

LAURA FLANDERS AND FRIENDS

MALAIKA JABALI ON WISCONSIN'S DISCOURAGED BLACK VOTERS

LAURA FLANDERS: Wisconsin is an important swing state again this election year. The Republican National Convention will be held there in Milwaukee, and both parties are vying to claim the attention of Wisconsin's voters in the general election this fall. That all leads us to today's guest who recently relocated to the state, the award-winning journalist, author, and attorney, Malaika Jabali is the former Senior News and Politics Editor at "Essence" magazine. Her work has led her to dig into the data where she's found out that Wisconsin is one of the most racially unequal states in the country. Housing costs are up, wages are not. It has the highest Black male incarceration rate according to the sentencing project. And perhaps unsurprisingly, Wisconsin has seen a record drop in Black voter turnout. From one of this country's most progressive places to one with historic rates of inequality and police violence, Wisconsin has clearly taken a turn. Is any party or politician running today offering a fix? What or who might, and in particular, what might help Black Midwesterners like those in Milwaukee, who Donald Trump wants and Joe Biden needs. Malaika Jabali's written for "Teen Vogue", "The Guardian", and others. Her first book, "it's not you, it's CAPITALISM: Why It's Time to Break Up and How to Move On" is out this year. She is hard at work on a new book specifically about Black Midwesterners, which all makes me super happy to welcome Malaika Jabali to "Laura Flanders & Friends". Glad to have you here.

MALAIKA JABALI: Thank you, Laura. It's really great to be here.

LAURA FLANDERS: I usually start these programs by asking my guests to settle me as much as anyone, what's uppermost in their mind, top of their hearts? Who are you thinking about as we start to talk?

MALAIKA JABALI: I'm thinking about Black Midwesterners, particularly Black Milwaukeeans being here. I see the kind of economic devastation that has hit the state, that has hit the city in particular. Very viscerally, I see it when I just immediately walk outside of my door. I've not seen the abandonment of a city, of a Black community anywhere else in the country, and the data backs that up. Right now, Milwaukee has one of the worst jobless rates for Black men in the country. It has a lower median income rate, or the lowest median income rate for the 50 top metropolitan cities or metropolitan areas in the country.

LAURA FLANDERS: You wrote a piece about economic anxiety, particularly Black economic anxiety and voting patterns in Milwaukee back what, six, seven years ago. What was it that drew you to that place then, and what keeps you there?

MALAIKA JABALI: For one, it was looking at the low voter turnout from 2012 to 2016. So, it started with the data. I wanted to figure out what was going on behind the numbers. I felt that there was a very extensive narrative that I think we're still hearing now. It's almost a cottage industry of trying to figure out what happened with the White working class. What happened where you had voters who were switching from Obama to Trump? Why have so many White working class people over the last few decades gone to the Republican party? When I think at the other side of that is that you have a lot of Black non-voters. A lot of Black people are saying, we don't have any options really between the Republican and Democratic party. Those are our only two viable options. But voting for Donald Trump for many Black people is not an option. So, they tend to stay home. So, it was me trying to understand what was going on behind the numbers that most journalists, I barely saw any journalism about it. This was back in 2017. So, all the moratoria on what was going on with the election was missing a very crucial story.

- The short film you made back in 2020 called "Left Out" talks to Black Milwaukeeans about the history of their state and where their city has come today. Here's a clip.

- So, the Midwest, and the way the Midwest is looked at from the broader communities from the East Coast, from the West Coast, is that people who live in the Midwest are basically corn farmers. Okay? That's the way we are looked at. And it's as if we don't have ideas and thought processes ourselves.

- It seems to me that we have been greeting every election with what happened to the White working class, going back decades now, has anything changed? Is anything changing?

- I have seen, I think especially this election, because they know the Democratic party is almost hemorrhaging voters. If you look at some recent data last year, this is the least support and the least faith that Black people have had in the Democratic party than it's been recorded. The analysis tends to look at what are some of the more symbolic gestures that we can reward Black people with? We've got a Black vice president, we've got Black people in the cabinet, we've got Black people in this administration. But when you talk to people on the ground, a lot of that excitement and that allure really dulled after Barack Obama. So, people aren't just looking for firsts anymore, they're looking for substantive policy.

