including involvement with justice system, homelessness and the like.

And then the other piece of that is lifting up the jobs that are not currently good jobs. There's nothing inevitable about any job that makes it a bad job, a low wage job, an exploitative job. Oftentimes, as Angela has already highlighted, the jobs that are most exploitative are the ones in which you have people of color working in them, oftentimes women of color working in them. But there's nothing about care work or back of the house restaurant work. There's nothing inevitable about any of those things. Janitor or toilet work, that makes them low wage. So we have to be really laser focused on exploiting the notion that some of those jobs are just low wage jobs and really figuring out how we lift them up.

So High Road Training Partnerships is about doing that. It's about taking employers who have good jobs or industries where we can elevate the jobs and creating partnerships, meaning between management and labor, between employers and employees to come together to look at what are the industry needs and how do we train people for those needs? And how do we open up the pathways to those jobs? And we have, before the pandemic, we had eight pilot High Road Training Partnerships in eight different industries. We're now expanding them. They already are in, but they will be in many of the industries that we talk about a lot. They're in care. How do we uplift care workers? They are in the imports, in trucking, in construction. There's just a whole range of industries where there are good jobs. We want pathways to them, and we want to train people who otherwise would not be able to get those jobs for them or we want to uplift those jobs through these partnerships.

And there's a really deliberate focus on workers being at the table to design those training programs, to design the future of those industries. And in attention to climate, making sure that all of these efforts are also good for our environment. This goes back to what I said earlier, that every initiative we have, every policy proposal is an opportunity to create jobs in the communities that need them the most. So when we're talking about building more housing to end the homeless crisis and those who are precariously housed, we're going to need to build housing. And we need to make sure that the people who build those homes can afford those homes. Same with all of our climate work and clean water, transportation. They're all opportunities for good jobs. So High Road Training Partnerships is one key strategy to making sure that we build inequity into that job growth.

Meghan McCarty Carino (42:05)

Just one last quick question before we get to the audience questions. We have a great audience of folks who are really engaged on these issues. So I want to ask each of you, what is one quick thing that folks here can do kind of in their own lives to support a more fair and just recovery in their own communities? Angela, do you want to start?

Angela Glover Blackwell (42:30)

Sure. Everybody can be in this conversation. This is the time for people to take individual initiative to say, "How can I help to keep the conversation going about how we become an anti-racist nation?" It is not enough just to say that I am not a racist. People have to say, "I am anti-racist. I am working to do everything I can to break down a system that has excluded based on race and made it so difficult for so many people." We need to have that conversation and move forward. We need to not let people get away with ignorance, that we have a history in this country and whether it's painful or not, it is history and we need to hold people accountable for knowing it. That is a nation that was founded on genocide, stolen land, human bondage and slave labor.

And when we got to a certain year, whatever you want to say, none of that went away. The narrative continued to be there. Help people to understand that history. Ask yourself in everything that you see your community doing, how do we make sure that we are being fully inclusive and advancing racial equity. When we think of infrastructure, we often think of roads and bridges and public transit, but we also know that the part of the infrastructure has to be the care that people need, whether it's childcare or eldercare. Part of the infrastructure has to be housing and housing policy and housing availability that allows people to live close to work, to live in dignity, to live in communities that allow them to be able to access opportunity. Have that conversation. And when those things are happening in your local community, ask who's being left behind, who needs to have this investment and how do we put our resources there?

The next thing we need to do is we need to hold our elected officials accountable. We need to have a North Star that we're carrying in our minds about what we want to be as a state, as a nation, as a city, as a village. And when you have an opportunity to put someone in office, ask yourself how that person operates in relationship to where we need to go. Combine our personal values with our voting and our democratic participation. I think those are things that everybody can do, but people who are lucky enough to be in policy positions, to be elected officials, to be owners of business, understand that it's not just the right thing to do. It is the economically prudent thing to do, to be able to build a fully inclusive society that achieves racial equity. It is good for the heart and it is good for the economy. And it is good for the democracy.

Meghan McCarty Carino (45:15)

And Julie, what is one thing that you would advise folks to take personal action on this?

Julie Su (45:21)

Do I have to follow that? I was going to say, and I just want to repeat, that it has never been, but I think these moments have really just driven home for everybody. It's not enough to be non-racist. We really, really have to fight for a truly just and equal society, on the basis of race. And I think being really intentional and laser focused on that in all of ... Not just in our work, but I think personally continuing to raise the issue of specifically being embracing the notion of racial justice as the North Star is just so key. I mean, I'll build on what Angela said earlier so eloquently about what the George Floyd murder meant, not just in that moment, but in terms of what it represents everywhere.

