

August 2018 *Solidarity Is This* Podcast
Episode 13: Mother Earth

Guest: **Colette Pichon-Battle**

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DEEPA: Hello, everyone! My name is Deepa Iyer and I'm your host for *Solidarity Is This*, a monthly podcast where we explore how people and organizations are expressing and thinking about solidarity in a multiracial America. Now this month, our podcast is called *Mother Nature*. We're discussing climate justice through the lens of the Gulf Coast and, in particular, the state of Louisiana. Thirteen years ago this month—that would be August of 2005—Hurricane Katrina resulted in the devastation of a 90,000-square-mile area in parts of Mississippi and Louisiana. Up to 400,000 people were displaced altogether from their homes and their neighborhoods. Black people were particularly affected by Hurricane Katrina. They lost their lives, they couldn't return to their neighborhoods, and their neighborhoods and communities did not receive adequate recovery funds or assistance. According to CityLab, compared to the year 2000, about 100,000 fewer African-Americans live in New Orleans now.

Many of us will remember the images from New Orleans's Ninth Ward, where people were climbing on tops of roofs and writing in chalk, "Help Me." Or will remember the scenes from the Superdome, which housed those who were displaced and who began to be called, strangely, refugees in their own country. It's thirteen years later, and a lot has been done in terms of the recovery and the resilience work in New Orleans and all along the Gulf Coast. What can we learn from the struggles for dignity, the right to return, and multiracial organizing in the Gulf Coast?

I'm in conversation to talk about that and much more with the remarkable Colette Pichon-Battle. Colette is the founder and executive director of The Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy which focuses on climate justice and ecological equity. In 2016, Colette was named a White House Champion of Change for Climate Equity, and in 2008, Colette was awarded the US Civilian Medal of Honor from the state of Louisiana for her work around multiracial and crossregional alliance-building with the Katrina recovery.

Colette, thank you so much for joining me on this episode of *Solidarity Is This*.

COLETTE: Thank you so much for having me, I'm excited for the conversation.

DEEPA: Great, so I actually want to start off a little bit—I introduced your formal bio, but I actually want to ask you if you can share with us what your point of entry was into social change work. How did you start, who do you do it for — and if you can kind of trace your

trajectory to what you were doing in August 2005 before Hurricane Katrina and how your life changed.

COLETTE: I remember, in August 2005, I was in the DC area and I was starting to look for a house. And I remember thinking, *wow, this real estate is really expensive here*, and I was learning about the different DC neighborhoods that I wanted to live in, and sort of, you know, planning out the next phase of my life. I was finished with law school, had a few years of practicing law under my belt and was just excited about a new life and a new way of living, and I was in the dreaming phase. I remember, I was sitting watching the television and there was the announcement of Katrina. I think she had hit Florida already, and they showed a picture of the storm in the middle of the gulf. And I just remember seeing the television and thinking, *I've never seen one that big before*. I mean, I grew up with hurricanes. These are not things that scare people like me, it's just sort of a fact of life when you grow up on the Gulf Coast. I just remember calling my mom and just finding out where she was. I got a little scared, and I didn't think anything of it, you know, I found out she was okay, her brother, my uncle.

DEEPA: And your family was in Louisiana, right, which is where you were born and raised?

COLETTE: That's correct, I was born in North Louisiana and raised in South Louisiana. My mom's family is from South Louisiana, they've been there since the 1770s.

DEEPA: Oh, wow.

COLETTE: So we live on the bayou, you've got my grandparents and her grandparents and their grandparents have been there for just a really long time. Again, we live with water, we live with floods, we live with storms. And that's where she was, she evacuated to Lafayette. She went west, and Katrina, the storm, came up and turned east right with a direct hit to Slidell all the way to Pass Christian, Mississippi. The eye of the storm was huge, it crossed the Louisiana-Mississippi border. So, anyway, our neighborhood, our community was in the direct hit. Unlike New Orleans, it turned from New Orleans. They still, of course, as you know, got hit, but the eye of the storm turned east and my mom was able to go west. My community was inundated by a tidal surge, and the tidal surge that inundated my community then went into the lake and helped to burst the levees in New Orleans and those levees flooded New Orleans afterwards. So if you can just imagine just a wall of water knocking out some communities. That water has, you know, it's been displaced into the low-lying areas which is the lake. And the levees that surround New Orleans, especially around sort of that east side, that's where you saw several of the levee breaches. I believe it was like nine levee breaches just from that lake side. We received the surge, and they received the sort of dump. New Orleans received the dump.

