The Politics Classroom
Host: Professor Floros
Ep. 2022.19: Every Worker Should Have a Union
In the Classroom: Professor Jeff Schuhrke
(SUNY, Empire State College, Harry Van Arsdale, Jr. School of Labor Studies)

Professor Floros: [00:00:00]

The coronavirus pandemic changed a great deal about how many people view their work. Whether it was those dubbed essential workers who risked their lives and health to continue to provide goods and services for the rest of us, office workers who discovered the convenience of working from home, with or without pants, or those whose caregiving responsibilities required their disengagement from 'regular' jobs, paid labor looks very different in 2022 than it did in 2019.

One of the most interesting trends that has emerged is the increased focus on unionizing service industry workers in large companies like Amazon and Starbucks, among others. Today, I'm going to talk to a labor historian about unionization campaigns and much more. So, let's get started in The Politics Classroom recorded on August 24, 2022.

Intro Music: Three Goddesses by Third Age

Professor Floros:

This is The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC radio. I'm Professor Kate Floros, a Clinical Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Over the summer, I joined TikTok, so now you can find me on Twitter and TikTok @DrFloros.

For the first guest of the fall 2022 season of The Politics Classroom, I'm thrilled to welcome labor historian, Professor Jeff Schuhrke. Professor Schuhrke is an incoming Assistant Professor of Labor Studies at the SUNY Empire State College Harry Van Arsdale, Jr. School of Labor Studies in New York City. He received his bachelor's degree in history from Colorado State University, a master's degree in International Development and Social Change from Clark University, a master's degree in Labor Studies from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and a PhD in history from UIC. For the past two years, Professor Schuhrke has been a Visiting Lecturer in UIC's History department, and among his various professional credentials, he was an English teacher in the Peace Corps in Turkmenistan and a disaster preparedness specialist for the Red Cross in San Francisco as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer. His forthcoming book, to be published in 2023, is *Blue Collar Empire: The AFL-CIO and the Global Cold War*.

Professor Schuhrke, welcome to The Politics Classroom.

Professor Schuhrke:

Thank you for having me.

Professor Floros:

So, in addition to being a labor historian, you also have experience as a union member. So, what came first, your academic interest in labor or your experience with unions?

Professor Schuhrke:

My experience with unions. My original academic and sort of career trajectory was towards like international development and humanitarian relief. You mentioned I was in the Peace Corps, uh, and I did a master's in international development. I worked with the Red Cross, um, in San Francisco. And oddly enough, through those experiences, I kind of got exposed more to ideas of community organizing and social movements and eventually the labor movement.

And after finishing that master's in International Development, I wound up working on a union campaign here in Chicago, which eventually turned into the Fight for $15, big campaign of mostly fast-food workers organizing and holding short term one day strikes to demand a $15 minimum wage and a union recognition.

So, once I started getting involved in that I thought, 'Oh, I really wanna change my whole career trajectory and my whole academic interest.' Ended up doing a master's in Labor Studies. And then when I did my PhD in History at UIC, I, uh, focused, especially on labor history.

Professor Floros:

Okay. And you also interned for the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers union before becoming a professor. So how, how do you view the relationship between this academic career and labor organizing?

Professor Schuhrke:

I think they can go together pretty well. I mean, being a professor, being a lecturer, an academic worker, teaching assistant, you know, working in a, in the university, you're still a worker. Um, you still have an employer and any worker can be part, and should be part, of the labor movement. Should be in my opinion, whether you're, you know, working at Starbucks or Amazon, or whether you're working in an office or, uh, at a school or a university, you're a worker. So, in that sense, you know, professors who don't have [00:05:00] any expertise in labor history or labor studies can still be active in their own faculty unions, or other kinds of, you know, professional organizations to make their jobs and their work lives better.

