Augustus Wood:
Welcome, everybody, back to “Off the Shelf: Revolutionary Readings in Times of Crisis.” This is your host, Gus Wood, and I want to thank again the Humanities Research Institute for co-sponsoring this amazing podcast. We are still rolling through Season 2. And we got some of the greatest Black scholars working today doing awesome work, just, just showcasing all of the forgotten scholarship. And also, I'll be merging scholarship to understand Black struggle and how racial oppression is really operating today. And I'm really excited that we have a good brother that I've been trying to get on for awhile now. He is here and not just here, in terms of on the podcast, but he's here at Illinois, doing awesome work. We have Dr. Alonzo Ward here, who I want to thank for coming on to the program. Thank you for coming on, brother.

Alonzo Ward:
My pleasure. My pleasure. Been a long time, like I said, we've been waiting on this one, right?

Augustus Wood:
That's right. So, I want to talk a little bit about what Dr. Ward...and you're going to understand why I wanted him on here, when you learn about this amazing research that he's doing. So, Dr. Ward is currently an assistant professor at Eastern Illinois University. And his research is on the African American history in the Midwest during the 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as the general history of race and ethnicity in the United States. And he researches African American labor history in Illinois, in conjunction with the larger labor movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

So you can already see that Dr. Ward is, is, is the, is the like the first part of the movie for Black labor history. And then I come in, in the second part, on contemporary Black labor history. So we're, we're, we're bookends of a larger like a, like a Marvel film, you know what I'm saying? [LAUGHING]

Alonzo Ward:
It's a long, it's a long history. [LAUGHING]

Augustus Wood:
It really is. What's cool is that he's got a current book project titled Relegated to the Bottom: Illinois African American Workers and their Struggle Against Systemic Oppression During the Early Jim Crow Era. And it's a multifaceted examination of African Americans in Illinois prior to the Great Migration of the 20th century. And this examination explores the type of labor Illinois African Americans procured during the early Jim Crow era from 1877 to 1914. Now, I want to start with this, Dr. Ward, because this is really cool that you're looking at a period that very few people have ever looked at in relation to Black labor. So, because you talk more about how you got to that, how you got to this point. Because as you know, most of anybody who talks about Black folks is either slavery, and then they skip over everything else that goes right through the Great Migration, because that's the first industrial working class, et cetera, et cetera. But here
you are looking at a very undeveloped uh, era, and you’re filling a gap. So tell our listeners about what you’re doing with this.

**Alonzo Ward:**
Gus, man, first of all, thanks for having me on here. I really appreciate this. Anytime we get a chance to talk about ourselves and our scholarship, man, it’s a privilege, man. And yeah, we need more folks out there doing what you do, first and foremost. Um, you know, getting to this project was, I mean, I can give you the shorter version of this story… it was something else, it was an accident. Quite frankly, it was started over just reading an article. I remember it was an older historian and long, in fact that he may have passed away a long time ago. But the Illinois historian by the name of John Keyser wrote an article on Black labor, on Black workers, specifically about Black strike breakers. And you know, the article itself was written in the 1970s, and you can relate to it as well, too. It was written in the seventies, I believe. And one of the things that made it good, it was the fact that somebody was talking about Black people, period.

**Augustus Wood:**
Yes.

**Alonzo Ward:**
And, and, and I imagine when, when, when the historian was writing this article at that time, you know, this was a big deal. Hey, look, I'm talking about Black people… and that was it. But I think in the 20th and 21st century, as we're doing our research, and this is where I come in… I realized that, again, this is something you can completely relate to, when we research Black folks, in labor or whatever they're doing in America, we've got to complicate these things. We can't just have these people looking like dimensionless stick figures.

And that was one of the things I accuse John Keyser’s article of doing-- that we come off looking like these stick figures, that there was no background information on these people. There was no, where do these workers come from? Why were they here, how much they knew about these strikes and all that. And so, that was part of the inspiration of me getting into that particular, specific field of Black workers in the 19th century and trying to and understand what they were really thinking.