DEEPA: You were watching all of this happen and unfold in Washington, D.C., and what made you say, 'you know what, I'm needed somewhere else'?

COLETTE: I don't even know that I thought that clearly. What was happening on the ground was — so, my family, my mom is from a huge Louisiana Catholic family. That's just shorthand for:

it's a lot of us! And the phone lines were jammed, you couldn't actually get to your family, you couldn't verify that people were okay. All I was seeing, you know, I had great coverage because I was in D.C., so I could see the TV crews and all these things, the helicopter shots, but my family, who remained in Slidell, we couldn't get in touch with them. Folks were still trying to get out, they didn't leave when my mom left. One of my aunts was still there, one of my uncles was still there, and several of my cousins, my young cousins were still there, so I just went into a panic. I don't know that I thought anything through. I went into, *where is my family?* And you get lots of busy signals and you can't get through, then your mind really starts to race, and you have to get to them. There were a couple of days there that were pretty scary because you just, you didn't know. And once I could verify that my family was alive, there were gatherings happening in DC, and I just remember, there was a march in DC. It was a big march, and someone called me and said, 'do you want to speak at this march about Katrina?' This was, like, maybe—I don't remember which march it was, it was a pretty big march. And I just remember, I got to go on after Joan Baez, and I remember waving at, like, Cornell West and Maxine Waters, I was like *oh my gosh*.

DEEPA: I'm sure you held your own, Colette, knowing you!

COLETTE: My entry was a speech on the National Mall in D.C., right after Katrina, telling the President of the United States that he needed to have his priorities checked and to get some help down there. That was the beginning. That was the beginning. After that, I got some phone calls to be at meetings, and I learned about organizers. I hadn't really heard that word before. I learned about this whole movement of people working for, not just justice, but liberation. These were not things that I thought I needed. You know, I had successfully maneuvered this Western educational system to a particular level of attainment, so I didn't think I was in need of liberation, certainly. But Katrina's one of those moments where I realized, as a Black woman in this country, that we were not free and that the government didn't care, and I needed to get in there and at least try to help attain some level of liberation for me and my people.

DEEPA: So I'm trying to really get a sense of what you were facing. So on one level, you're trying to deal with the immediate needs of your family—right?—and yourself, but then there's the broader displacement that's going on, there's the right to return, there are recovery efforts. Can you talk us through how you began to start to get involved with some of that organizing? And, as you know, this is a podcast on multiracial solidarity, so I'm also curious if you can identify both some of the tensions but also some of the opportunities.

COLETTE: I live in a very wealthy, white, conservative parish twenty miles north of New Orleans, and I live five miles from the Mississippi border. All my life, I've lived in these three different worlds—the sort of suburban, white, conservative Southeast Louisiana, the Mississippi coast was our backyard, and we had friends and family there, and then New Orleans was a place to go to and a place that I knew and understood and had ties to. So I was traversing the three almost every day to check on Mississippi, to live in Slidell. You had to go to New Orleans if you wanted to get any information, it was sort of the information hub. And, at the time, you know, the politics were playing in this, too. Mississippi had a Republican governor, Louisiana had a

