

Music

Introduction

Harshi (0:01)

Welcome to the ConnectED podcast produced by the Community Data Clinic, your guide to unlocking resources and opportunities in East Central Illinois. I'm Harshi, and alongside me is Aisaiah, your hosts on this journey.

First off, we'll show you some cool things happening in our community. Think of it as a bunch of resources, programs, and projects that can make a real difference in your life.

Then we've got some amazing stories to share. Real people just like you and me who've had their lives changed by these programs we're talking about.

And don't worry, we're not going to leave you hanging. We'll also give you some tips on how you can get in on these opportunities and make them work for you.

In this episode, we are joined by Augustus Wood, and we'll have the opportunity to learn from his extensive experience in labor organizing and community advocacy in the Champaign Urbana area. Augustus is an assistant professor at the School of Labor and Employment Relations, active labor organizer, and works closely with the Independent Media Center—IMC—at the University of Illinois, where he supports efforts to amplify underrepresented voices.

He is experienced in politics and activism within urban regions and is dedicated to empowering local workers to ensure that they have access to vital labor resources. Our conversation with Professor Wood will be split into two episodes. This episode will focus on his involvement in labor organizing, so let's jump right in.

Aisaiah (1:32)

So can you discuss more about what your work entails and how you were introduced to it?

Augustus (1:37)

Sure. I'm from Atlanta, born and raised, and I grew up in a majority African American area, working class family. Father works on sewer lines. Mother is an administrative assistant. And we often wondered, well, not we. I did. They—my parents knew. I didn't know. I often wondered why the...the major part of the city looked a lot different than the part we lived in.

It's like, because I've always heard it was about, you know, racism, racial oppression, but you... but in the '90s growing up, the late '90s, early 2000s, you didn't see white faces in the city as much.

You saw people that looked like us. And so this idea of class was already developing. I didn't have the interpretive skills to understand what it was when I was younger, and my family, they weren't into that kind of stuff either. So it wasn't 'til I got older that I started to dig deeper and start to build my interpretive skill. The other part is that, you know, my—my father was a union person.

And in 1977, the mayor of Atlanta, during the biggest strike in the history of the city, the sanitation workers strike, he—the mayor fired all the workers in the public sector and then sent them job applications after he fired them, you know, to be petty because that's what they do when they, you know, petty bourgeoisie. And so I grew up in a household that was very angry about how workers are treated. And so that was kind of my launching off point to start this work.

And, essentially, the work I do is I take how, how scholars typically homogenize the African American socio-historical experience, and I bring in the aspect that is often never talked about, which is labor. And that if you actually look at labor and the alienation of Black workers, then you get something that's a lot more complex about urban development, about the repression of unions and Black labor in the South and about gentrification.

And so that's what I came up with, the subproletarianization thesis, which argues that the gentrification is a byproduct to subproletarianize Black and Brown workers. So to move them from stable labor when they were in factories or when they...when, Black women be started to work in, computer literacy type jobs, etcetera, to move them away from that to what I call dirty labor. Warehouse work, unstable, nonunion, and typically nonskilled labor, dirty work. So I take the thesis of Joe Trotter who in 1984 presented the proletarianization thesis to say that Black people, we are proletarianized into a space because he was challenging the idea that we're ghettoized. And that they just put us in spaces and we just—we're locked away.

We don't build social institutions. We don't resist. We're just—we're just ghetto captives. You know, he...he fought against that. And I'm doing the same thing with gentrification today whereas in we're told that gentrifiers, real estate people just move us places, and we don't fight back, and we don't build community, we don't resist.

And they never bring up labor. They always talk about housing. You can't gentrify somebody until you take away productive labor first in that area because I can't pay the rent that you're jacking up if I don't have productive labor. So when you, when you analyze the gentrification in multiple spaces in the United States, you have to see that there's always a dismantling of unions, first of all. And then productive labor, meaning labor that either meet or exceeds the cost of living inflation, as well as stability and protection from being fired, that kind of stuff.

That labor starts to be dismantled. And so that's the work I do now is to put forth that you cannot discuss the transformation and the oppression of working-class people without looking at labor first.

Aisaiah (6:01)

What, what you're saying, like, it's just, like, getting my brain thinking about, like, again, Chicago. Like, you can think about the organ- the, I guess, the organization of, like, work centers and how people are interconnected or disconnected from that and, like, what alternatives may look like, you know, in areas that are central to them. And, again, it happens to be, you know, using your own words, like dirty labor, like warehouses or factories, but not again towards productive labor.