**Augustus Wood:**
Exactly. I think you, I think you hit on something incredibly important because the scholarship that has been published on Black workers at that time period, as you mentioned, it's very…like, but were we were strike breakers, and that's it. That's all they talk about. We were strike breakers or we were sharecroppers, now again, and they don't nuance the fact that, number one, many Black folks who were brought in to be strike breakers, actually when they found out that they were going to be strike breakers, they stopped and they went on strike. That's one thing they never mention. Yeah, exactly. Number two, they always never mention the fact that there was, that there were active independent unions springing up at the time, when folks are really trying to struggle at different parts, particularly as you mentioned, in your research, how Illinois' political economy really starts shifting after the Civil War. So again, I think, I think what you do is really cool is that not only do you could complicate the position of Black working-class people in the period leading into the nadir, right after reconstruction. But you also actively show that there was a very tricky situation for Black workers in Illinois at that time because there were, there were different types of jobs available, but you have to be careful what types of industries
you get into. You know that there was a lot of different politics involved as being a Black worker that allowed the Black middle-class folks, most of them being free people prior to the Civil War, didn't have to deal with. So you bring a lot of class stuff in there as well and I think it's, I think that's really important.

**Alonzo Ward:**
I appreciate that, Gus, and I'm going to tell you what, too, one of the things that I concentrate on, especially early on, again, this is still a work in progress. Even that, even that long title that you gave is a work in progress. [LAUGHS] We'll see how that publishing stuff…

**Augustus Wood:**
But that's what I'm saying, hopefully you get to keep that title because I love it, but you know how it go with publishers.

**Alonzo Ward:**
That means a lot to me that, that, that, that title sounds good to you. That means a lot to me. But one of the things that I'm really trying to, to, at least in the origins of Black folks first coming to Illinois after the Civil War, obviously, they trickled, they trickled, they trickled in, we trickled in after the Civil War. And as we get close to the turn of the century, you start to see the numbers increase. But one of the things I really want to emphasize in terms of labor and Illinois, that you had these, not only the white working class that wanted to racialize labor, but you also had the, the, the, the owners, the industrialists, that look to exploit that racialization as well, too. So, what better way to bust up these unions than bring in in these Black workers, you know, and, and, use their racism, use these white workers’ racism against them.

So that's one of the things early on I tried is to, is to, is to really focus on that racialization process. One of the things, one of the, one of the main tenets of my, of my forthcoming book is that I, I term what Black workers did, as this hybrid labor activism. And what that is, is this idea that Black workers, first thing, you know this very well, but Black workers could not just only be workers, they first and foremost, they were Black, and they were always being told they were Black in various ways, you can't work here because you're Black or you can't do this type of labor because you're Black, all this. They were being excluded because they were Black as well too. And so this hybrid activism that Black workers had to do is, is at least twofold. One, they were fighting for their civil rights as people, just as citizens of the state. You know, up until 1865, they couldn't even come into the state legally because of Black laws. But even after that, they were still fighting this uphill battle against state legislatures and all that stuff. But so Black people were fighting for citizenship, citizenship rights and all this stuff during this time simultaneously of course, they were fighting for things like the the eight-hour work day, better working conditions, better pay and all this stuff, too. So yeah, Black workers still... so they're fighting that battle, that white workers are fighting. But like I said they’re also simultaneously fighting against Black exclusion or just exclusionary measures that kept them out of a lot of these jobs, kept them out of a lot of the labor organizations as well, so again, my cute term I think is the hybrid labor activism that Black workers were trying to accomplish, just, again, just to survive.

**Augustus Wood:**
See, that’s interesting, too, as you’re doing this, because when you think about the way people conceptualize activism at any point for Black struggle, you do get a sense that there’s a singular and somewhat linear process to a lot of it. And I think one of the people that I love to talk about that just fills my research is Aldon Morris and his social movement theory from his, from his legendary book, the *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*. And he, he, he, he kind of introduced or challenged the very thing that you yourself are also challenging, except you’re doing it in the realm of labor, which is really, really impressive because there’s so much of this is that, okay, they’re doing this and they’re engaging in this, in this area, and then they don’t leave out the other part, as you mentioned, is that these Black, these Black folks had day-to-day lives where they had to encounter that they were Black in so many other places. It wasn’t just, now we’re going to organize this union, or we’re going to fight the boss, it’s like, nah I gotta go to the store where I get sold bad meat because they don’t actually, all the good meat goes to the white stores, and at the Black stores you get whatever, whatever thawed out and went rotten, you get that meat. Then you gotta go home and you gotta deal with the police like so yeah, what’s, ao then…