Democratic governor, and that actually played into the conversations that were happening and who was getting access to what. I remember going to New Orleans because there were meetings happening, there were—all these folks I met in DC were telling me to go meet this person in New Orleans or go find this person. One of my first meetings was one called by Dr. Beverly Wright. She didn't know who I was and someone told me to go to this meeting, it was a meeting of mostly Black folks, and Dr. Wright was talking with a lot of Black homeowner, long-term, long-standing residents of the city, so I started learning about what happening in places like New Orleans East. New Orleans East is part of the Ninth Ward. People don't talk about it like that, but that whole Ninth Ward got wiped out, it wasn't just the Lower Nine. It was New Orleans East, the Lower Nine, the Upper Nine. That whole side of the city contained Black wealth, contained Black poverty, but it also is where our Vietnamese community lived. We did not have a big Latino population at the time because the economy of Southeast Louisiana was not a place to migrate to. There were no jobs, not for people who were from there, not for people who were migrating for economic opportunity. But it was really interesting because what was happening in the Ninth Ward wasn't just the devastation. For the first time in my entire life, I saw Vietnamese and Black folks talking to each other. They were in the same situation. I mean, all my life, I had grown up understanding a little bit of tension, or at least sort of a distant nod that Black folks were able to do with Vietnamese folks, but it wasn't really an alliance. But after Katrina, everyone was in the same boat. So, learning about the housing issue in the East—but then learning about the dumping that was about to happen to the Vietnamese community, they were about the put the waste from the debris in the Vietnamese community near a watershed, in a place that floods over and over again. So then I start to see the Vietnamese community organizing and the Black folks in New Orleans East showing up in solidarity around their leadership. And I remember, maybe a year or so after that, the People's Institute for Survival and Beyond were calling meetings at the Children's Defense Fund. So this is Dr. Kimberley Richards calling meetings and and Mary Joseph of the Children's Defense Fund. These are two Black women, very strong matriarchs of the city, were holding space for us to meet as organizers, which I was still not sure that's what I was. So at these meetings, I started to see people who were working on juvenile detention—these were white women who were working on juvenile detention, Black women working on education, Vietnamese folks who were working on environment. And then, of course, a lot of leaders started to come, folks who were working on women's reproductive issues, so this is Black, this is white, this is Vietnamese, this is young, this is old, these are people in Orleans, but also folks like me from St. Tammany and Plaquemines, we're coming together and we ended up forming the Greater New Orleans Organizers Roundtable. This is where I met people like Norris Henderson who were working on the rights of the incarcerated. You know, I didn't know what happened to the people who were in jail, I didn't know what happened to the schools. These were not things that I immediately thought of, I thought of my home and my family, and then with more and more information at these community meetings, started to really see the scope of, not just the impact of the storm, but the impact of the systems that we were all living in.

DEEPA: I'm so glad you mentioned that roundtable because, as you know, a couple of months when I was out there and had a chance to meet with some of the folks who were participating in that roundtable that you mentioned—which is still going on, right? And these are groups like

VAYLA and Mary Queen of Vietnam, and Norris Henderson is with VOTE, these are groups that have specific issues and communities that they work with but there is a sense, I gleaned, at least from my preliminary conversations with folks and watching how they talked and how—you were also in conversation with so many of them—that there is a sense of, ‘we’re in this together.’ And we have to show up for each other, like you said, regardless of what the issue is. And I’m curious to know how that’s continued, right. How, thirteen years later, how has the strength of that multiracial organizing, how is it coming to bear in this moment, for example?

COLETTE: The one thing I have to say about the Greater New Orleans Organizers Roundtable, you know, it’s not as active as it used to be. In a couple of weeks, we will be at the thirteenth year of Katrina, but all of us who met each other in that moment still have each other’s cell phone numbers in our phones. We know where the other is and, when there’s a call, those calls are answered. When I saw you in New Orleans, Norris made one phone call, and when Norris calls, someone is listening and he needs whoever is listening to know about the strength of the ground. And that it’s one thing that I could say, I think all of us pull from the Greater New Orleans Organizers Roundtable. There’s now a listserv so you can see, especially when storms or protests or something really ridiculous is happening, there’s just an activation that happens using that infrastructure. We fought together, we were in really horrible conditions together. In addition to this storm, many of us had to put our necks out. I’m thinking about Norris, I’m thinking about Mary Joseph, I’m thinking about people who really took hits so that we could learn how messed up the systems were. And with regard to our Vietnamese brothers and sisters, that was another immigrant community that had not been integrated very well into many other parts of the New Orleans culture. They were strong and secure in their neighborhoods, but this was really one of the first times I saw people listening to, like—there’s a reality of the Vietnamese folks in New Orleans East that we have to know. There’s also a reality of Native Americans south of New Orleans that we have to know. And it helped me to start to question: who are the communities in and around the New Orleans area? What’s happening there, really? How are the systems working against them and how do we use the process that we started at the Greater New Orleans Roundtable, a process of listening, the process of authentic community building, which is a slow build—how do we use those processes to advance not just recovery but our resistance to whatever is coming next, because we knew something was gonna come next.