- When you talk about the gestural versus the substantive or the systemic, what do you mean?

- I think there's rhetoric and I think there's also symbolic gestures of appointments and getting a few Black faces in high places. So, when it comes to symbolic gestures, for instance, Hillary Clinton was known for saying that she carried hot sauce in her bag, and that actually insulted Black voters. Maybe she did not mean it that way, but a lot of Black voters took it that way. And so, you've got this kind of appeal, this racial appeal on one hand, these cultural appeals, but then

they lack of not only substantive policy, but a lack of substantive engagement with the community. So, Bernie Sanders actually won Wisconsin. Hillary Clinton ended up losing in their primary. Bernie Sanders got most of his Black support, so he didn't get a whole lot throughout the country, but his highest Black support at 31% was in the state of Wisconsin.

- So, how do you think Donald Trump is doing on this run? He's heading off to Milwaukee. He's been trying to bond with African Americans, weirdly through fighting the carceral state, costing himself as some big victim of the criminal justice system. How do you think that appeal is going down?

- I don't believe that he's going to win Black people in Wisconsin. I do think that there is room for maybe a larger number than expected to shift to him. But when you look at Black people as a whole, they're not en masse switching to the Republican party. I mean, even if you look at 2020, and he had plenty of cases against him and all kinds of criminality, and the way that he's even using that framing to try and appeal to Black people is just wildly racist. But he was facing that problem in 2020, and it's not like he won a large number of Black people. In fact, the voter turnout that year, even though 2016 was a historic Black decline in Black voter turnout, 2020 was even lower. So, it's not like he's winning over these people who would otherwise not be involved in the two-party system.

- The Democrats would say, well, but look at what we've done. We've seen the IRA, the Inflation Reduction Act. We've seen the American Recovery Plan. We've seen a lot of money go into infrastructure and social supports. Is it visible in a place like Milwaukee? Is it making a dent? Is it appreciated?

- For the average person, I don't think they are aware of some of those policies. And I think some of the key issues that are affecting Black people, when you look at unemployment, when you look at housing costs and affordability, it's not gonna hit that yet. I think, as we know, infrastructure developments take a long time. So, I don't think people are seeing that on the ground, but so much of this is because of really generations of abandonment. And so, the work that he might've been doing the last three years, I don't think is enough to quell the disillusionment that people have been having with the party, really since the 1970s and '80s.

- So, that brings us to the big systemic question that you answer or ask, pose perhaps in your last book about breaking up with capitalism. I mean, maybe the problem is bigger than any individual candidate or party.

- I think it is bigger than both parties. People see that they're not able to, for instance, housing for Black America is worse than it was in 1968 before the Fair Housing Act passed. So, home ownership rates have barely budged. When you look at just the affordability of college, it's

gotten way more expensive and Black men and women are more likely to carry student loan debt. So many things that should have been a part of our social safety net have been marred by this kind of individualism and anti-Blackness where everybody's not able to thrive from it. Instead of community programs, you're looking at individual small business ownership. And so, we've been trying that the last 60 years of that kind of inclusion. DEI didn't just get started when it became a boogie word for conservatives in the 2024 election. DEI has been, it's been affirmative action. It's been these kind of inclusion programs over the last 60 years. If it were going to work, I think it would've worked by now. And so, the purpose of the book is to say, why don't we give another relationship a shot? And this isn't even a new relationship. This is something that we've had during the Great Depression or as an antidote to the Great Depression. This is something that we've had right here in real America, in Wisconsin. So, let's return back to the things that actually worked for people.

- Now, when you say Wisconsin, you're referring to that Wisconsin ideal that played a role in helping to inform the New Deal going back into the 1930s. Talk about what that Wisconsin ideal was and the place that socialism had in that very state, in that very town.

