LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

MAMDANI, BLACK FARMERS, USDA & ICE: THE STORIES BIPOC JOURNALISTS UNCOVER

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LAURA FLANDERS: Are you an avid news and public affairs consumer? Think you know what's going on? You may have your finger on all the important pulses, but if you rely on so-called mainstream or commercial media, it is far more likely that you are missing out. Do you know all you need to about the U.S. farm workers organizing and their resistance in the U.S. today? What about the facts on who's voting how in the New York City mayor's race? Here at "Laura Flanders & Friends," we do our best to go beyond the mainstream headlines. And so, today, in the monthly feature we call "Meet the BIPOC Press", it is my pleasure to have a couple of journalists whose reporting helps fill some important gaps. Covering the U.S. South, I'm glad to be joined by Aallyah Wright, the rural issues reporter for Capital B, and from New York, a familiar face, Amir Khafagy, senior labor reporter with Documented. What is happening that money media are missing and what strategies do these reporters and their outlets have for surviving in these times? We're about to find out. Thank you so much for joining us. I want to start with a quick round of what you're excited or aghast about. And let's start with you, Amir. What do you think is the most important story that money media are missing in this moment? Spill the beans.

AMIR KHAFAGY: That's a very good question. Thanks for having me on, Laura. What I'm really disappointed in is the fact that the mainstream media is not talking about in terms of ICE raids. I'm hearing a lot of things on the ground in which employers are threatening workers, immigrant workers, with deportation if they report wage theft that's happening or any other kind of issues that are happening on the workplace. And this is something that seems to be growing nationally. And in New York, it's happening. I think I've heard dozens of cases so far.

LAURA FLANDERS: So using that threat of deportation or raid by ICE as a kind of bludgeon to threaten workers?

AMIR KHAFAGY: Yes, a hundred percent.

LAURA FLANDERS: What about you, Aallyah, what's riling you up?

AALLYAH WRIGHT: Yeah, I think it's just the culmination of things that are impacting Black farmers. I mean, they literally cannot catch a break. I think I've been seeing a lot of news

coverage about, you know, what's coming out of the USDA when we talk about office closures, or folks being laid off, or these different, you know, grants that are being cut, and programs that are being terminated. But they're not always focused on the realities of what that looks like for Black farmers, given, you know, the history of the fraught relationship between Black farmers and the USDA and the historic discrimination, all of those things. And so I would love to just see more about, what does it look like, what is the real impact on these farmers as they're navigating all of these different changes.

LAURA FLANDERS: So important. So not just to focus on the bureaucrats but the actual people on the receiving end of these policy changes. You reported on one seemingly obscure policy change recently that has massive implications, a rule change. Can you talk about that?

AALLYAH WRIGHT: Yeah, I can. So last week, the USDA announced that it is eliminating the term "socially disadvantaged." And basically, that term describes people who have been subjected to racial, ethnic, and gender discrimination, including, you know, Black folks, Asian, Hispanic, Native communities. And with that, they also said that they will no longer consider race or sex in its decision-making processes on programs. So this is basically falling in line with what we saw earlier this year, with President Trump and his executive orders that basically, you know, terminates anything that is even in relation to diversity, equity, and inclusion. But I think something that was really interesting that was in that notice and a reason why they're, you know, no longer using this term is that they feel they have sufficiently addressed their historic discrimination. And I consistently hear about cases with Black farmers who are still enduring discrimination by the USDA.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's so important, the reporting that you're doing, Aallyah. And it's important that people get beneath the headlines of that story in particular, because if you don't understand what the USDA, that's the U.S. Department of Agriculture, even does, which most urban readers really don't know, and most of our media is urban-based, you don't understand what the implications of a rule change like that might be. Remind our audiences what the USDA does for farmers and has historically done much more for white farmers than for Black farmers or women.