I think those who saw the video, saw that one of the cops who stood by was an Asian-American cop. And for me, I think that that's also symbolic of what is the role of all of us in terms of when we speak out, when we intervene, when we demand better, when we use our voices, when we are in that space, to not just stop something awful from happening, but from actually allowing something right and good to happen. I would say that everybody has that power, not just in our workplaces and through our any positions of policymaking or the power, but in all of our interpersonal relationships, I think building in this notion that racial equity, it is key to a just society and is how we want to measure who we are is just so important.

And what we measure determines how we work, it determines what we do. So I think to be really concrete on the labor and workforce side of things, really think about what we're measuring and are we actually creating more opportunity that shows that we're breaking down racial barriers in our work. Are we actually increasing the numbers of Black and brown people in our work environments, in our programs? I'll say that I've been so inspired by the people I've worked with on the task force, on the Future of Work Commission, who are fireless in raising this theme and making sure that we're really deliberate and really intense attentional about that.

I would say that everybody can do that. And then I would just, I think a part and parcel of that is that we ... I would ask that we all reject this notion that every job is a good job, that people should just be grateful for any job. I think if we just stopped repeating that, I think that, it's harmful to our economy, it's also harmful to all of our principals around racial equity. And I think we need to start looking at, we want to build jobs that any of us would be proud to do, that we would be willing to work for. So I think that really embracing the notion that job quality is integral to a strong economy, that inequity is bad for our economy, it's not just bad for workers. I think that's really important in terms of our messaging about what we stand for and also in our embrace of how we do our work.

Meghan McCarty Carino (48:49)

I want to bring you guys some of the audience questions. First one, "How are you thinking about job quality for independent workers in recovery, specifically as pertains to workers like day laborers?"

Julie Su (49:07)

Right.

Meghan McCarty Carino (49:07)

You can take that, Julie.

Julie Su (49:12)

Sure. I'll say something briefly about that. I mean, absolutely, right. So day laborers tend to fit into the demographic groups that we've been talking about. They are largely people of color. Many of them are undocumented. And so definitely the idea that we need to make sure that all of our attention to uplifting the quality of work that people get and the protections that they have, I think day laborers are absolutely key to that. Another part of that is just the idea of worker voice being so important. Day laborers are one of the shiny examples, certainly in California, but also across the country, of how lifting their voices, demanding day laborer centers, demanding certain standards in terms of the work that they get, was really key in lifting up the work in that industry and in raising awareness among employers and hirers about that. So I think that it's a really important example of the value worker voice and listening to workers who are most directly affected for the kinds of things we need to do.

Meghan McCarty Carino (50:18)

The next question is about unemployment insurance. The expansion of unemployment insurance to many more workers has been a big challenge for California and for many states. What are you learning about unemployment insurance in this moment that you would like to see inform permanent changes to our UI system?

Julie Su (50:38)

So much. Angela, is that a-

Angela Glover Blackwell (50:41)

I'm definitely deferring to you on that one. I will fill in.

Julie Su (50:43)

So, so much. I'll say a few things and I'm sure I will leave some things out. Number one is that we need to reimagine our unemployment insurance system as a human-centered support for people who are going through hard times. That's in everything from looking again at the amount of benefits, to how we provide those benefits, to the ways that state communicate, and I'll just own that in California, we have a long way to go and doing better by Californians in terms of just communication about what's happening when you're applying for UI. How do we make it easier to apply, easier to get through the process, and easier to get benefits?

I'll also say that our unemployment insurance system has shown fractures just like everything else. So there are workers who are left out of unemployment insurance benefits. Oftentimes, they're the ones who are most vulnerable, people who've been working in non-continuous or insecure or low wage jobs who don't qualify. Under federal law, undocumented workers are not eligible for unemployment insurance. So that's a group that has been left out of that system. In California, we've tried to make up for it through other sources of funding, but that's definitely one of the real limits of unemployment insurance, that if we could create a better system, I think those are the kinds of things we would have to look at.

Meghan McCarty Carino (52:13)

We also had-

Julie Su (52:14)

Including-

Meghan McCarty Carino (52:14)

Oh, sorry, Angela.

Angela Glover Blackwell (52:15)

I just wanted to add, including that we need to think about how we measure unemployment, we need to really talk about that because, you know, these things are tied together. That our whole system is not one that actually is constantly thinking about how to include more people and how to help people reach their full potential. Our support systems are based on a concept of safety net rather than on a concept of steps and platforms and ladders that allow people to move up and reach their full potential and trampolines when they fall off so they can get right back on the wrong. We need to rethink the whole thing. And unemployment insurance is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of how it's reflected that we have a distorted notion about what the public sector is there to help people do.