But also, labor scholars, historians, or sociologists, whatever, who focus on labor issues can also be very helpful in, in actual union activism, in being able to provide research that can help propel union campaigns to take on employers who are against their workers organizing. Sometimes having just information, statistics, data, interviews can be a very powerful tool for any kind of social, or any kind of activism because it, it allows activists or workers to be able to say to the public, to the media, or to their employer, 'We know what we're talking about. We have, uh, professors are backing up what we say,' so that can be really helpful. And in terms of labor history, I think it can really helpful for workers to understand the struggles that they're going through are not necessarily new, that other people have been demanding the same kinds of changes for decades or centuries, and that these same kinds of slow conflicts

have been with us for a very long time. So, this isn't all just (indistinct) thing that somebody just came up with yesterday, right? This is part of a long continuing struggle for justice.

Professor Floros:

So, while you were a grad student at UIC, you were active in the GEO, the Graduate Employees Organization, rising to the position of co-president, and when you transitioned to a faculty position, you became a Humanities representative on the Representative Assembly for UICUF, the UIC United Faculty union. And, in the interest of full disclosure, I am a member of UICUF, a member of its Representative Assembly, representing the Social Sciences, and a member of the Bargaining Committee, which is currently in contract negotiations with UIC administration. So, I just wanna be very clear about that.

So, I think when many people think about unions, they think about manufacturing or trades, but at least as far as I'm aware, some of the largest and most active unions are in the realm of education. So why is that? And why is it necessary for university professors who are some of the most highly educated people in the country to have unions? Because presumably, if they don't like their place of employment, they have a bunch of resources that they can corral to get another job. So why are education unions in general and faculty unions in particular so necessary?

Professor Schuhrke:

Yeah, I think you're right that oftentimes the general image of what a union worker is, is somebody in a factory or in a mine, or, you know, building trade, which is certainly very true. And especially in the mid- to late- 20th century, that was really the heart of the union movement in the United States, was in industry and building trades. And, you know, as I'm sure a lot of folks know in the last 40 years or so, we've seen de-industrialization and major economic change in the US and this move towards a more service oriented economy.

And part of that has meant that fields like education, as well as healthcare, have become some of the largest sectors of the economy in terms of where the jobs are, where people are. So, you have like University of Illinois, Chicago is this massive employer in the city of Chicago, not only in terms of all the academic workers, professors, faculty, graduate workers, all of the administrative staff and maintenance and custodial workers, but then also there's a UIC hospital...

Professor Floros:

Mm-hmm (agreeing)

Professor Schuhrke:

...and all of the healthcare workers, nurses, and technicians. So, healthcare and education together are just these major massive sectors of the economy. Today, as the population becomes more educated, as getting a college degree becomes more of the, the standard to get a job in this country, as well as, as there are advances in healthcare and the population gets older, that's why health, we're seeing healthcare get bigger and bigger.

More people work in these fields. And again, any worker should have a union to be able to protect them on the job and to be able to have a little bit of democracy in the workplace. So, it isn't just that their employer can dictate everything that they can together, with their coworkers, have a voice, a collective voice, and have a say in what their pay will look like and their working conditions, et cetera, et cetera.

So, education workers, healthcare workers, other service sector workers, just as much as industrial workers, have a right to have a union and have been organizing unions for a long time now. And we've seen like teacher union in the K through 12 schools, teacher unions, like the Chicago Teachers Union have become a very strong voice [00:10:00] in the labor movement in general, you know, going on strike. There's teachers in Columbus, Ohio, when were on strike this week 4,000

Professor Floros:
mm-hmm (agreeing)

Professor Schuhrke:
You know, as educational workers often say that our working conditions are our students' learning conditions.

Professor Floros:
Mm-hmm (agreeing)

Professor Schuhrke:
So it isn't just about the paycheck, although that can be important, of course, cause everyone deserves fair pay for their work, but also it's about making sure there there are enough resources being put into schools or universities so that the students can benefit as much as possible. So that's also what comes into play with education unions for faculty and for, in particular, professors at university.

Yeah, the image is typically professors, a really fancy job and it's very comfortable and there is certain, you know, advantages of course, to being a professor, which, you know, a lot of people get PhDs, but universities are becoming more and more run like they're corporations. It's sort of business people at the very top, making the decisions in the business-like manner and with not enough funding, especially for public universities, like University of Illinois, not enough public funding going in.