- There's such a rich history here, a history of progressivism, and not just progressive politics, but radical politics. Wisconsin was the very first state to have a representative in Congress that was socialist. You had a scholar named John Commons who was an economist who considered himself a socialist. And so, his school of thought is what influenced a lot of people who are coming out of the University of Wisconsin Madison. A lot of other economists came under him, and those economists in turn, affected federal policy, specifically New Deal policy. So, along with that, you had organizing where you were able to elect the first socialist mayors and they had the longer stream, excuse me, the longer string of mayors anywhere else in the country up until the 1960s with Frank Zeidler. So, a lot of this politics is what affected and what impacted the kind of bold progressive policy we're able to have in the United States. And it's not a foreign concept. It's something that we've implemented right here in the real America.

- So, we come back to this current moment, Malaika, and I wanna just lift up your book again. It is rich, it is fun, it is feisty, and it is framed as a kind of breakup manifesto, and gives answers to all of the things that bad lovers and wooers tend to say. They're the only one, they're the best option, there's nobody else out there. They give you gifts, they make promises. What else is out there? You've alluded a little bit to the aspirations of the '30s, but there are some people that say that that New Deal didn't go far enough, that left out lots of people of color. Where do you see real opportunity today for a competitor to tempt us away from capitalism in a real way?

- Yeah, I think a lot of it is gonna have to come at the local level. I think what some of these ebbs and flows have shown us is that there's a real limit in federal policy. You have a lot of investment and a real, I think, campaign from the ownership class and the donor class to make federal policy

work for them, and they have the money to back it up. So, I think it's gonna be extremely difficult to do a lot of this at the federal level. But you can look at your city councils, you can look at your state legislatures, you can look at some of these other smaller municipalities and say, we can control some of these resources. We can look to see where we can get community land trusts, which is another way of looking at public ownership of land where there is a body of people who represent the community on a board of directors, like a nonprofit, and they maintain affordable housing.

- Do you call yourself a socialist? And if so, why? And is that term useful, do you think, in our national media here in the US?

- I do, and I do think it's useful. I think we need to plainly put a name on an ideology that can battle the kinds of entrenched hyper capitalism that we have in the United States. Calling myself a progressive is isn't enough. I don't consider myself just a progressive. I think unfortunately, the politics that are very popular, I consider radical in this country, but radical also has another meaning. It means getting to the root of the problem, and being a progressive simply doesn't do that. I think you can ask for concessions in capitalism, but I don't think it'll ever get at the root of the problem. And capitalism was based on inequality. It thrived on inequality. It continues to be maintained, because of inequality. We wouldn't have it without it. So, I think it is a fundamentally flawed system. There's a deep history of my ancestors, my forebearers connecting with socialism and understanding that it was intimately and intertwined with their liberation. Whether it was Malcolm X, W. E. B. Du Bois, who was even more left than I consider myself to be. He was a communist. Angela Davis ran on the Communist Party. Assata Shakur said that there was no liberation movement in Africa that was not fighting for socialism. So, something that the book does is demystify what it looks like and what it meant for people who are fighting for justice, not just in the United States, but all over the globe. And they look like people like me.

- We did interviews early on with Jessica Gordon Nembhard about her book, "Collective Courage", that was really about Black strategies for survival, depending on exactly the kind of cooperation, collaboration that is at the root of some of these economic alternatives that you're talking about. In that book, she quotes E. B. Du Bois, who says, "In the turn of the century, African Americans have a choice between cooperation and socialism or capitalism. They'll thrive under only one of them." So, one question for you and for her is why has socialism been so slow to be adopted in this country, especially by Black Americans here?

- We have had a lot of violence against that kind of solidarity and that kind of embrace. It's not innate to us that we foment division. It's not innate that we think of everything as a zero-sum game. We have been acculturated to, in part to believe that, and also given very few opportunities, because we have a propaganda machine through the US government, through US media, through actual law and policy that made it illegal to be socialists. We've had two versions

of the Red Scare that had violent consequences for people who believe in these kinds of systems. Martin Luther King, the Black Power Movement, the Black Panthers, they were surveilled for even any hint of thinking about any anti-capitalist thought. So, it's not just Black people, but it's leaders all over in the labor movement. You had this Sedition Acts, you had a variety of legislation in the 1919 and 1920 that made sure that we would not have any alternatives to capitalism. And what kind of system is that where it is so hell-bent on freedom, but that it does not give you the freedom to think about other ideas and other types of policies? I don't consider that very democratic.