Meghan McCarty Carino (52:57)

Yeah, I think that relates to a number of questions that we've gotten about the idea of a universal basic income, which the unemployment situation has kind of raised that with having basically an impetus to kind of have a minimum wage of unemployment, with the \$600 extra that is no longer coming. But what are your thoughts on kind of universal basic income as we kind of look forward to improving job quality, but for those who may not have the opportunity?

Angela Glover Blackwell (53:29)

I'll say a little bit before Julie May have a lot more to say. I prefer the language of guaranteed income rather than the focus on universal. Guaranteed income, which means that we make sure that there is a level of support that people can count on. And I think the examples in Mississippi and in Stockton, California of a guaranteed income, working with a pilot of people who are already in a low income bracket and the results of these pilots so far just underscore what your gut would tell you, that people need money for the basics. People are spending their money on the kinds of things that you would spend yours on, on an emergency that comes up here and there, an educational opportunity. I think that this is part of what we need to rethink in terms of the social contract in America.

Julie Su (54:20)

Yeah, I would echo that. And just to highlight that, like in California, obviously Mayor Michael Tubbs in Stockton has led piloting of these kinds of ideas. And I think that in California, we really pride ourselves on strong labor policies that protect workers from minimum wages. One of the first states to sign a \$15 minimum wage. I think that we really ... And local entities that have set even higher wages. I think that we really need this, to Angela's point, about re-imagining how we think about work and about like just human security. What does that look like in a society in which we don't want ... Nobody who's working full-time year-round should be living in poverty. Nobody should be having to piece together life through multiple temporary jobs because one is not enough for them to live on.

I think that idea of a guaranteed income it's just really part and parcel of that. And as you said, we've seen the pandemic has given us a lens into what do we need to do in the worst of times and how do we translate that into in better times how do we make sure that we're not just planning for crises all the time, but we're really planning for security and a sense of place and belonging and taking full advantage of everybody's capabilities and talent and the full diversity of what we have.

Meghan McCarty Carino (55:56)

We've had a number of questions about caregiving and how to address equity issues through systems and how you deal with caregiving in California. What are you guys thinking about that?

Angela Glover Blackwell (56:13)

I'm going to have to go in a second. I did comment that caregiving should be thought of as part of our basic infrastructure. We also need to understand that the caregivers are so essential. We need to make sure that people are making living wages, livable wages. We need to make sure that they have the care and support they need that they're providing the others in terms of access to health benefits and time to spend with families. We need to treat caregivers with the respect that we are hoping that they will give to our children and our elders and those of us who are in firm. It is so backwards that the very

people who we're looking to when we are most in need, we're not treating them with the respect that they deserve, is we're quite focused on it with the task force. Thank you.

Meghan McCarty Carino (56:59)

Angela. Thank you so much. If you have to drop out. Thanks so much.

Julie Su (57:03)

Yeah, thank you, Angela. She's absolutely right. What Angela said, both at the task force and in the Future of Work Commission, care has come up as a real priority. I think we all see the need. We all see that, again, we've said this already, but in a pandemic, the essential workforce that does this work and says we haven't been treated essential. I think we are really focused on addressing. And care really runs the gamut. We're talking about from childcare to elder care, from individual home care to residential care homes, to skilled nursing facilities and the like. Care really is broad. So we're looking at it from all of those angles and hoping to launch and announce a few initiatives on how to really take care of those who care for the rest of us.

Meghan McCarty Carino (57:54)

Thanks so much. I think, yeah, we're out of time. So back to Maureen.

Maureen Conway (57:56)

Yeah. That has been such a great conversation. Thank you all so much. Angela, Julie, Meghan, terrific job. I know that there were a lot of questions that we didn't get to, but this has been just a fantastic conversation and I really appreciate it. We can learn so much from you as we're kind of thinking about, how do we build our company back to work better for working people? Huge thanks to the audience. We had great engagement in the chat and questions on Twitter. So really, huge thanks to all of you for being with us. And many thanks to my Aspen colleagues who do such a fabulous job behind the scenes organizing these events. So really so many thanks. Everybody, please do take a moment to respond to our quick feedback survey at the close of this webinar or send us an email at eop.program@aspeninstitute.org. Let us know what you think. We'd love to hear from you. And we hope you'll join us again for an Opportunity in America discussion. Thanks everybody. Bye-bye.