The idea that there is a, it is multi-faceted, it’s very fluid, and it’s not linear. There are so many, so many different nodes of that in relation to being a Black worker. Well, I think that is incredibly important for us moving forward to understanding the struggle today, because again, as you know, we’ve seen how they have, how do you say, co-opted the image of poor Black workers or in the media today, and they’re all, you know, like, they work in warehouses, and you know every once in awhile they’ll win the union vote, and they’ll get something for their… Okay, so what about their day-to-day, nah we’re just worried about them organizing the union and fighting the evil Amazon. It’s like, well, yeah, Amazon is bad. Well, Amazon is bad because there is a government who has deregulated capital to allow it to do whatever it wants in both NAFTA one and NAFTA two. So again, Amazon is doing these things because of the political economy, making Black workers have to face multiple types of oppression in different places. And so what you’re doing that’s really cool is that you’re introducing this systemic element of it in a moment in history where many people haven’t looked at Black people in that way.

Alonzo Ward:

No, that’s right, Gus, and I’ll tell you this too, Gus, one of the things I’m trying to do as well, I… mean that was perfectly put, first of all. One of the things I hope to really get out in my work here is that we had to be creative in terms of our activism. You know, I mean and so, but another thing that, science shows racialization that I’m talking about that besides, like you put it, you know, we had to fight this on multiple levels. I mean, you know, yeah, I just want to be a worker in the coal mines. No, you’re Black. And we may not want you here first of all. Secondly, we don't want you in our union. That's another thing... so, so, so one of the things, I mean, and going back to my original article, the John Keyser article on strike breaking—it's still sitting out there, too, if anybody wants to look at it—but I said, the one thing he did not do, as I said, that that was the immediate thing I wanted to address... then hold on a second. If they are...and he said this, but he didn't, he didn't make the connection. If they’re, if they’re excluding Black people from these unions, and they’re excluding Black people from, from working in these coal mines and all this other stuff and all this racism is happening, then the strike break in itself is an act that is it a form of activism.
Okay, here we go come in here and bust up unions then. You know, whether they, whether they knew they were doing this or not, whether they were imported from the South or not. That's almost irrelevant because most of those Black men that came from North Carolina or Virginia were being recruited from, they were like, hey, you know what? They're not going to let us work in their union or in their coal mines anyway, so we're going to come in here and bust them up. That's what we're going to do… [CROSS TALK]

**Augustus Wood:**
That, see… that's what I'm talking about. That's the kind, that's the kind of intervention that is sorely missing, because again, we going to get a little deep with it, now. What you're arguing is a proto nationalist viewpoint and both of us know, looking at, looking at somebody that we both know incredibly well, Dr. Sundiata Cha-Jua, who wrote on Brooklyn, Illinois at that time period where yeah, like exactly what you're talking about, in labor in Illinois when Black workers would come here, they have an idea that like, we are Black people who were not allowed in these unions. They lynch us, they do all these other things to us, and they're calling us to get a job and we got a chance to break up these white folks’ union and bust it up. Why not? Right? So again, people look at that, look at that in a one-dimensional manner that that is just strike breaking, and messing up the labor movement and… it's negative, exactly. What you're doing is now you got to look at the perspective of the workers themselves as they see it as a proto nationalist element, that we as Black folks are going to take this and take this over, or bust this up. So yeah, man, that is an incredible intervention, something that nobody has done yet.

**Alonzo Ward:**
Hey Gus, you hit it right on the head, too, you know, you actually remind me of things. I was like, oh yeah, that's, that's part of my intervention, too. Yeah, I forget about that.