- You are working on a new book on Black Midwesterners, I understand. What are the questions you're asking? And if folks want to be thinking about this election in complex and nuanced ways, how do you think, how are you thinking about this November and what's at stake?

- I'm just asking people what makes them lose interest in voting? I think we have to get at the heart of what does it mean to actually be a democracy? And when, for instance, you have a state like Wisconsin, where 47% of Black people have come out to vote, basically, a majority of Black people did not show up in 2016, why? Instead of forcing people into these false choices, we need to ask them what makes them thrive? What would make their lives better? What kinds of choices can we have electorally to give them that kind of life instead of forcing to under this duopoly So, my focus is on talking to people and asking them what do they want? What do they need? What are they missing? Do we even have a democracy? Have we had a democracy when it took so long for Black people to even fight for the right to vote? And then, once they get it, they realize not a whole lot is changing materially once they do have that right. I'm saying elected officials, I've been seeing the writing on the wall for the past seven, eight years, and if you look further than that, then that should have been clear. The signals have been there when you look at the simmering frustration. So, it's giving people the, I think the historical context for their problems. This isn't just something that they're dealing with. This is a function of a democracy that has really gotten in the hands and become controlled by two capitalist parties. So, what do we do with that? Are there other outlets for us?

- We have seen progressives elected in cities like New York that now have a majority, a women of color led majority for progressives. There's gonna be serious citywide elections in 2025. There have been experiments in participatory voting and land trusts and cooperatives funding for all of the above under this progressive regime. And yet, it still seems underappreciated when you look around the country that there are these kind of experiments going on that need perhaps to get more attention, to be paid closer attention to. Maybe they have more potential than we think.

- I think that we're at a crossroads that we're at an inflection point right now, where you have so many people who are feeling the weight of capitalism, but don't really have a language for it. They're feeling the weight of the unaffordability crisis, but don't have a language for it. And the

language that people are using instead is divisive. It's blaming sex, it's blaming transgender communities, it's blaming Black people, it's blaming migrants. So, I think we are at a crossroads with what do we decide the story is going to be, but it's also opportune for people who care about this, the fate of this country and the fate of the world to decide how are we gonna organize around these differences, around these anxieties, and ways to revive the history that we have already had in this country, and the examples of solidarity that we've seen around the globe.

- Malaika Jabali, thank you so much for joining us here on "Laura Flanders & Friends". It's great to have you.

- Thank you so much, Laura. It was great to be here.

- I spoke with Malaika Jabali before the all too revealing meltdown between Joe Biden and Donald Trump that has occupied the media's attention for just about every minute of every hour of every news cycle in the days and weeks since. But had we spoken after that event, I hope we would've discussed the very same things, because Malaika is right. The Democrats are dreaming if they attribute only to personality, the behavior of their voters or lack of them. Let's face it, back in 2008, Ralph Nader was accused of racism when he opposed Barack Obama on the grounds that the party's agenda had moved too far to the center and the right and too far away from the interests of regular working people. In 2016, Bernie Sanders was accused of sexism when he opposed Hillary Clinton on pretty much the same grounds. Earlier this year in the primary that should have been, Marianne Williamson was what? Thought of as pro-terrorist for believing that some Democrats might be concerned about the party's participation in genocide and war. I can't foretell the future, but I bet that no matter who is on the ticket come November, a whole lot of Democrats are gonna be accused of ageism this time around. And that's a pity, because as Jabali says, there are serious issues Democrats need to attend to. And I'll go one further. It's not about the candidate, or at least it's not solely that. For my full uncut conversation with Malaika Jabali, you can subscribe to our free podcast or the information's at the website. Till the next time. Stay kind, stay curious, stay cool. From "Laura Flanders & Friends", I'm Laura. Thanks for joining us.

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