Augustus (6:26)

No. Not at all. Because with the warehouse work, you're—because factories were mostly unionized. And the thing is, is that because you had a union contract, you had a lot of control over your breaks, your...your health and safety. You can arbitrate those things.

But what they're doing is that because so many 18-year-olds like Champaign-Urbana and parts of Chicago and especially in Metro Atlanta. So many people are graduating high school and don't wanna pay for expensive colleges. And so they're like, where do we go? We're gonna push buttons at McDonald's. We're gonna sweep streets. We're going to work in dollar stores or we're going to go in the warehouses and the warehouses that are building around the...around the country, they're saying we'll pay you \$22 an hour, but you get no health care. You get no holidays.

You get no this or that, and you can't unionize. And young people are saying, well, that's the only work that pays a decent—even though it's not living—wage, so they take it. And then in the next fifteen years, we're gonna see...we're gonna see young people in their thirties who can't move because they've been forced to move boxes and move very heavy things for hours of a day. And the reason they're doing this is because when they gentrify particularly the Black working class out of parts, out of the Downtown Atlanta area, they're putting them in the metro suburban spaces around the city that are rural.

Now people think because they're metro, it's like, okay. They're still urban. It's like, no. Drive through Douglas County, Cobb County, all these places. These are rural spaces where grocery stores are 15 miles apart. The highway is miles apart. There's no public transportation, and we know that over half of Black people don't own cars. So, again, they're—they're putting...they're putting people in places to, so they don't have access to resources. That's what they're doing.

And, again, that's a subproletarianization because the only thing that they're being put towards are dirty labor jobs. So that's really the big difference of it is that you don't have access to resources in a subproletarianized warehouse versus a factory.

Aisaiah (8:43)

So in terms of local resources, what labor resources are currently available to workers in the Champaign Urbana area, and how can they access these resources?

Augustus (8:53)

Awesome. The first one being the Campus Labor Coalition. The Campus Labor Coalition is an organization of not, of all the unions on the campus, but also labor friendly organizations who fight for the power of workers. So you have the graduate worker and the GEO.

You have the SEIU who are the building service workers. You have AFSCME who are the clerical workers. You have a professionalized faculty, the NTFC non tenure track faculty. You have our group, the campus faculty, the tenure track faculty, and you also have undergraduate organizations that are in favor of labor power.

You have the YDSA. You have...there's a few other groups in the—in the coalition. There's a lot of groups, but that's a space that if there's an issue or just people wanting to know about what's going on in terms of labor on the campus. That's where we meet, and we discuss, and we share resources. You also have outside of that, you have the Champaign County AFL-CIO, which is kinda like—that's the bigger umbrella organization that handles a lot of the other labor throughout the county.

So that goes into some of those spaces outside of Champaign as well. So they have members there from the Champaign Federation of Teachers. They have the building trades in there. So you have the plumbers and pipefitters.

You have carpenters, electricians, psychologists, a bunch of different groups in there. So that's another one too. And I served on the board for them for about three years between 2016 and 2018. Outside of that, you also have alternative media spaces like the IMC, which in terms of just actually knowing what's going on.

My...my radio show, Radio Free Labor, is a major labor source for people just to know what's happening around the area and the world. So just highlighting that we have alternative media. You also have Smile Politely who...who gives, who offers, they do op-eds on labor issues.

Aisaiah (11:03)

Is it like writing or...?

Augustus (11:05)

Yeah. It's a—it's a newsletter, but it's mainly, online.

Aisaiah

Okay.

Augustus

Yeah. So Smile Politely is a newsletter that's online. It's kinda like Public Eye, except Public Eye does hard copies.

But there's so many different ones.

Channing-Murray. Oh, I forgot Channing-Murray. They would've killed me for that. Channing-Murray is amazing.

Channing-Murray is one of my favorite spaces in the entire world. The—the amount of work that Channing-Murray does that's so, it's invisible because you never hear—they never get their accolades, but the work that they do in providing spaces and resources for workers, labor. I mean, during the encampments, the work that we did in helping the students stay protected and safe with Channing-Murray, there's so many things. And then going back to our strike, going back to other issues when the—when the Mike Brown Ferguson stuff started, Channing-Murray was this huge space for us. So, yeah, there—there's just yeah. They're a big one.

McKinley Foundation is a big one. They've gone super-duper hardcore progressive in fighting for workers' rights. They do a lot of events around the issues, and I do talks with them all the time. So yeah, there's so many...there's so many campus and community spaces for labor.

Aisaiah (12:25)

What was the you said outside of campus is like a big organization. It had, like, a lot of letters.

Augustus (12:32)

AFL-CIO.