**Augustus Wood:**
That's what we do, though, you know?

**Alonzo Ward:**
Hey, hey, hey, hey, hey, you hit it right on the head when you say it from a Black perspective, people, people can take that, again, in this linear fashion—oh, it's from a Black perspective and therefore it's just this one thing, and like no, no, no. First and foremost, yeah, if you look at that strike breaking, for example, from a Black perspective, and those strike breakers, they were trying to eat just like everybody else. They were trying to work just like everybody else. Secondly, if you understand too simultaneously while they're doing this, there is a strong Black tradition in unionism at this time, and even going forward. And that never really truly wanes. But again, these labor historians have been so busy looking at labor through a white lens, a white working-class lens. And then even when these so-called liberal scholars are talking about labor, oh with these Black people were all strike breakers, well hold on a second. It's much more complicated than that though. Again, let's make these people three-dimensional instead of making them these two-dimensional stick figures.

**Augustus Wood:**
Well, let, let's call it as we see it. I mean, let's be honest. Besides you and I, there may be one other Black scholar who does Black labor history, honestly, in the entire United States, let's be honest about it. So again, where you have very few of us doing Black studies on labor, that you're going to have certain types of perspectives and also certain types of blind spots, right?
Then again, I'll go out, I'll give you a great example of it. One of the best books ever written on Atlanta, but also one of the worst books ever written on Atlanta, is Kevin Kruse's *White Flight*. Because what it does is it portrays, it gives you the full white supremacist, political, social, etc., of how racial, how they racialized Atlanta, segregated, et cetera. Amazing structural perspective. However, they're no Black folks in the book/ You see what I'm saying? It's like when you have somebody who comes in and who has perspective of actually no, we need to center the agents, the ones who are actually the most important element of the narrative, that typically comes from the folks and again historically, what is the golden age of Black Studies? 1969, start with Robert Allen, right, and Black Cap, *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, all the way to probably 93-94, and what was it because you had all those Black scholars during the Black coming into the Black Freedom Movement, who were starting to actually centralize Black agents. And then you started getting all kinds of new perspectives. Like wait a minute, hold on. You remember John Blassingame, all these cats were coming in, Sterling Stuckey, all these folks were like wait wait wait, so again what you're doing is you could be ushering in that type of era, particularly for Black labor, and that's kind of what "Off the Shelf" has been doing is that we want to showcase these types of interventions and these types of scholarship that we can use not only to interpret what's happening today, but also to understand the gaps and the problems in scholarship and we need to be filling if we're ever going to intervene in racial oppression today.

**Alonzo Ward:**
Ok... you bring up so many good points here. I mean, just the, just the idea of Black agency in, and dealing with some of these historians and other scholars, that the lack of agency among Black people would be... You bring up Kevin Kruse's *White Flight* book, which was a fantastic book by the way. I love it, but where are the Black folks in it? [LAUGHS] ...and so that was, that's the one, so as I'm as I'm still working on chapter by chapter in in my in my current book, my current manuscript rather, yeah, that's first and foremost: Black agency. You know, I'm not, I'm not interested in talking about white folks too much in terms of, in terms of their history. Their history's already been told in Illinois, or other places. And so yeah, you hit it right on the head when you talk about agency and Black people. Because yeah, their story has not been told. We're getting these perspectives from, from the white working class. And I think, I think many of these scholars actually mean well. But, but that I was thinking about this too, Gus, as you were talking, one of the reasons—that I was talking to another colleague about this as well, too—one of the reasons, one of the reasons I wanted to focus on Black agency, one, because I'm interested in Black folks and telling their history. But also I noticed that some scholars, well-meaning scholars, too, I don't think there's anything wrong with what they do, but they use titles with with the term race in it, race and ethnicity in Spring Valley, Illinois or something like that. Like I said, the difference of what I'm trying to do is I'm trying to, no, I'm specifically talking about Black people, I think.

**Augustus Wood:**
Thank you. Thank you.
Alonzo Ward:
This is part of my inspiration from Sundiata Cha-Jua, you know, he wrote a book on Brooklyn, Illinois about Black folks in Brooklyn, Illinois. Like, I'm not writing about race. I'm not writing about race and ethnicity and what are the others terms we use, these euphemisms for Black people…

Augustus Wood:
Yeah, people of color.

Alonzo Ward:
No, no, no, no, I'm, I'm specifically talking about Black folks that were coming up here, however they got here, you know coming up through the south, some of them were already here, you know. But yeah. So yeah, if I use… no, no race race and labor like, oh, hell, no.

