

## **Cooperative Journal Podcast**

“Solidarity Economy Shorts” in collaboration with New Economy Coalition  
Solidarity Economy Shorts #3: Practicing Abolition with Sol Underground

### **Featuring:**

**Sunny:** Founder of Sol Underground

**Ebony Joy:** Host

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*[Music - Solidarity Economy (Riddim) by MADlines]*

**Ebony:** Welcome to Solidarity Economy Shorts, a collaboration between New Economy Coalition and Cooperative Journal Media. Solidarity Economy Shorts are conversations with frontline organizations and individuals that are putting solidarity economy principles into practice. They're using different strategies to build an economic system where communities are meeting their own needs outside of Capitalism.

New Economy Coalition is a member based coalition representing the solidarity economy ecosystem in the United States. Their members are actively working across economic sectors to shift from individuality and capitalism, to cooperation and solidarity.

Some of the New Economy members will be featured on this podcast to explore land reclamation, cooperation, worker ownership, arts and culture, resource mobilization, and more. We'll share lessons learned, practices, and how you can engage in this liberatory vision.

As you listen you're invited to feel into your body. When do you sense constriction? When do you feel light and expansive? We hope these shorts can be a reminder that we don't have to wait for the future we dream of, it is here now waiting for us to participate.

Sol Underground is an abolitionist ecosystem in Atlanta dreaming of a Black and Indigenous liberated world that is resisting colonial systems of oppression. They are actualizing this dream as an autonomous community-led group that is building, joining, and maintaining networks of care.

In this episode, I speak with the founder Sunny who begins with defining what abolitionism is and its correlation to the solidarity economy. How their shape transformed from an artist collective to supporting the unhoused community through mutual aid. They share some of the models they organize like Sol Below, a pop up tent that provides warmth and food to the homeless when the temperature drops below a certain degree. They paint a beautiful vision for a world when exploitative systems are abolished, offer practical tips for adopting an abolitionist mindset, and how to put theory into practice.

**Ebony:** Hello Sunny, welcome to the podcast. I'm really looking forward to learning more about Sol Underground. I've been reading a lot about the work that you all are doing in advocating and addressing the housing crisis that is happening in many cities, but specifically in Atlanta, Georgia, where you are. I know that at the root of the work that you all do is abolitionism. So before we get into more of the details about what Sol Underground is, can you please explain what is abolitionism?

**Sunny:** Yeah, abolition to us is finding a way to free ourselves from the oppressive systems that we live under. Since the term was coined and popularized through slavery, it was the ending of chattel slavery in North America. So in kind of that essence and roots, it's the ending of all the systems of oppression for all of us. So that's gender oppression, race based oppression, economic oppression, and things like that, and creating new systems that serve all of us and help build equity and equitable systems.

**Ebony:** Yes, the basis of the New Economy Coalition, and the stories of this podcast is around the solidarity economy, which I feel like is the antidote to these oppressive systems falling and creating something new. So could you explain maybe the connection that you see between abolitionism and the solidarity economy?

**Sunny:** Yeah, I think one of the great principles of the solidarity economy that I've seen is making sure that resources get to the places that they need to be. While I'm not the most well versed in solidarity economy practices, that is the one thing that stands out to me and that is one of the biggest connections to abolition, because like you said, we're trying to break down the systems of oppression. In order to do that we need to make sure that people have the things that they need and that things are circulating in communities, within the community, between communities, that resources aren't getting hoarded, and that everyone has the access to the things that they need to live and live well.

**Ebony:** How is Sol Underground doing that? Y'all are deep in that work.

**Sunny:** Yeah, we do a lot so I will try to give an abridged version. I think the best example we have is our free store. Every first, second, and fourth Friday, we go to two different locations downtown and it's essentially just like a free store, when we have all the things we need to set it up like that. We give away clothes, food, toiletries, books, art related things, household items when we have them. People can just come and take what they need, they can drop off stuff that they don't need anymore, they can switch things out. I've definitely seen a cute jacket, taken it and then left another jacket because I own far too many and just kind of trying to keep things circular because many people have too much of one thing and not enough of something else. This is a space for them to instead of throwing out, letting it go to waste, it's able to circulate throughout the community as long as it's useful.