AALLYAH WRIGHT: Yeah, the USDA is a fairly large organization, with numerous agencies that provide resources, and technical assistance, loans to farmers. They also have like a rural development arm. So they focus on, you know, particular resources for rural communities, with housing, and broadband, and there's some other programs there. But the largest part of the organization is their work that they do with farmers through the Farm Service Agency, again, which administers loans, and other agencies like Natural Resource Conservation Service and a few others.

LAURA FLANDERS: Yeah, I mean, and loans being so critical for farmers who often have to put out before they can get back, and who have to invest in new equipment, et cetera, et cetera. So just to give people a sense of what they're missing out on when the story only talks about the bureaucrat in Washington, much as we care about them too. Coming to you, Amir, I don't know whether there's a comparable story to the one that Aallyah just told, but is there a story you're following that illustrates that same problem that you kind of need to hope to know more than the headline?

AMIR KHAFAGY: Well, it's interesting, New York has had a really sweltering summer. We've been bombarded by heat wave after heat wave after heat wave. It's terrible. And there was a law in Albany that was supposed to kind of help workers that work outdoors. It was called the TEMP Act, right? So there was this law that was going to provide heat protections for workers. The law did not pass this legislative session. It was introduced, I believe, in 2024. It wasn't passed even though workers and worker advocate groups have been advocating for this law to get passed. I was able to come across a memo that was leaked to me from the New York Farm Bureau, which is the largest lobbying group of the farm industry, in the agricultural industry in New York. And in that memo, they made the case against the TEMP Act. And one of the reasons they gave that stated that the law wasn't necessary was that because Caribbean workers and Latino workers are immune somehow to high temperatures, that they can work comfortably in high temperatures. And they were promoting this racist language that harken back to like eugenics language. And they were proudly sending this out to all the different politicians throughout the state.

LAURA FLANDERS: You mean, so if you come from a country that they think is hot, that it's just fine for you to be toiling in temperatures that make people's blood boil?

AMIR KHAFAGY: That's what they were arguing, despite the fact that Black and Latino workers are more likely to die because of heat exhaustion and extreme temperatures than any other worker. So it boggles the mind that they were openly saying this without any shame. And they weren't hiding this. They were sending this out to all the most prominent politicians in the state.

LAURA FLANDERS: So what happened? I mean, this TEMP Act, temperature, not temporary, TEMP Act, you managed to reveal this memo, then what happened?

AMIR KHAFAGY: Nothing. It got a lot of attention. It came out last week, but nothing happened. I hope that next legislative session that with the revelation of this memo, it would put a little more impetus on the advocates and some of the politicians that were sitting on the fence. But the New York Farm Bureau spent billions of dollars to stop this law, as well as other big businesses, such as the airline industry. I heard that Delta was one of the also main lobbyists against the TEMP Act because airport workers working on those hot tarmacs throughout the

summer are being exposed to some of the most egregious heat that is imaginable. Some workers, I did another story, they were denied water on hot days while they were working at LaGuardia Airport.

LAURA FLANDERS: And this has been a huge national story. Aallyah, I'm sure you've been following this question of just the right to water when it broke in Texas, that there were legislators opposing the right to water for their workers on the fields. It was like a scandal. Oh, those Texans. But clearly, it's not a Texan problem, it's a New York problem, maybe a national one.

AALLYAH WRIGHT: Yeah, it's really unfortunate, but I think that speaks to the importance of our voices, and holding folks accountable, and staying on those stories, and even diving deeper. I'm sure, Amir, you had to build trust with those folks to get that memo, for them to leak it to you so that you would have that additional insight.