Aisaiah

Wait.

Augustus

The CLC.

Aisaiah

Could you say that slower?

Augustus

Yeah. The Champaign County AFL-CIO.

Aisaiah

Okay. Got that.

And then how would you describe Channing-Murray? Is that—is that the correct term?

Augustus (12:45)

Yeah. Channing-Murray Foundation.

Aisaiah

Okay. Foundation.

Augustus

Yeah. Channing-Murray Foundation is its own independent entity. It's not tied to the university.

So even though it's on campus, but, essentially, what it is—is it's kinda like an...it's kinda like a little sibling of the IMC for campus. It's a space where they offer resources as well as space, physical space.

And they have a lot of people that work there who offer trainings and organizing tips for anything, not even just labor, but anything around social justice. So Channing-Murray is just, just brimming with resources. So, yeah, I love them to death. Channing-Murray Foundation is so, so crucial to this county.

Aisaiah (13:30)

Are there any upcoming initiatives or projects in Champaign-Urbana that you think the community should be aware of when it comes to labor rights?

Augustus (12:39)

Oof. Well, that's a big one. Funny. We do—we're doing this right after the strike ended.

Aisaiah

Yeah.

Augustus

But that was really...the, that was where we were putting all of our energy towards. And it was just can—can we talk about that for a bit?

Aisaiah

Yep.

Augustus

Yeah, because, I mean, that was that was so important.

It was so important for building service workers, predominantly Black and Brown women, who have often been told by this administration that their labor has no value, and they and they, this again, the way they treated them versus the way they treated us as graduate workers, very different. Because number one, we were not predominantly Black and Brown. Number two, we did academic work. And, unfortunately, we live in a society that likes to talk down to people who serve food, who clean buildings, all those things.

So the language in the mass mail and if you saw some of the ways they talked about them in the media, it was horrible. So when the building service and food service workers got to see the undergraduates and the community members and all these other groups come out and support them, it really energized them to go in to that second week. Because I always tell people, I've helped organize six strikes in my life now. And if you go beyond a week, that weekend is the hardest part because that's when people have time to themselves.

There are no picket lines, and they start to think, is this really worth it? Right? So when they saw Monday the support and all the stuff that's been going on, it really gave them energy to go back in the room, in the bargaining room, and get what they wanted.

And so, yeah, that was a major thing that I think everybody in the...and not just the county, but the state. We had a bunch of senators and house of rep members speak out against the university administration for what they were doing. So it went wide across the state. It was, it was amazing.

We had the Indiana Steelworkers come out, the Hollywood workers I work with. They showed up and gave money. We raised over \$30,000 in less than a week. So, yeah, that kind of support is what we have to do.

So that was the big thing. Now people are kinda decompressing from that because it took a lot. The big thing that is...that—that I would say is happening now that has to really be emphasized is the campaign for the graduate workers to unionize their research assistants. That's a—that's the push on the campus right now that if that happens, it creates the strongest—it creates the strongest base of labor that we would see on this campus since, I would say, 2001-02 when the graduate workers first unionized.

Because what you're doing is you're taking...you're taking about another 2,500 people who—who aren't unionized, and you're putting them into a collective where they can actually voice out their own issues about overwork, about their supervisors, about, being having their pay cut, about their hours, all the things that we often don't think about. They can now voice those issues without the threat of being retaliated against.

Because that's what a union contract does, it protects you from retaliation. So that's really the big thing that I think the undergraduates, the grads, professors, community members really should be educated on as we move forward is the potential to unionize research assistance on the campus is going to have such dramatic economic changes to the rest of the county. That we could build power off of and, hopefully, the undergraduate workers will be thinking of unionizing themselves since undergraduates are unionizing in multiple parts of the country now.

Hopefully, they feel the fire off of that as well. And then, hopefully, we'll follow after that, the tenured faculty. So, yeah, that that's the big one though is the RA campaign, which is currently going on.

Aisaiah (17:47)

Thank you. Wait. Okay. So wait. Can you break down, like, RA and, like, the acronym down?

Augustus (17:53)

Research assistant.

Aisaiah (17:54)

Okay. Got that.

Augustus (17:55)

Yeah. Research assistant.

When you—when you get a...assistantship as a graduate student to work at the university, you're typically a graduate assistant, meaning you typically do specialized, technical or, clerical work. You are a teaching assistant where you would teach classes, or you are a research assistant where you would do research for a professor. The only two that are currently unionized as part of the

GEO are graduate assistants and teaching assistants. So they're the only ones who are actually protected under the contract.

So the research assistants who don't have a contract, it's now their turn to hopefully be unionized under the contract protections.