DEEPA: You and I had this conversation at another time where we talked about how we worked in crisis moments, you know, a lot of my work happened after 9/11, a lot of your work after Katrina, and that people sometimes say, well, we’re in post-9/11 America or we’re in post-Katrina. And it doesn’t really feel “post,” right, in many ways. It feels like we’re still struggling with a lot of the same issues, and so I’m wondering if you could talk a little bit about that. Yeah, maybe it’s post-recovery, but is it really? What is actually still, as you said—what are the next fights on the horizon that people have to be geared up for, particularly as it relates to climate justice?

COLETTE: I remember at one point sitting down and thinking to myself, the leaders of the civil rights movement who are still with us probably see Katrina and her recovery as a continuation,

it doesn't feel like post-Civil Rights, it probably still feels like they're fighting for civil rights. And I remember coming to that conclusion because the recovery is so long and it continues. I had a client the other day tell me he got a letter to recoup his FEMA money. This is part of these systems that were working, there are these recovery systems that play out in a very discriminatory way, and as a lawyer, some of the work that I got to do was around the paperwork and the legal obligations that come in disaster, and *literally a week ago* I had a meeting with a man, it wasn't just FEMA money, it was his Road Home money which was the state program that funneled federal dollars to homeowners, they're now trying to take his money back. Money that they gave him, several thousand dollars that no average person would have, and they're trying to take his money back. This is where I've come to realize that the recovery is not finished. We have not recovered. In addition to these ridiculous systems that are in place specifically to aid the middle class America, which is generally not the people that look like you or look like me or live in my community—in addition to those broken systems, the education system has been privatized, the healthcare system has been privatized, the housing that has been rebuilt has now been gentrified. I mean, there's a line like a comet. There's the sort of front part of it, then there's this long tail and it just goes on, and people are really struggling. They closed down—this is the next governor, Kathleen Babineaux Blanco was the governor at the time of Katrina but after her was Bobby Jindal, and he just gutted the health services, but the worst part was that he gutted the mental health services in a time when almost half the state was suffering from trauma that had never been experienced before.

DEEPA: It was really, I think, helpful to hear about how the systems failed, and I'm glad you talked about the charter schools and the privatization and how there was obviously not enough money that went in for the recovery but also that there was a lot of disaster capitalism and manipulation that happened with the powers that be that still is causing tremendous harm. And, yeah, it's important to take Bobby Jindal and call him out every chance we possibly can. As someone who's Indian-American, you know, I have taken many shots at him in the past, publicly as well, and I just think this is an example of someone who put into place policies that continue to devastate communities of color.

COLETTE: You know it's interesting because disaster capitalism, I think, the way it's talked about, people think private industry. You should think private industry. You should think about private industries that come in after disaster to make their money. The worst part was when the government was also part of disaster capitalism. That was a blow that you're not quite expecting. The only thing worse than the government being a part of disaster capitalism was watching elements of the social justice movement also be part of disaster capitalism, and it was really hard to watch and deal with folks who came in and ended up counter-organizing a lot of the work that was happening from locals on the ground. This was an attractive place for a lot of people to come for some reason or another. And people not from here came in and used their access to New York and California and other well-resourced places — and DC — and they used their access to build their own power, to build their own leadership, to build their own legend, and they did it, really, to the detriment of the communities that were in trauma—number one—but were also trying to work through their trauma in order to do this sort of multiracial alliance-building. It was a tough situation, and I'm really proud that, you know, at some point

people start seeing each other as people. And at some point, people move these bad actors out of their sight-line and start living with your neighbor and talking to each other and, you know, we have a lot of work to do throughout the whole Gulf Coast, but I have to say the disaster and its aftermath created an opportunity for us to get to know folks we didn't know before. And I'm hopeful as an organizer, as someone who's really looking for opportunity for real movement, I'm hopeful that not just the successes of the last 13 years, but really even the struggles that we've made it through, I'm hopeful that that's gonna be a guidepost. We all know that we can make it through struggle with each other. We all know that we can make it through a really hard situation, which means if we have to dismantle these systems that are oppressing us, it's about as big as a hurricane, and it'll be about as hard as 13 years of working together, and it turns out we can survive that. So that's how I really kind of hold my hope in this region. And as a climate leader, I'm here in California talking to you, and I just finished speaking with about a thousand people who just don't know what's happening in the Gulf Coast, in our own country.