AMIR KHAFAGY: Right

AALLYAH WRIGHT: And so I just urge, you know, for journalists who are watching this, that we have to keep the pulse on the issues, we have to keep our ear to the ground and connected with folks in the community who are, again, being impacted by a lot of these things that are happening but may not even have the platform necessary to speak their truth.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, it would be interesting to do a little survey of how many of the people currently in Congress have any relationship to rural issues or the rural experience. I remember, when they were doing away with welfare and passing welfare reform years ago, it was clear that not only did the people in Congress who were voting on this have no experience ever of having been on welfare or benefited from that sort of support, but neither had their staff people, that they literally had just no connection to such a critical issue, which is why it's so important, the work that you two are doing. And maybe this is a good moment for you to tell us a little bit about yourselves, and your outlets, and what makes you different. Amir, our audience may feel like they know you, but maybe they don't. What would you share about what you bring to your reporting in the way of a lens and maybe what Documented is in the way of a different sort of media outlet?

AMIR KHAFAGY: Well Documented New York is one of the only newsrooms, if not the only newsroom in New York City, that focuses on immigrant communities in the city and the vast array of immigrant communities in the city. We focus on the Caribbean community, on the Chinese community, on the Latino community. So we really tell stories that the mainstream media has kind of overlooked. And sometimes they even copy us. You know, stories that we've done maybe a few months ago, you'll see a similar story in the New York Times and stuff. So I

really think Documented is the trendsetter in New York City in terms of reporting on communities that really go underlooked. And even in urban environments, there are plenty of rural places within the urban environment. People really don't look at places like in New York City, Rockaway, Queens really gets overlooked. Or Coney Island. Or some of these places that are the far stretches of the city that really don't get the attention either from the news or from politicians. So what we strive to do and what I strive to do as a reporter is to constantly try to go into those communities, and see what's happening, and show how the issues that they're facing is really a citywide, if not national issue.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now it's been a convention, in conventional media that people need to have an outside perspective to understand the story. So you have that phenomenon of kind of helicopter journalism, where somebody is sent from a town, you know, where they live to a far different place to do the objective reporting on that place. You have not done that, Amir, right?

AMIR KHAFAGY: No, I'm from New York City. I'm born and raised. If you can't tell from my accent, I'm from Queens, New York. My father's an immigrant from Egypt, and he was a cab driver for many years. My mother is a Puerto Rican from the Bronx. And I really grew up in New York City, in a working class community. I've done stories on the plight of cab drivers from my firsthand experience, as my father as a cab driver. I lived just a mile from LaGuardia Airport, and now I've done a lot of stories exposing some of the egregious worker violations that are occurring at the airport. And I have this connection with those communities because I not only report on those communities, I'm from those communities.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, that goes to what you were saying, Aallyah, about what it takes to build trust also. But tell us a little bit about you and your outlet, Capital B.

AALLYAH WRIGHT: Yeah, so Capital B, we're a local-national nonprofit news organization that covers Black communities across the country, so-

LAURA FLANDERS: What does it mean to be local-national, sorry.

AALLYAH WRIGHT: So we have two local newsrooms, one in Atlanta, Georgia and the other in Gary, Indiana. And then I'm a part of our national team, and we're kind of scattered out across the country. And to Amir's point, like, we cover the communities that are often underrepresented in mainstream media or we cover the stories that are not often being covered by mainstream media. I mean, look at my beat. In particular, when we talk about rural America, oftentimes the coverage is synonymous with white or conservative, but there's a heavily Black rural population, particularly in the South. And so being from the Mississippi Delta, a super rural region in Mississippi, I, you know, know from my experience living there, so my lived experience, looking at my families, and my friends, and also just what I've, you know, learned as a reporter, I feel that

there's a huge responsibility for me to cover these stories with humanity, and empathy, and compassion, and through the lens, again, of what it's like to live in these places day in and day out. You know, there are communities where I have to travel to that I may have never been to before. But guess what? I'm putting in the work to reach out to those folks, to have these conversations, to allow that time for them to get to know me, and my intentions, and why our newsroom, you know, exists in the first place. And so it's what I love about Capital B in terms of just having the freedom to tell fuller stories with context and nuance, but also, you know, explore the systemic challenges, but also look at the joy, the faith, the food, the traditions, all of the things that make these communities who they are.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I was going to say, you've been doing some reporting on the resistance that's building and the organizing that's happening, and that's an important part of the equation too. You want to share any of what you've been finding on that front?