Music

Midroll

Harshi (18:41)

Before we dive back into our discussion with Augustus, let's take a moment to spotlight some fantastic resources for those looking to enhance their business skills and workforce opportunities in Illinois. First off, we have Illinois Small Business Development Center, SBDC, at Champaign County EDC. Part of America's Small Business Development Center network, the SBDC provides comprehensive assistance to new entrepreneurs and helps existing businesses thrive in a complex marketplace. For more information, visit their website. They're open Monday through Friday.

We also have Parkland College SWIFT, support for workforce training. This free short term training program includes academic and career services. Applicants receive a stipend to attend classes, \$1,600 per semester, or \$150 for the forklift program.

Plus, completing all coursework and an exit interview can earn you an additional \$500. Financial assistance is also available for purchasing technology, hot spots, childcare, and transportation.

Another great resource is United Way of Champaign County, which connects workers with job training, legal aid, and emergency assistance. Check out unitedwaychampaign.org/labor to learn more about their support for labor rights and economic stability.

Next up, we also have the Parkland College Career Center. This center helps individuals explore their interests, skills, and values to select college majors and career goals. They offer free resources for resume writing, interviewing skills, and job search strategies with appointments available for personalized assistance. Lastly, we have the RPC Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, WIOA. This program supports training in various fields, including IT, manufacturing, office administration, and accounting. They also offer options for GED, CDL, which is truck driver licensing, culinary programs, vet tech training, and career assistance.

For more details on these resources, check the episode notes or visit your local community center. Now let's get back to our conversation with Augustus.

Aisaiah (21:06)

Pivoting from one big topic to another, but I, I would say, again, what have been some of the biggest challenges you faced? And I guess that's kinda interpretive.

Augustus (21:17)

No. Definitely. No. Of course, the biggest challenge, no surprise, would be the 2018 strike, here at University of Illinois. Myself as a graduate student, I was the president of the union, and we were in a contract negotiation with the university administration, meaning the provost, chancellor, human resources, and that's who negotiates against the union.

And essentially, what we were fighting for was to make sure that they could not decide who gets a tuition waiver for working. What they were trying to do is, we had a right, as in a legally binding, to get a tuition waiver if we work for the university. Because, essentially, if you don't have a tuition waiver and you still work for the university, that means you're paying to literally work here. And we were like, that makes no sense.

You're gonna—nobody can afford to do that. So about 75% of our membership would probably have to leave school without a tuition waiver. And they were wanting to make it to where they got to decide who got tuition waiver instead of it being a right if you come here and get a job. Right?

So long story short, they fought us tooth and nail, and we believe that they were seeking to bust our union. So they just held firm. So we spent the next nine months organizing a strike that would completely dismantle this campus's ability to operate. We wanted to make sure that nobody could go to class. Nobody could get boxes delivered. Nobody could do anything on the campus. And it took all 2,700 of our members who I had to essentially tell them you have to quit your job. Because that's what going on strike is, is you're quitting your job.

And we faced a ton of backlash at first. The—the provost, of course, targeting myself personally as well as the union saying that we don't care about the education of the students. We're being greedy. I had members who were living in cars.

I had members who were skipping meals and going to the hospital. One of the things we fought for was to make sure you had access to mental health services because there was a cap on the number of visits you could have to visit to, for...for, for a mental illness or mental distress. And we were trying to take that cap off.

So I had...we had so many issues with our membership. And if you read some of those polls and surveys that went out around that time, over half of graduate students were suffering from some type of mental illness. And they didn't care about those things as a university administration because they saw us and they still see graduate workers as numbers that can be just replaced. So they, they didn't care.

And we had to understand they didn't care instead of them...instead of us thinking that they were just, like, evil and, like, no. They just don't respect us. And the way you make people respect you is you withhold the biggest important thing that you have, which is your labor. And so the strike lasted fourteen days. It was an amazing experience.

The undergraduates were easily the greatest part about the strike. They spent so much time learning about it. Everybody was educated about it. It was amazing. We still have videos and

pictures, and somebody made a documentary about it. At the end of the day, the...the greatest feeling because it was a challenge. I don't—we don't have time on this podcast to talk about all the things that we went through as leadership. I didn't sleep for weeks, making sure we had enough money so people got paid, all kinds of stuff. The greatest feeling ever was on Day 13 when they walked into the room and said, “We'll give you whatever you want. Just don't put the picket lines back up.”

They were so defeated and beat down by our strike. And mind you, we were just going. It was only the second week. By—by the time we had occupied illegally two more, buildings.