So, there's a lot of cost cutting and there's a lot of business type things that are done to try to bring in as much revenue as possible. And what all, what happens, in my opinion, is that the ultimate mission of universities, which is teaching and research, ends up kind of coming in second to other kinds of, uh, gimmicks to scrape together as much money as possible.

And what's been happening over the last several decades is that more and more faculty, as well as graduate workers become more exploited, economically have less and less job security, are made, as you know, contingent workers instead of having a long-term career. They're only hired semester by semester basis or year by year basis and don't know from one semester to the next or one year to the next, if they're still going to have a job. And oftentimes people get PhDs end up becoming adjunct instructors, where they're just on a contract basis. And often they get paid very low

wages. They don't necessarily qualify for benefits like health insurance, and they have to work at multiple universities in one semester just to scrape together enough classes to teach, scrape together a basic income. And I believe the statistics now are upwards of like 70% of the people who do the teaching and universities are contingent faculty. They're not the tenure track, you know, professors that we usually think of. And so, it's a really small shrinking number of the traditional tenure, tenure track professors.

This is why there's also been a growth of unions in, in higher education. To try to have more job security for the adjunct instructors and better pay and benefits as well as making sure that administer-, the administrations of universities are putting their resources towards the actual education and research.

And similarly with graduate employees who are people working on their master's degree or people working on their PhD, who often end up being the faculty, the professors in the future. More and more of the teaching burden falls on them. Here at UIC, graduate workers, they might be called teaching assistants, but in many cases, in many departments, they're the actual instructor of a class teaching 60 to a hundred students um, as the actual instructor coming up with all the, the coursework and the syllabus, the lesson plans, teaching the classes, grading the papers and getting paid really, really low wages while also still working on their degree. So it's a highly exploited workforce and this is why we need unions. This is why the GEO has gone on strike twice in the last three years for new contracts to try to get phases down on the fees that they have to pay and, and get a little bit more job security and other protections as well.

Professor Floros:

Yeah. I mean, I think there is a huge misunderstanding or lack of understanding about who professors actually are. And I, I was at a, an event once and it was, political people were there and they were talking to students and the students were asking about the high cost of tuition. And somebody said, 'It's, you know, it's because your professors get paid so much.'

And I was like, 'No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. Let me just stop you right there.' And there are some faculty who do make a very nice salary, but that is not most people. And again, another full disclosure. I am one of the contingent faculty that Professor Schuhrke was talking about. While I am not an adjunct who, in the most common use of that term is, they're paid on a class-by-class basis rather than a salary. I, so I do have a salary. I am currently on three-year contracts and my employer can decide at the end of a contract, 'Yeah, no, we're not gonna renew you.' That by itself, I mean, people say like, 'Oh, [00:15:00] out in the real world, you know, non-education people get fired all the time' or whatever. But one difference, I think about higher ed that most people don't understand is that our job market is not like the job market for an accountant or for a lawyer or for a doctor, right? You find out that you don't have a job in six weeks. It's not like you can just go to another university and be like, 'Oh, hey, I'm ready to start a job.' Right? That's not how it works. And I think a lot of people don't really appreciate that.

Professor Schuhrke:

Yeah. I mean, for one thing, there's, you know, just the reality of an academic calendar and when semesters start and when they end. So, it, it's not just a revolving door. Can't just start at any old time if it's already in the middle of a semester or something like that. So that's, that's one issue and yeah, I mean, a lot of times the jobs that you see advertised are the, those contingent adjunct jobs. And sometimes there's a limited amount of jobs where you already live.

So, there's a good chance you would have to move somewhere else for your job, which is, you know, you mentioned at the beginning that I've recently been hired as a new job at SUNY in New York City. I'm having to figure out, moving out there right now, you know, and I would, which is great, a great opportunity, but you know, I also, would've been perfectly happy to just stay, stay, you know, in Chicago where I am, but just weren't jobs in my field.