Another way that we do that is we partner with food distros across the city. They get food that can't be sold in the grocery store anymore, because it's not pretty, or it's a few days out from expiring or they just have too much of it leftover. We go around and we deliver it to various households and we get the free food because we help volunteer with these distros. I think those are probably two of the current best examples that we have but we've done so much in the past too much to talk about.

**Ebony:** Yeah, and what was the foundation of creating Sol Underground? What inspired you to start it?

**Sunny:** Um, yeah, the actual real deal inspiration was just that Black organizers in Atlanta needed a space to meet safely because during the uprisings in 2020, we were meeting in parks and public places. This was around the same time that like other cities like New York, they were just picking up protesters in unmarked vans, and taking them to, we don't even know. I have many years of venue and DIY art space management under my belt and so I figured I could use some of the skills that I had in the previous places that I've worked to create that space for us to meet. So that's how it started. It didn't really have any other intentions really, other than being a space for us to meet and gather. Since then it's grown and it's changed to fit and adapt, to reflect the changing needs of our community throughout the years.

**Ebony:** You all started doing a mix of what seemed to be art and activism. Now your work has shifted more towards meeting the needs of the community, like you said, and one of those major needs is housing. So how did you all make that shift from art centered organizing to housing and why?

**Sunny:** Like you said, when we originally started, it was an art and activism based collective and the switch really just happened kind of overnight. Once we got the space we knew we wanted it to be art based because we at the time were still an art collective, under a different name, the building was named Sol Underground and then the art collective was Saint Sol. Then they kind of merged probably like a few months into having the building.

The reason honestly was that a friend and I were walking by and we started to talk to three unhoused guys because we were going to dinner and it was absolutely too cold for us to be walking there and we are probably 100-150 meters away from the restaurant so it wasn't a super far walk. We're like, if we were too cold these people only have, I think the guys had like a hoodie, sweatpants, shoes, socks, and a sleeping bag. So we just stopped and we talked to them and we were like, what would be helpful? What do you guys need? They told us that they needed another blanket, gloves, hat, it's Atlanta so they wanted some wings and some beer. So we got back in our cars, which we were very happy to do, because it was, I cannot understate how cold it was.

My friend was the president of the BLM Atlanta chapter at the time so we posted on our stories trying to crowdsource funds, like, hey, folks, we have some guys who need some stuff, can we get some money, because it was not in either of our organization's budgets to do. We got the funds and then some and then we gave them cash, gave them all the stuff. Then when we were at dinner, we just started talking about the needs and both of us having been raised in Atlanta, talking about the fact that I was staying with family 45 minutes outside of just the city so I was almost an hour away from Sol because I couldn't afford to live on my own. Then my friend was living in Smyrna and their rent was going up \$1,000 in one year, we're just talking about how we can't do it anymore, this is so unaffordable. I had been just in general organizing work, not necessarily in art at the time, or art organizing. So I just decided to make that switch, had a few meetings with some friends, started going downtown to talk to people about what they needed, and just involving the community to see what they needed. That's pretty much how we made the switch. It was like, all happened within a month.

**Ebony:** Given now that you focus on housing justice, and you identify as an abolitionist, what are the connections that you make between both of these movements?

**Sunny:** I mean, housing is a human right, everyone deserves to have a warm indoor space to sleep. The way the housing system works, it has historically been anti black, anti LGBTQ, anti pretty much everything and everyone unless your a cis het, white man. Those are the systems we need to break down. Right now as we speak, the U.S. Supreme Court has decided to take on a case that essentially the judgment will be whether or not homeless people should be allowed to sleep outside with blankets and pillows. They're trying to decide if that should even be legal going forward. Even though in theory, it's not even legal in the city of Atlanta, because we have an urban camping law that prohibits people from sleeping in public areas.

So the connection there is very strong, because the reason the systems are set up like this is because they know that people won't be able to fully organize or fully even be present in their personhood if they don't have a stable place to call home. So it's just us to kind of, hopefully it doesn't come across conspiracy theory-esque, but control the masses, because if you control where people live, where they sleep, how they do all of that, then you control them. Because if you're tired, who has the time for a revolution?