AALLYAH WRIGHT: Yeah, I mentioned earlier how there's just this kind of, I don't like to say perfect storm because there's a lot of destruction and chaos that seems to be happening.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's hurricane season, let's not talk storm.

AALLYAH WRIGHT: You're right, like, take a beat. But, yeah, again, with all of, you know, the elimination of grants and funding through the USDA and the federal government, what I've been finding is that, one, Black farmers are very resilient. And oftentimes, they tell me time and time again, you know, we've been through this before, just given the fact that they've always had to do more with less. So they're used to having limited resources. But they're not deterred by what's happening, you know, on the federal level. They're actually more motivated. They're, you know, passing on their wisdom. They're working to train up the next generation of farmers. And part of that is also changing the image and perception of what it means to be a farmer. A lot of young folks think that you're just a super old person who's, you know, pushing the equipment or physically, you know, picking cotton, like, these very outdated images of what it means. And so part of that is like exposing folks to all of the different facets of agriculture. Like, you don't have to just be in farming. Maybe there's something with technology. Maybe there's something with curating events, like farm to table. So they're very energetic. And it's really inspiring to see that no matter, you know, what's happening outside of, you know, their bubble, if you will, of where they are, they're super rooted in their work and they're just trying to do more to increase the number of folks who are a part of this industry.

LAURA FLANDERS: Coming to you, Amir, on this question of energy, there was a lot of energy flowing in and around the mayoral primaries this summer. What did you find in the coverage there that was lacking? Because you can't say there wasn't a lot of it. There was.

AMIR KHAFAGY: Oh, it's probably one of the biggest news stories to come out of New York in a long time. I think with Zohran's candidacy, there's a lot-

LAURA FLANDERS: You're talking about Zohran Mamdani, the Democratic Socialist, came from what the media felt was the margins and just wiped the floor with the former governor, Andrew Cuomo.

AMIR KHAFAGY: Well, if you know anything about Queens, he didn't just come out of nowhere. He's been around for quite some time. I think in the mainstream media, there was this conversation happening around, maybe it was like the gentrifier class and the hipsters were the ones that really were coming out and voting for him. And that may have been true to some extent, but immigrant communities, especially Asian immigrant communities, were really excited for him. He really represented something different in New York that people haven't heard about in such a long time. Cuomo represented the status quo. He represented more of the same in a city that's becoming increasingly expensive, a city becoming increasingly unaffordable. With Zohran, there was a lot of optimism and hope. And maybe he may not even be able to achieve some of the things he's doing, but he at least is striving to do something different. And I think that really resonated with the vast majority of people in working class neighborhoods in Queens, who really came out and voted for him. Some of the districts in Queens that even went Trump voted for Zohran, which is very interesting to see. It's like people want authenticity. They want a politician that is going to represent some sense of change.

LAURA FLANDERS: Now, I should say, we should say, that as we're recording this, Andrew Cuomo is back in the race. Where do you think that important story that made headlines after the election, after the primary, stands? We can't afford just to wait to see what the election results will be next time.

AMIR KHAFAGY: I think the number one conversation that is to be had is about affordability. I think that's what's on the ballot. Public safety is always a fear that a lot of people have, but I think that's overblown. And I think that's what Adams and Cuomo are selling. I'm not going to say who I support in the race, although it may sound like I'm overly optimistic about Zohran. I think he should be held accountable to the same degree as any politician is, because I think all politicians should be held with a certain degree of skepticism. You know, we hope that they do well, but, you know, we should challenge them when they don't. With Zohran, I think he still needs to create a sense of, he still has to answer a lot of policy questions in terms of how he's going to do some of the things that he promises, such as free busing and whatnot.