Augustus Wood:
But you're exactly right, though. And I think that that's the kind of thing that we have to be honest about, is that the reason why a lot of these liberal scholars are so adamant about we we're doing race now in labor, we're doing race in urban hi-, we're doing race in stuff, it's because they don't want to completely centralize the fact that number one, Black folks drive a lot of social, political, and economic decision-making at specific levels. And number two, they don't want to actually dig into the archive of the voices of those people.

Alonzo Ward:
Why is that?

Augustus Wood:
Let, let's just let's just be honest about it.

Alonzo Ward:
Why is that? Well, why is that though? I'm being naïve, why is that?

Augustus Wood:
Because it's not because it's not their project. Their project, again, is to to, is to keep this, keep the American structure because they believe it to be the best. Keep it intact but point out the flaws in it. Because again, they built their, in their ideological mindset they believe that America, the American structure, the capitalist structure, is fine. It needs some band aids, but it's fine. Whereas in most Black scholars that I talked about in that golden age from 1969 to 1993, what they were trying to say is no, no, no, that this system was made specifically against poor people who were disproportionately Black, red, or women. And therefore, because of that construction, it needs to be destroyed with a new system put in place. So yeah, again, that's why all of these things are important and the work that you're doing, especially in filling in a much-needed gap in Illinois history.

Alonzo Ward:
Hey, Gus, I'm writing that down. I'm writing that down. [LAUGHS] But you're absolutely right. And I didn't, I didn't think about the fact that, yeah, even in this early 19th century or excuse me, late 19th century form, yeah, you see what's driving the system and what's driving this racialization is capitalism. And you can see the absolute flaw in the system, in how it's being utilized to divide these workers. I'm talking about all the workers. White and Black and whoever
else, and those capitalists, those industrialists, whatever you want to call them, yeah, they're the ones that understood that we could drive a wedge through these people. In fact, we can make these people take less wages because it’s so racist.

**Augustus Wood:**
You’re exactly right. They found, they found out the system was working too well, right? That's what Du Bois gets at in *Black Reconstruction*. They found out the system was working way too well, so now I can continue to oppress these white workers because they are so racist now and social control has just gotten so out of hand, that yeah, like we don't have to we can really not pay them anything… and of course, we know what happens then, you have all the general strikes of 1877 and all that other stuff come up. So you have a legitimate struggle of the working classes, but internally you also had this nasty racist element in the working classes that worked out so well. Because to this day, as we’re moving into the modern period now, yeah, we’re at a moment now, Dr. Ward, where you can't even go into a labor union hall and ask them to actually have a real discussion about racism. Because their first response is well, we're not racist, right? You know what I’m saying? Because again, they haven't read stuff that you're doing. They haven’t read work that myself and other Black scholars want to centralize to actually say that this isn’t about an individual, like, view of somebody being racist. There is a specific system that we have to fight against to get that garbage out of how, of how we live our lives in society. So my question to you is, is there like, in terms of like, modern stuff, like is there anything that you is there anything that you're recognizing currently happening with the with all the people leaving their jobs, all these strikes happening, folks forming unions... like what do you like, what do you see relation to Black workers today? What’s, how is your work going to influence how we think about Black workers today, for you, what is your perspective on it?

**Alonzo Ward:**
You know, it might be more, it's complicated. It's complicated. I think that that's a complicated question. But I think, I think one of the, one of the takeaways from what I'm doing now, first and foremost, I'll oversimplify it then. It's the fact that Black folks are not in unison in terms of how they feel about labor, in terms of how they feel about unionization. But with that said, though, the overstatement by, by some of these liberal scholars that have happened for, for, for decades, the overstatement of us being anti-labor or anti-union and all this other madness, that's, that's been overstated.

And, I think in the 21st century, that's one of the takeaways is that hey, Black folks are on the vanguard of this union movement or trying to be, you know, better paid, or all the, the abhorrent conditions that we work in Amazon. You mentioned Amazon earlier. But yeah, we’re all the vanguard of that movement of trying to improve worker, ah worker, the quality of work, I should say.