**Ebony:** I do not think that is a conspiracy theory at all. I think it's very strategic to what they're intending to do, which is to isolate us, to create a sense of scarcity. What you all are doing is creating mutual aid. I'm wondering what those encampments are like when the people are living there. Is there also a sense of mutual aid between them? I'm thinking about even how separating them and putting them in shelters is taking away their autonomy, taking away their collective determination that they're creating together.

**Sunny:** Yeah, I just wanted to agree with you. Yeah. There is a very strong sense of community in, I can't necessarily call them encampments that we work in just because the city specifically where we hang out in the city, folks aren't allowed to gather in mass, they get moved pretty frequently. Everyone looks out for each other, a lot of their resources are shared, people will make sure that kids, thankfully there aren't many, but kids, pregnant women, disabled folks, more vulnerable people eat first, that they're safe. They take care of each other, they take care of us like when this first started, I was going down by myself late at night, as a 21 year old, and I never felt any kind of way. I knew that everyone there had my back, I had their back, like there have been times where we've needed to protect each other. Everybody's done an amazing job at just building that community and with sweeps with these homeless shelters, it does tear the community apart, sometimes quite drastically.

**Ebony:** I'm sure the Atlanta homeless Union also evolved from these communities coming together and standing against homelessness, and these are people that are houseless themselves. I know that you all work really closely with them. So if you want to share anything around that collaboration and what types of support you all are providing to the houseless community.

**Sunny:** Yeah. So the homeless union started back in 2021. We had been going out for a few months, and just having general conversations with everybody, as you would if you're going to a bar or something, you're just meeting new people. So some of the things we were saying started rubbing off, we would talk about regular leftist organizing conversations. There'd be debates on theory and labor unions and protests and revolutions. People who weren't as familiar with it ask us questions, and then you know, we'd kind of go back and forth, because people have their own lived experience with these things. A lot of the folks that we know are older, so they've been around and have seen a lot, and especially if they're from Atlanta, they have experienced a lot and been involved in a lot. So it kind of grew from there.

We wanted them to be able to have a space community owned and led by them, much more than Sol could be. So the idea of a homeless union came up, and folks were really, really down for that. Unfortunately, due to state repression, and just the nature of being unhoused and things like that, it was a short lived project that every now and again gets bursts of energy when things happen. The state has done a really, really good job at keeping people away from each other. Specifically, folks have been offered housing so that they don't talk to us, they're kind of bribed. Like, hey, we can give you a house, we can give you surgery that you need, as long as you don't continue working with these people. We can't fault anybody for taking that offer, because those are life changing offers that are a lot more immediate than anything that the homeless union could really do. So that is one of the biggest roadblocks that we have, especially with organizing with unhoused folks, is that needs need to be met and sometimes the state offers those needs to undermine the work that folks are doing.

**Ebony:** Oh, wow, that is wild. I was reading in this article that you sent me that it only will take \$3 million to meet the demands of the houseless community, which at that time of the article was around 3,200 people. That's just housing, water, sanitation, health care, and a seat at the table around these decisions. They're doing these little bribes when really it takes not that much money in their budget to meet all of the needs of the community. Even though maybe you're not able to compete with them meeting their needs in a more expansive way, you all are providing housing to houseless folks, and creating these tents called Sol Below where people can come and get food and warmth.

**Sunny:** So things like Sol Below we do, A, because the city won't, but B our whole thing is meeting people where they're at. A lot of times in the winter, most people won't go to city run shelters because they are so poorly managed, understaffed, and have ridiculous rules that when you go, you lose your autonomy, you can only bring maybe one bag, you can't bring any of your blankets, you really can't bring any of your clothes. They have rules about sobriety, which is very hard for people to just quit one day just to maybe get a bed for the night, they can be kicked out at the staff's discretion. So if you look at somebody sideways and they don't like that they can remove you. Sometimes violently, well, technically, it's all violent if you're kicking somebody out and it's 12 degrees outside, but physically violent, like throwing people out, throwing their stuff on the street, and they don't feed people.