LAURA FLANDERS: What I'm hearing is something about the shaping of the story of our society, our democracy, of what's possible, what's painful, what's actually hurting people, is so influenced by the media that we have. And I hear from a lot of people that they've just kind of

turned off the news because what they're consuming, which is mostly commercial, still somewhat television, a lot of social media, is just so alienating, really.

AALLYAH WRIGHT: Yeah, and it's like, how can we be in partnership with the people that we're covering? How can we allow them to help shape and form these stories, you know what I mean? Oftentimes, if something comes out of, you know, the Trump administration or, again, the USDA, I'm not picking on them, it's just I've been covering a lot of the USDA, when these things come down and they're announced, a lot of times it's like, oh, the USDA has done X, Y, Z, right? But how often are people flipping, you know, those stories to say, this particular person is going through this. And because of this policy or this legislation, now their life will, you know, be transformed in a negative, or whatever, you know, that impact looks like, and then get into the people, like, how can we give the power to the people when we're framing and shaping these stories? And I think, again, it just speaks to the freedom that, you know, I have and other folks have at Capital B, and a lot of, again, independent media organizations to do that.

LAURA FLANDERS: I'm glad you brought us back around to that question. And I want to ask you, Amir, if you want to address this sort of media shaping role question, but where I'm going, I think, is as we're speaking, you see this organized assault. It's decades long, but seems to be coming to fruition at this moment on public media, on sort of legacy public broadcasting and television. Think NPR, think public television, the funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting that supports those institutions, if not programs like this one, but institutions that air programs like this one, is being clawed back to the tune of 1.1, I think, billion dollars over a couple of years. It will leave a huge hole in the media budgets of those institutions. And my question, I guess, to the two of you is do you see your organizations as filling that gap? Is it time to let go perhaps of that legacy history, at least at the level of government support for public broadcasting?

AMIR KHAFAGY: I think public funding's very important for organizations like PBS and NPR, but it's really vital for organizations and nonprofit media like Documented New York to not be so dependent on government funds. And what we do is we get a lot of donations from the very communities that we serve. And I think that's very important. Yes, there's donations from bigger nonprofits and bigger, different other sources, philanthropies-

LAURA FLANDERS: Foundations and so on, yeah.

AMIR KHAFAGY: And foundations. But we really get a lot of small individual donations from our readers, and that's keeping us afloat. And I think that's the future of a lot of media. And I think there's a lot of media going in that direction. And I think that also holds us accountable to the communities that we're reporting on, and reporting for, and reporting with.

LAURA FLANDERS: So it's a plus, as well as a minus. Aallyah.

AALLYAH WRIGHT: You're singing to the choir, because, as you know, we're a nonprofit too, so most of, you know, our funding is relying on foundations and grants. But a lot of the funding also comes from folks who are just everyday people who want to support the work because they love what we're doing. And to your point, it does have that level of accountability because they can call us out. They can also snatch their donations if they feel like the work isn't of quality or what we said we're going to do, right? And I feel like we need more journalists. We don't need less. So I'm always in favor of more media. I know we're in a time of, like, the evolution or maybe all of these changes that are happening around social media, and the content creators, and all of that, but it's, like, how can, you know, we teach more people or train more people how to do this work responsibly? If there are folks with this huge following, where folks are going to get the news, there's something there, right? So how can we also, I guess, kind of wrap our arms around others and bring them to the fold so that they're, again, they can do responsible journalism. Always in favor of diversifying the funding if we can because we know we just can't rely on one source, unfortunately, but yeah.

LAURA FLANDERS: Absolutely.

AALLYAH WRIGHT: We just need more journalists, period.

LAURA FLANDERS: More journalists, some good institutions with the stability to be able to train some folks, and of course more people engaged with their media. I don't just mean reporting but supporting the media outlets that they care about. So thank you both. It's really been fun to talk with the two of you, and I hope that we get to do it again soon. And thank you for your work. It's very, very strikingly important.

AALLYAH WRIGHT: Thank you for having us.

AMIR KHAFAGY: Thank you.

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