Professor Floros:

Yeah. Let's talk about grad students for a second because adjuncts who are getting paid on a course-by-course basis, I believe are very exploited, but graduate students have to be probably the most exploited category of academic employees, at least that I'm aware of, because they are getting their education. And if they are an employee, they are most likely having their tuition paid by the institution. Right? So that's a huge benefit, right? They don't have to pay tuition, but they get paid poverty wages. And so, you know, living in a city like Chicago, I mean, I don't know what the, the going rate is for a teaching assistant, but when I was a grad student in Pittsburgh, granted this was 15 years ago, we got $16,000 a year, a year to live in a city, but our education was paid for. So, people thought that was enough. And we had to work, right, so getting an outside job was very difficult.

So how do universities kind of get away with exploiting this type of labor and how is that legal to pay people below the poverty line?

Professor Schuhrke:

Well for one thing. So, I mean, you're absolutely right. I agree with everything you just said, and yeah, you mentioned 15 years ago, you were getting paid $16,000 a year to live in a major city like Pittsburgh, the minimum yearly pay for a graduate worker at UIC only a few years ago was also 16,000. (Professor Floros gasps in horror) and then we (Professor Floros breathes 'no') in like 2015, we got raises, well, it was a gradual raise, but by 20, by the year 2018, we had boosted it to $18,000.

And that's when we went on strike in 2019, and now it's at like 20,000 and it's gonna go up to about 25,000 over the next few years. So, it's not a lot, but one of the things is that graduate workers are classified as part-time, you know, they say, 'Well, you're only working like 20 hours a week instead of 40 hours a week,' even though of course graduate workers in addition to that, the work they do as teaching assistants or research assistant. They're also doing their, their work as a graduate student, their coursework, their research, writing a dissertation and all that. In the sciences they're doing hours and hours of lab work.

Professor Floros:

Yeah.

Professor Schuhrke:

And for a long time, private universities and a lot of public universities still like to do this, but the tradition has been, say that graduate workers are not really workers. They're just students who are, you know, they're getting some training on the job, they're apprentices thing like that, and they're just kinda helping out and that the labor they do isn't real labor. And therefore, we don't have, have to treat them like actual employees and follow actual labor laws or employment laws and pay them real money.

That's how most universities like to see it. And at private universities, that was until 2016 and a ruling came down from the National Labor Relations Board, but that was the way legally define. And I wanna remind people, graduate workers, oftentimes, you know, are adults who have families, who have kids of their own.

Professor Floros:

Yeah.

Professor Schuhrke:

Who have responsibility. I think this is another thing. The image that universities try to project is that graduate workers are just kids who, you know, basically just live with their parents and they don't, they don't have any responsibilities and it's okay. But that's not the reality at all. Most, I think the average age of our graduate student workers, roughly 30 years old, go to the administrators and [00:20:00] say, you know, I need a raise and et cetera, et cetera.

And they can be very polite and listening to you, but then they'll just say, 'Nah, we don't wanna do that.'

Professor Floros:

Yeah.

Professor Schuhrke:

So, so this is why you need to have a union. The union is just, you know, you and your coworkers together acting collectively. Going on strike isn't something that any worker really does lightly, or, you know, just fun or whatever, you know, it's, it's a big risk because you're risking losing a paycheck and you don't know if you're gonna actually win, uh, when you go on strike. So, it's a decision that is very difficult to make, and it only, it's kind of a last resort after negotiations have not gotten anywhere. And it's a way to finally put pressure on the employer, you know, in the case of graduate workers or faculty with the university administration to finally say, okay, we have to actually negotiate for real. Now we have to actually listen to their concerns and try to offer something to meet them halfway at the very least.

Professor Floros:

I'm still flabbergasted by the fact that when the UIC United Faculty union was created, when it formed, the minimum salary for a starting lecturer was $27,000. And the union has brought that up considerably.

Let's take a break. This is Professor Floros in The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio.

Music Interlude: Champagne Papaya by Avocado Junkie

Professor Floros:

Welcome back to the Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm professor Floros and I'm joined in the classroom today by Professor Jeff Schuhrke, soon to be a professor in labor studies at SUNY Empire State College, Harry Van Arsdale, Jr. School of Labor Studies. So, in the introduction of the podcast, I mentioned that unionization efforts at some of the US' largest companies, including Amazon, Starbucks, that we're hearing a lot more about this.