**Augustus Wood:**
And so yeah, I mean, at the end of the day, for us to understand how the difficulties of being a Black worker, particularly now with, nowadays…we used to have all these different things. There used to be a separation between poor and working class. I’ll argue that, that, that delineation is gone. Working classes bring in so little now. Because again, they no longer have the ability to own homes like they did 20 years ago. They no longer have the ability to save for colleges, vacations, pensions, etc. So they I argue that the working class now is a poor class.
Alonzo Ward:
Yeah, Gus, I mean, you know, your working class, I mean, in order to be working class now, you have to at least go to college and maybe get a degree in this case though, in order to be working. You know, it used to be back in the day, you finish high school, you go work in a steel factory. That does not exist. Not on a large level, at least.

Augustus Wood:
No, you're exactly right. The best, the best working-class labor that's, that's, that's prevalent right now, is warehouse work.

Alonzo Ward:
Ok. Ok. Ok. Wow, yeah...

Augustus Wood:
That's really it. Now construction...

Alonzo Ward:
Cause cause construction… I was thinking construction right away. I was thinking construction.

Augustus Wood:
Construction is unstable because it goes up and down so often, particularly what we're having right now with inflation and recessions et cetera. The one stable because the proliferation of consumer capitalism is that warehouses for Amazon, Walmart, etc., have just exploded because people order online now more so than go into the stores...

Alonzo Ward:
I'm guilty.

Augustus Wood:
You have warehouses opening. And like you said, you can get a job in a warehouse that's backbreaking work. And that's really the, that's the highest paid labor for a lot of Black working class folk now, is doing that type of work. And it's scary because most of it is, is non-union, most of it will distort and destroy your physical body in ten to fifteen years. And that's kind of where the political economy’s going for Black labor. This is a very scary thing.

Alonzo Ward:
Is it to my understanding, see this is where you come in and you can inform me, because is it to my understanding, and this is all anecdotal, maybe you know the numbers on this… Are those people mostly Black workers or is it just a, just a disproportionate percentage of Black workers in say these warehouses like Amazon and whoever else?

Augustus Wood:
Disproportionate.

Alonzo Ward:
Disproportionate, OK. OK. OK.
Augustus Wood:
Yeah. Because again, at the end of the day we’re only 13 percent or a 12 point something percent of the population, but in most of these spaces we’re like 30 to 40, sometimes 50 percent of the work. I mean, the Bessemer Bessemer Amazon warehouse is 78% Black.

Alonzo Ward:
[LAUGHS] Oh, my goodness. OK.

Augustus Wood:
Yeah. And so again, that's what I'm saying is like, this is, these are, these are the new conditions that are happening. Or in other words, this sub working class is now becoming the dominant form of labor. And again, what's, going back to your work, your research, if you look at what Illinois, what Black Illinoisans, is it Illinoisians?

Alonzo Ward:
Illinoisans, that's right. That's right, that's correct.

Augustus Wood:
Okay. Cause people look at you weird when you might throw that “s” on there. So Black Illinoisans at the turn, at the end of the 19th century, are really having to think about how they were going to, because again, they’re not sharecroppers like in the South? Right. They actually have the capacity to work in to work in locations where they have a higher wage scale and a somewhat higher standard of living. There's sharecroppers prior to the Great Migration. And you don't really see a of that scholarship. And when you look at what's happening today, you have to ask the question for people who go to warehouse work in Amazon versus those who go to work in a restaurant. Because you know wages are going up or restaurants, even though inflation has killed that. But you see my point though is that there is a higher standard of living in terms of you're not doing physical backbreaking labor in warehouse work, so you'll take a job at a retail store or a gas station or restaurant. You know what I'm saying? But then again you're not getting a pension, or you're not getting a possible union contract if the if the Amazon warehouse continue to unionize like Staten Island. You see what I'm saying?

So for those those workers who were sharecropping in during your, the period you're looking at, versus the ones who are in Illinois, who are going to try to work in factories, coal mines, wherever else, you know, is that standard of living worse dealing with what Illinois people dealt with versus the horribleness that was going on in the Deep South? See, that type of comparison or that type of analysis is not prevalent in Black labor history.