So in that we try and meet people where they're at, which is quite literally to set up, right where they are usually sleeping, so that they know that at any point in the night there's a warm space and food for them to go to. It just helps build that community and that trust because they know regardless of what's going on, we will be there. If we can't be there, it's likely because it's too cold for the heaters to work and in that instance, then we go and we crowdfund and we put people in hotel rooms, which we're currently doing right now actually, because it's not safe for anyone to be outside.

It's a community led effort, we've gotten to the point where we really don't even need to be there, we like to be there, and we're almost entirely there because we have the cars with all the supplies. Also just in case the police come, they're more likely to listen to folks that they perceive to be housed instead of harassing all of our friends. It's at this point, community run, they have come up with their own system of how to make sure that everybody's getting an equitable amount of time in the tent because the tent hasn't grown, but the population of folks that need it have. That's the short of Sol Below.

**Ebony:** I have been thinking a lot about these tents, actually because currently in New York City, there's an influx of asylum seekers, and they're lining up for like 12 hours a day hoping to get a bed in this winter weather. I don't know how to catalyze that, I'm curious, how do you all fundraise for this? That's one of the things that I've been thinking a lot about, people have just been coming, residents in the city have been coming, giving food, and different winter items. While they're waiting in this line, how amazing would it be to have these tents lined up to keep them warm in that moment.

**Sunny:** Fundraising honestly has always been such a tricky thing to kind of figure out but after the first year, we just made sure that everything we bought could last us as long as possible. Most, I would say right now 75% of the fundraising we do is grassroots folks, just sending us \$5 here and there. The other 25%, we've been lucky enough to get a few grants, including from New Economy Coalition to help us continue running Sol Below but we've just made sure to be as cost effective as possible. The walls for the tent we've had for three years, the heaters we've had for three years because those can last a while. The propane, we just have the same propane tanks and just refill them because I think that's like \$30 and they last at least, I would say 30 hours running, if we kept it on for 30 hours without running out on low, which heats up the tent. If there are people in it, the tent gets to about 70, if there's snow, the snow melts as soon as it lands on the roof because it gets really hot in there.

Then just a lot of community willpower. That's the biggest lift that I would urge anyone thinking about doing anything similar to consider, we're there for 12 hours, 8pm to 8am. So we have really dedicated folks that don't like to sleep, that's pretty much how the current crew of Sol Below folks met, I was out there doing it by myself and then a few of my friends started coming. We got a very large night owl crew of folks that don't go to sleep till 5am so they come out until they're tired. But other than that, I wouldn't say easy, but I wouldn't necessarily say super hard. Especially if your heart is in the right place. Now, I can't speak for New York, because it does not get that cold down here very often but I would definitely say it's worth doing because even a few minutes can help save people's lives. The risk of hypothermia, frostbite are so big, and it just can come on so quickly.

**Ebony:** Definitely and a lot of these people are coming from warm countries into this freezing cold. There's also the NYPD that's disrupting distribution, they're actually seeing mutual aid as a threat. I'm sure as you've mentioned, you all are dealing with the same types of obstacles with the police. So I'm curious, what are the things that keep you going, that keeps you inspired and motivated to continue? Maybe you can share a story from the work that you've done that embodies that?

**Sunny:** I guess I'll answer the question and then maybe if I can think of a story, but really what keeps us going is just the possibilities that exist. It's definitely been an uphill battle over the past four years. But we have been able to do things we didn't think we'd be able to do when we first started. I guess a good example of that is a few years ago, we met a guy who was living, or he didn't really live there, but he hung around the church we work in front of and he became a pretty good friend. We'd hang out, we'd see him there, sometimes he'd come to my house, wash his clothes, we'd hang out, do all the things that friends do.



Then once the homeless union kind of came about, he really stepped up, I guess, because it's always been in him. He's always cared about the people in his community. If we're there, he's making sure that everybody is getting fed, that everybody's getting clothes, that things are shared across the community equally. He kind of just naturally had these leader qualities so much so that the police didn't really like him, he would actually get arrested probably once a month. Just because if the police come to harass somebody, he's there being like this is wrong, what are you doing? He's calling me, he's calling other folks like, yo, they're down here harassing us, yada, yada, yada.