DEEPA: Right now, you're the founder of the Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy, and it's looking at what I think we talked about earlier, the roots of the issue rather than the end of the issue. So tell us what we need to know about climate justice, ecologic equity in the Gulf Coast, and how it affects the whole country.

COLETTE: The first thing I'll say is climate change is real and it's happening. And we can't let this topic be taken by the privileged environmental movement. We've gotta get Black and brown and poor and rural communities ready for what's coming at us. What we know is that Katrina is a result of actions that we took in the 60s and 70s, the emissions that are in the air and the impact of what we have put into our climate and into our environment. The Earth just coughed out Katrina, that was from what we did in the 60s, we have not yet felt the impact of what we've done in the 70s, the 80s, the 90s, the 2000s—this is about to get really bad and Katrina, for how horrible that was, was the warning shot. This is about to get really bad, and the worst part of climate change is we're starting to think about it as just storms, and we can't be that naïve. We have to understand that we have to see these fires in California, we have to see the drought in the California Central Valley and in the Western Plains, we have to see these cold snaps in the Northeast, the lake effect snow that's coming really heavy and downpour that folks haven't really seen before or the lack of snow, which is another thing that's been happening in this area, we gotta see all this stuff as part of climate change. And what we need to know is that we're not, most of us are not going to struggle because of a storm or even a fire, it's gonna be heat. It's gonna be so hot and our poverty is going to tell us, don't run the air conditioner or we don't have an air conditioner, and we're gonna die because the heat is gonna get so bad the human body will not be actually able to take the changes that are happening to the climate. And I don't mean to be so morbid about it, but when you go through something like Katrina and you see the extreme of what will happen and you see who it happens to, this is why I'm in this climate movement. It's because I know what communities are gonna get left behind. I know who's not gonna get the services, I know who's not gonna be able to restore themselves. The other thing I'll say is it's happening because this economy that we use, the economy that we depend on, the capitalist models of taking for gain with unlimited consequences and unlimited profit, it actually has consequences, it actually is impacting us. We take from this

earth, we put things into the air, and we drive our cars and we live very comfortable lives. And we are changing the atmosphere of the climate, and it's starting to have impacts like—the Polar ice caps, which I know people don't like to talk about, they're melting, water in the ocean is expanding, so sea levels are actually rising, and most of the population of the globe lives at the coast.

DEEPA: Yeah, I was just thinking about, my home state in India, Kerala, has been dealing with tremendous floods that they haven't seen in a century, just, you know, in the past couple of weeks. This is happening everywhere.

COLETTE: This is happening everywhere. And Baton Rouge two years ago had a rain—they call it rain events now, they don't even know what to call this stuff because it's so new. It's just a downpouring of water that floods, and then that water has to go somewhere and it goes to low-lying areas. And guess who lives in low-lying areas in cities across the US? This is Black and poor people, this is by urban design. The segregation and the redlining of the past is now wreaking havoc on us, and the worst part of the climate changing, with regard to sea level rise—so not just what happens in the rain and the river, but the sea is encroaching—is that we are about to, in South Louisiana, have to deal with mass relocation. And mass relocation is something that we dealt with during Katrina, and the worst part of mass relocation is that you have to leave and go to a new place and you're not necessarily the person controlling that decision. It's not 'cause you want to, it's 'cause you have to. And the only thing worse than that is how receiving communities react to mass movements of people, and this is why it's important for us to realize not just migration from climate but how this country is dealing with immigration. This is the connection. We cannot be Americans sitting by watching what happens with immigration and not understand that climate change is about to have all of us become migrants in some way or another. And we need to understand that there are systems in place that allow for certain types of relief and benefits based on citizenship, that's true, but there's another social thing that's happening. *"This is my town, you don't belong here,"* when we start to let that be the social mantra, it's gonna come back on us. And you can ask any Katrina evacuee how they were received in Houston, in Atlanta, in Memphis, even in Baton Rouge. They became 'Katrina kids,' they became 'Katrina refugees,' they were ostracized, they were treated differently, they were looked down upon, they were exploited, they were discriminated against, and these were citizens.