And they were gonna arrest professors and students who were occupying the provost office. We had tours that were...that could not operate because we were blowing horns and being noisy. We went to the Engineering Quad and emptied those buildings because they couldn't do any—I mean, it was just, it was absolute chaos. It was beautiful. But the challenge is, like I said, listing all the things is making sure everybody was on the same page, making sure that we had a strategy that actually worked, making sure we had the funds to last if we had to stay out for two-three months.

It was so many things involved. So that was the biggest challenge that I've faced in the work I've done over the years. So I didn't know if you wanted more examples.

Aisaiah (26:04)

No, I mean...

Augustus

That's a big one.

Aisaiah

So that, that is a big one.

That's, like, way before me. I didn't even know about that, honestly.

Augustus

Yeah, that's unfortunate.

That's one of my biggest issues with the way the campus has gone since then, is there's this...this quiet repression of learning about the history of the campus. Because this used to be one of the greatest campuses for student protests. Like every week there was something, but the university administration, if you've been paying attention to what they've been doing, have been adamant about silencing protests, anything that could...that could awaken the campus. Very, very angry about those things.

And I think that's a major reason why a lot of people don't know about those histories. They don't want them to go out.

Aisaiah (26:48)

What's your vision for the future of labor organizing here in Champaign-Urbana and more broadly, where do you think the movement is headed?

Augustus (26:56)

Let me sum this up very quickly then. My—yeah—my vision is the creation of a neo labor movement. I believe the current labor movement that began with the general strike of 1877, it has waned and possibly has been has now been reduced to not being effective anymore. I believe we need a neo labor movement where the rank-and-file workers are the central voice and decision-making power over how labor movements operate as well as any decisions that are made. Because currently, the international leadership is the one that typically makes all decisions under this labor law.

Well, we have to go back to the old school rank-and-file organizing where the members see themselves as decision makers and highlighting their agency in fighting for change. Because if they don't see those things and they see just a representative who doesn't do the job they do, who makes a ton of money, making decisions that oftentimes contradict the things the workers want on the ground, then you're gonna start—you keep losing members. That's why the labor movement has went from almost 50% to now we're hovering around 9-10%.

Aisaiah

Wow.

Augustus

So that's—that's why.

So that's why a neo labor movement would restart it with a proper foundation of rank and file organizing. So that's my vision for here as well as the world if we're ever gonna have legitimate labor power to exercise the big thing that would actually win us a new world, which is a...a general strike.

Aisaiah (28:30)

So that was our last question. I just wanna say thank you so much, professor, for joining us today and sharing your insights. It's been inspiring to hear about your work and the resources available to our community.

For our listeners, be sure to check out the IMC and keep an eye out for ways to get involved, supporting labor rights.

Harshi (28:47)

In this episode, we covered several resources and insights into labor organizations. Make sure to check out the links to the resources mentioned in the episode description. Stay tuned for the next episode where we will be discussing Professor Wood's involvement with the IMC, the Independent Media Center.

Aisaiah (29:04)

And that's a wrap for today's episode of the Connected Podcast, co-sponsored by the Community Data Clinic. We want to extend our deepest gratitude to all of those who have made this episode possible.

We sincerely appreciate the invaluable support received from the State of Illinois Broadband Ready Program, led by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity, the Chancellor's Call to Action Research Program to address racism and social injustice from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, the National Center for Supercomputing Applications, Technology Services, and the School of Information Sciences at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

We also want to express our heartfelt thanks to our community partners, including the Community Data Clinic, Cunningham Township Supervisor's Office, Champaign-Urbana Public Health District, Project Success, and the Housing Authority of Champaign County. Your collaboration has enriched our discussions and initiatives in profound ways.

Let's take a moment to applaud our outstanding students and contributors. Among them are the director of the Community Data Clinic Dr. Anita Say Chan, Program Manager Julian Chin, and Master's Researcher Evan Allgood.

We also want to recognize the great work of our undergraduates, Aisaiah Pellecer, Lily Rybka, Harshitha Vetrivel, and Renee Zhao. Special thanks also goes to our graduate researchers, Kainen Bell, Jorge Rojas, and everyone we had the opportunity to interview during our sessions. Your contributions have added depth and richness to our efforts. As always, we appreciate our listeners for tuning in.

Be sure to subscribe for future episodes and feel free to reach out with your feedback and suggestions. As we mentioned in the middle of the midroll, all of the resources that we share throughout this podcast will be in the description below. So if that is of interest to you, please take a moment to pause and check that out. Until next time, take care and stay tuned for more engaging discussions on the ConnectEd Podcast.