He stuck with us through all the ups and downs of our organizing work. One day we were just fortunate enough for somebody to reach out and say that they rent out rooms in their house. I was like, okay, cool, I think we can pay maybe like a month or two. So we told him that we were like, is this something you'd be interested in, he said absolutely, so we started paying his rent. Then a friend of mine was like, yo, I'm hiring and I was like, oh, I have a friend I think you'd like because my friend manages a restaurant that they also do a lot of mutual aid stuff on their streets, they're pretty dope. We got them connected and then he started working there and did all the things that he needed to do.

Then literally, maybe three months later, he was a completely different person. He had more capacity to do more of the organizing work that I do, like more the boring stuff that nobody wants to do, the admin stuff, checking in on folks, you know, not the fun protest stuff. Since then, his life has changed, he's gotten a new job, I think he's an assistant manager now. He's making more than I make a week, he's saving up to get his own place.

That literally all happened because of a lot of luck, but a lot of hard work and kind of just keeping with it. Had we all just been like, okay, we haven't gotten anywhere in six months, let's just stop, we all just kept going. We're like, no matter what happens bare minimum, we're always going to be downtown with food. There were times where that's all we could do was bring food, we didn't have the capacity to organize, we didn't have the capacity to fundraise or do any of those things. Eventually, there is a good outcome and that if we keep up with it, we're able to visualize the future that we want and kind of build towards that future. Hopefully, that makes sense and wasn't too long winded.

**Ebony:** That was perfect, gave me chills. It brings me so much joy. It's also a testament that even if we cannot show up with the resources, just our time and our presence consistently for somebody can mean so much. You started to talk about visualizing the world that we want and so I want you to do that for us. What is the world that you envision, when exploitative systems are abolished? What types of infrastructure will be in place?

**Sunny:** Yeah, I think about this a lot, as I think about the future of Sol, because the end goal, and the end goal that I try and get other people to get on board with, is that we shouldn't be doing this forever. I am fully of the mind that this, what we do isn't our job, we shouldn't have to do this, we should just be able to be in community with people, we shouldn't have to be creating these systems. That's a failure of our government, and of all the systems that have been built. So when I think about the future that I want, I don't want anyone to have to be doing community organizing. As fun as it can be, it's harmful, it's draining and life giving, it's everything.

So for the future, what I want for people, I want free medical systems. I don't necessarily envision hospitals as they exist now because I want people to have the preventative care they need, I want people to have access to the "non-traditional." Actually, I'm gonna flip that and say, I want people to have access to the traditional medicines that their ancestors have historically used. I want people to just be well in the way that makes sense for them. I want everybody to have food, I want everybody to have a place to live. I want everybody to be able to have the quality of life that they want. I want to be able to go on vacations with my friends, because they aren't worried about having to pay rent. I want to stay up late on a random Tuesday because I don't have to wake up at 9am to go work and do stuff that I don't actually feel called to do. I don't know specifically how I want that to look, I just kind of know the feelings that I want to be there. I want everyone to feel loved and valued and everyone to have the autonomy and agency that they deserve.

**Ebony:** I definitely felt that. I say something similar when I talk about the Solidarity Economy. I'm like, it's so hard to articulate in words but once you experience it, you know that it's something different and something that we should be living on a day to day basis. For this to happen, so many paradigm shifts need to happen. That includes internally and in the wider systems. So I wonder if there's any practices you could suggest for people who want to cultivate abolitionism within themselves, their mindsets, and their communities?

**Sunny:** Yeah, that's another thing that I do think about a lot. I was personally fortunate enough to be raised in a household that was built on quite a few abolitionist principles. My parents were college students when they had me. So they were like young hippies and I'm West Indian so I've always lived in communal households, great grandmother had a household like that, so it's been a long time. One of the things that I still work on within myself is definitely having a more optimistic view of things as corny as it sounds, because it is really easy to fall into despair and think that nothing is worth doing and nothing can be changed but that's not true. I mean, just generally, in life, outside of movement work, things have changed so much in the past 20 years. That's due to people having a clear vision of what they want, or what they want to feel, working towards that, and actively dismantling the things like the thought processes in their mind.