DEEPA: What you've just done is pull it all together, as I knew you would. But the point I want to really underscore for people listening is, the reason that, what I've learned from you, right, the reason that Black and brown folks, working class communities, have to be part of this conversation is because there are so many intersections with multiple identities that we particularly have. Whether it's around socioeconomic status and access to benefits, whether it's around immigration, I mean, climate change is not an issue that's in a silo. It actually has all these implications and the way that we work on these other issues will also affect what happens around climate change as well. I just want to thank you for actually making those connections. And I'm curious to know, what is it that—well, either what you all are doing at the Gulf Coast Center for Law & Policy or other best practices you're seeing around the country.

How are Black and brown communities organizing to work on a just transition or to understand how to protect and preserve our communities, can you talk a little bit about some of those models or best practices?

COLETTE: You know, I can talk about this stuff all day long, and so I'll lift one up, which is the Southern Movement Assembly which is a formation of social justice leaders from 13 Southern states coming together—from their own issue, these are not climate activists. I'm one of the few people in the formation who works on climate, but we all work on justice and we're all working on liberation and human rights together in a unique Southern landscape and what that means for many of our communities. And this is a multiracial alliance across a very large Southern region and we come together to really figure out what's going on, to lay a landscape, to understand what's happening to us. But there's something really beautiful that's happening, too, which is methods of self-governance are being developed and practiced. I mean, what is that, self-governance? Who cares about that? We've got a government, who needs self-governance? But it matters when your democracy is being demolished, it matters when the system that you think will always be there is being slowly dismantled and you don't have the ability in your community to assess what's happening, to prioritize what we're gonna work on together, to govern ourselves, to hold each other accountable. These are things we need to figure out even more than we need to, you know, figure out where we're gonna relocate to or how much CO2 we're putting into the air, because the social impact of this changing climate is going to exacerbate all the justice issues. This is what we learned in Katrina. It's going to advance the human rights violations. This is what we learned in Katrina. The Southern Movement Assembly is saying: something is brewing, and it's not just gonna hit one city, it's gonna hit the Southern region, it's gonna hit all of us. And so there are people from Appalachia, people from the Gulf, people from the urban center of Atlanta, people from rural Arkansas, I mean, it's coming together to really figure things out. And so I'm excited about that formation because I believe it's building an infrastructure that we're going to be able to use in ways that we cannot yet anticipate. Because what is about to happen, we don't know what it is, but we know it's coming.

DEEPA: We're always poised, I think, for rapid response and crisis work and disaster work, but the importance of creating an infrastructure that actually envisions something different, right, is absolutely important. Colette, you're so amazing. Thank you so much for the work you do, thank you for being the strong leader that you are that so many of us look up to and learn from, and thanks for being on the podcast with me.

COLETTE: Thank you so much for having, it has been my absolute pleasure, I really appreciate it.

DEEPA: I want to thank Colette again for painting a picture for us about the realities thirteen years after Katrina, for reminding us what's at stake all around the country and the world, and for also giving us some guidance about what we need to be thinking about and creating in terms of networks and connections around the country. All of the resources that Colette and I talked about in our conversation will be part of the Solidarity Syllabus for this month, so please make sure that you take a look at it, download it, share it. It will be up at www.solidarityis.org.

Before we leave the topic of New Orleans, I also wanted to urge people who visit the city to make sure that you take something called the Hidden Histories Tour to get a sense of the Black history and resistance struggles there. I recently had a chance to do that twice this year, and I learned so much and was deeply moved and inspired. You can find out more at www.hiddenhistory.us.

Now, at the beginning of the podcast, I mentioned that this month marks the 1-year anniversary of the *Solidarity Is This* podcast, so I wanted to take a moment to thank some of the folks who've supported me on my podcasting journey. Abdullah Rufus of Bedrock Communications, who produces the podcast each month, has been an invaluable resource. I also want to shout out to Shelby House and Laura Li for their research and work on the Solidarity Syllabus which accompanies every podcast, and I want to thank the Open Society Foundations and Race Forward, which have supported my work on the Solidarity project. And, of course, I'm grateful to all of you out there who are listening, downloading, and sharing these podcasts. I appreciate hearing from you about month to month about how the guests on these podcasts are inspiring you and influencing your own analysis and your actions. Please continue to reach out to me — drop me a line at deepa@deepaiyer.com with your feedback, suggestions for topics and guests I should bring onto the podcast as we keep pushing forward. Thank you so much for listening. I'll see you in September for the next episode of *Solidarity Is This*.