Alonzo Ward:
And that's what, and that's... you hit the nail on the head. That's one of the things I'm trying to bring out. You know, these people, you know, they were leaving the south, we know that, and they left the south with intent to come to a place where they could get better employment, where they wouldn't get their heads bashed in, where they wouldn't get lynched, where they can actually get some kind of voting rights, obviously, or some semblance of it as least. Illinois, obviously, at the turn of the century, was clearly not perfect. We know that that's part of what my whole book is going to be, the imperfection of Illinois. But I mean, these people, when they were coming up, we could think about this though, Gus... these, these workers, that's the beauty of what we do. See, everybody works. [LAUGHS] Everybody.
Augustus Wood:
Well, hold on now, because, you know, the old saying. There's two people in the world, those who work, and those who don't. You know, the ones who don't are the ones who own everything, and so, yeah.

Alonzo Ward:
OK, the people that exploit the labor and then the rest of us. But, but, but one of the things, or one of the most important questions, I think that a majority of the Black workers that were coming up here, or you know finally migrate into Illinois, is that, is that they had to decide whether they were going to remain in a in a larger, excuse me, they would, if they were going to remain in the larger labor movement period. They had to decide that.

I mean, and I'm making that argument too, you know, as, as, as these chapters evolve, or as again, so this does not stay stagnant, this status for Black workers in Illinois. Like I said, I'm starting in the say 1870s going up through the early 20th century. It doesn't stay the same, and so, as it got worse for them in terms of racism in the unions, racism in the workplace, they had to make a decision. They're like, OK, all right, hold up, not all of us are strike breakers, da, da, da, da, da, you know all the stigma attached to that. But we got to decide whether we're going to remain loyal to these larger unions or not. And I'm gonna tell you what, it was, man....yeah, and this and this, and this is connected to allow a lot of the race riots that took place in the early 20th century as well, too. But a lot of Black folks was like, you know what, the hell with this. We not only, not so not only were we once union men and women at one point, but now what we're going to do, we're going to purposely bust up their unions. We didn't do that. See, it was not organized before. And I would argue that a lot of the white industrialist owners were the ones that were responsible for bringing Black workers in to break these strikes. But I'm telling you after the 20th century begins, Black workers were like, oh no, no, no, no, we got this. Now it started, it started around these, I could be wrong, but I'm still doing research on this. But it, it starts in 1894 with the Pullman Strike. And if that... Black, Black folks, they ruin that strike, they completely... because those railroad workers Eugene Debs were so racist and they were so exclusionary. Debs, Eugene Debs was like, hey man, you gotta chill on that racism because it's going to ruin, it's going to ruin us. We could bring some of these Black folks in. Debs, Debs for whatever flaws he had, Eugene Debs was kinda down. Or he was smart enough.

Augustus Wood:
Yeah. He understand the strategy. He understood the strategy.

Alonzo Ward:
He understood. Them white workers were like, oh, no boss we'll take less wages to keep them Black folks out.

Augustus Wood:
Again, what you're bringing up. You're bringing up a Pullman history that nobody ever talks about. It's just like when I do New Deal history. Oh boy, you try, you try to talk to white workers about the New Deal. Oh, they will fall on their knees, oh, I love this new deal. And I'm like, well, you realize the New Deal was a cop out for workers. And all it was it kept, because it didn't apply to Black workers, especially Black women, and Black farmers, and all these other folks. And they're like, oh, you can't say that, the New Deal saved the white working, saved the working classes. The New Deal saved America.
Alonzo Ward:
It saved the working class, that's what it did. Not Black folks, the white working class. The white working class.

Augustus Wood:
So exactly what you're talking about, especially with the Pullman history, that's a history that very few people discuss. Because as you said, they want to put forth this argument of a, of a solidarity. And they want to talk about how the Pullman workers did everything they could to fight against George Pullman. And even though they lost the strike, you know, that they stood in solidarity with one another. It's like no, you gotta break down the actual day-to-day and the fact that they refused to organize alongside Black workers to the point they ended up losing the strike for them. Because even if, even if President Cleveland didn't bring those folks in to shoot them…

Alonzo Ward:
Oh, Grover. [LAUGHS]

Augustus Wood:
If he didn't bring those folks in to shoot them, they would have lost that strike over time because as you said, they were going to start, they were going to start scabbing or crossing the picket lines because they didn't have the numbers. Right. And so again, I think, so what you're saying, another important intervention that a lot of people don't recognize because they don't have the lens of centralizing Black workers to see what they were going through. And again, this was something that was first brought to the forefront of course, by Joe Trotter's *Black Milwaukee*, you know again, one of the most path-breaking books ever. And also, you know we're going to get him on here very soon on "Off the Shelf." So we're going to get into all that as well. And so like I said, you're, you're following in the footsteps of really important labor scholars and you're planting your flag in that, in that realm.