I think an important thought that is helpful for people to work on is dismantling the idea of scarcity. We live in abundance, there's so many resources that are available. We have an abundance of food, we have an abundance of housing, we have an abundance of care within ourselves, that we really need to tap into and start realizing more. I think for our communities, breaking out of the isolation, that capitalism kind of demands and really, seeing how community can fulfill us in so many ways. If you think about all the people you know, in that circle, there are so many different ranges of knowledge that people have for things. Even if it seems super niche, like we can take cosplay. If somebody's making their cosplay costumes, they're probably a decent seamstress, or probably decent at the fiber arts and works and can help you sew something or mend something, things like that. Or folks that are really good at computer stuff. I don't know anything about computers, but I know that there's probably somebody that can come help me in my community, to help me fix this, and just tapping into each other, and really starting to do the things that bring us joy, especially if you want to be an organizer.

One of our rules for Sol, when we're deciding on what we need to do and who gets what task, we always say that you should be tapping into the skills that you have, and fitting the project to you and not the other way around. If we're trying to force ourselves into a project that just doesn't mesh with us, then we probably aren't the right person to do it and we can find the right person. That will do nothing but lead us into despair, make us angry, make us upset, and then we won't be doing the thing to the best of our abilities or the best that it needs to be done. Hopefully, that wasn't a confusing way of saying it but yeah, just opening yourself to the possibilities and using the resources you have, looking for resources externally, kind of just embodying what community means to you.

**Ebony:** Beautifully said, I feel like when we realize that we do have this abundance as you were speaking of, and especially collectively, then we have more power and agency that we need to create the systems that we desire. I loved what you said about sharing skills and knowing what skills are available in our community. We need to be doing asset based mapping, it creates more resiliency. It also allows us to go deeper in relationship with each other because we start to learn the layers of the gifts that we have. So you spoke a little bit about the personal, and I'm wondering if you have any suggestions for resources, tips, or places for people that may want to engage and nurture this vision.

**Sunny:** Yeah, quick tips is just be open to learn. I went to school for this stuff so a lot of my time in my life has been dedicated to researching abolition and movement work. That has come with a lot of changing perspectives and something that I've definitely been working on and learning is that it's okay to change my mind about things. There are things that I've been very anti, or very, I just hated the idea of it, I didn't agree and then, you know, life happens. I've seen, experienced, witnessed things, and I've been like, oh, you know, I was wrong and it's difficult to say that, but in this work, you're probably going to have to say it a lot, because everyone has their vision of the future. That's why I don't think that there is one vision that I can speak to but at the end of the day, the principles of our visions are all usually very similar, if not the same so just be open to that.

Resources and places, there are a few websites that I enjoy. I love Freedom Archives, they are digitizing a bunch of old movement work resources like Black Panthers, SNIC, the Chicano Movement, Palestinian Liberation throughout the years. They have archives of posters, speeches, and old newsletters, and it's just really cool to go and read and see what our predecessors were talking about, and what work they were trying to move in their communities. I also really like Abolition Notes, they're on Instagram, and I think they have a website. It's just really beautiful artwork that breaks down very powerful and popular theorists, or authors, and writers that are just really nice to look at, read, and share. I think those are the top two places, if someone's asking me. I also don't endorse Twitter, but I do use Twitter and I just try and follow people who are doing the work that I admire, just following along how they do it. A lot of them are really good at documenting what they do, how they do it, to give you kind of a blueprint of how you might be able to replicate it in your life, and your community.

**Ebony:** So helpful. I learned some new resources as well. Thank you so much Sunny for being you, for the work that you're doing, for the community that you're nurturing. Thank you.

**Sunny:** Yeah, thank you so much for the podcast and the space, excited to hear and see how this grows.

*[Music - Solidarity Economy (Riddim) by MADlines]*

**Ebony:** There are many ways you can be in reciprocity with us. If you are or know of a collective model that aligns, let's connect so we can spotlight the story. Share episodes, especially with your friends and family who aren't aware of collective models but are unfulfilled with this economy. With your support, we can continue archiving the stories that aren't being elevated but are necessary for our collective elevation.