Alonzo Ward:
I appreciate it. Hey, Gus, I'm glad you had me on before you had Professor Trotter on here, man. I don't want to follow the legends, man.

Augustus Wood:
You're well your way, though. Now before we, before we close out, though, we always want to make sure that the audience knows how you got to this point. The kind of stuff, what kind of scholars and scholarship were you studying to get to all this stuff? You know, you mentioned that one article, but to get your perspective on Black workers and… what kinds of scholars influenced you, scholarship, specific books, or you know?

Alonzo Ward:
How far back do you want to go you want to go on that?

Augustus Wood:
Let's go, let it loose. Again, that why it's called "Off the Shelf." That we want to bring, we want to make sure that people remember these important scholars and works.
Alonzo Ward:
For sure, man. You know, look, I'm not sure that mine necessarily falls under the realm of Labor Studies or anything like that. I mean, you know, yeah. Yeah, no, no, no. When I was an undergrad, I think some of the things that... first of all, I had a couple of professors that just completely inspired me. You know, I was, uh, I was a marginal C student, you know, throughout high school, even beginning in college, man. But I had a couple of, Martha Sto, Dr. Martha Stovall and Alfred Stovall. They were married couple. They taught Black Studies, and things of that nature. This was when I was at Rust College. And they got me, just somehow they inspired me to start reading, and I was reading Dr. France, uh, Francis Cress Welsing of color theory. They got me interested in France Fanon, you know, things of that nature, man. And I don't even think I fully appreciated who these people were or what they were saying at the time, I was 18 or 19 years old. What do I know about the color theory? Or, you know, about violence and colonialism, under Fanon, but I was, but I was enthralled by it for some reason that I think had to do with the fact that I knew these were Black people and if they were, they were they were introducing these theories about why things were the way they were.

Gus, you know, I got I got into I tried to pick up everything at that point. And it's funny that we were talking about capitalism. And of course, you know, by my, my research being in labor, you would think that I would have some background as well, too. Yeah, I started reading about the destructive nature of capitalism on Black people. Just the history of that and I couldn't tell you all the scholars, oh my goodness. Oh, man. But it's just, I can look at the computer right now and look at my books here. What was this? *Yurugu*. *Yurugu* by Marimba Ani. And I'll never forget when I picked that book up and it kind of changed my whole thinking on, well, justice and broader racial issues. But these are some of the folks that really stuck with me, though, for the most part.

You know, I got some of the, some of the regular folk, I put that in quotations, James Baldwin was a big, just one of my idols, man, just in terms of how this, how this cat was able to articulate the racial issues of the 1950s and 1960s, even into the 70s as well, too. And it was just something about how he, not only how he spoke but how he articulated it, like nobody else could. And again, part of the inspiration was these folks, and I wanted to be like that, I wanted to do something where I could articulate the issues that are prevalent that the lay person cannot necessarily articulate. I want to articulate for them. Yeah.

Augustus Wood:
Wonderful. Well, we are going to come to a close now, but I'm telling you that this is going to be a very popular episode because we got into a lot. We were able to make some interventions, we were able to tell it like it is, no, no holds barred, no filter. So, I want to thank you, Dr. Ward, for coming on and laying it down for our audience.

Alonzo Ward:
I appreciate you.

Augustus Wood:
Yeah, we're definitely going to get you back on in the future and in the next season.

Alonzo Ward:
All right. When the book is out we'll have a little conversation again, I think that would be good.
Augustus Wood:
Most definitely, most definitely. So, we want to thank all our listeners for coming to “Off the Shelf: Revolutionary Readings in Times of Crisis.” And we want to thank the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Illinois for co-sponsoring this. We will see you all at the next episode. Always power to the people. Take care.