So, before we talk specifically about what's going on today. Can you talk a little bit about what the trend in unionization has looked like over the last 50 years or so? So, like basically, kind of, approximately what percentage of the American workforce is unionized today as compared to, say, the 1970s?

Professor Schuhrke:

Yeah. So, it's been bad, not what I would say, but I mean, if you're pro-union and pro-worker, it's been a really bad, bad story. The last several decades of decline, union density, or the percentage of people in the workforce who are unionized, reached its peak right after World War II, uh, go to the early 1950s, of about 35%. About 35% of the non -agricultural workforce was unionized. So that's about one in three workers. That's the highest it's ever gotten in the United States.

Since then, it's been in a kind of gradual decline and yes, since the 1970s and eighties, when de-industrialization really got going and you had factories, steel mills shutting down, laying off tens of thousands of workers, those workers were members of unions. So that contributed greatly to this decline in union membership, as well as the laws, generally not favoring workers who are trying to form unions. Employers seeing any technique that they can to try to stop unions from forming. And we can talk more about that, the kinda union busting tactics.

So combined with all of that, today, the amount of the total workforce that's non-agricultural workforce that's unionized is only 10%, but at its peak it was 35%. Now it's only 10%. And of that, private sector workers specifically, only about 6% of private sector is unionized. So, in other words, 94% of all private sector workers do not have a union in the United States.

Professor Floros:

Wow. Okay. Yikes. All right. Has the number been increasing in the recent years? Is it, is there an uptick, or not so much?

Professor Schuhrke:

No, the best we can say is that the decline is maybe slowed ever so slightly. It's still, it's still a decline. It's still going down. The best news every year, you know, it's the, um, Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics that puts out this information every year. And the best news usually is we held steady.

We [00:25:00] hit we're, we're still at 10% of the total. And I would say, you know that, so yeah, 6% of the private sector is unionized. The public sector right now is

where unions are strongest, roughly 30% of the public sec-, public sector workers, so is people working for public universities like UIC or public schools, or any other kind government, federal, state, or local government-related employment. There's a history behind that. You know, the private sector saw its biggest u-, push in unionization in, in indu-, industrial jobs in the 1930s and forties during the Great Depression and World War II. And then the public sector saw its big push of unionization in the late 1960s, early seventies, coinciding with the civil rights movement and other social movements of the time period because African Americans, people of color, women are disproportionately represented as public sector employees. Some of the social movements of the sixties and seventies kind of carried over into the labor movement with public sector unionization. So today, unions are strongest in the public sector,

Professor Floros:

And I'm glad you brought up the civil rights movement because historically, I mean, back in the day historically, labor unions in the United States were extremely hostile to extending membership to African Americans and other workers of color. And you mentioned that, you know, the push in, in public sector unions came from increased rights for those folks plus women in society, generally, that them being larger proportions of the, of the public workforce and therefore unionization. So, in both public and private sector unions are racial tensions still an issue in the modern labor movement or has that kind of been put behind, a relic of history?

Professor Schuhrke:

I mean, I, I think the situation has improved from how bad it was a hundred years ago or 70 to 50 years ago. There was, for a long time, going back a long time, a tradition of more left-wing unions that tried to be more inclusive and inclusive of immigrants and inclusive of women.

But the mainstream of the labor movement, especially in the late 19th, up to the 20th century, was led by white men who were native born. So, they were not only often racist, but anti-immigrant as well. And didn't believe in the idea of women being part of the workforce. So they were very exclusive, but because of some of those civil rights movement, and other social movements and uprisings in the sixties and seventies, which not only led to public sector unionization, but also led to reform movements within the private sector, industrial unions, because a lot of the members of those unions, I'm thinking, especially like United Auto Workers, representing workers in the auto industry, Detroit, which was, you know, in the middle of 20th century, the auto industry was at the center of the whole economy.

And a lot of the workforce was African American, but they were often relegated to the lowest paying jobs, and they didn't have a voice in the union. Within the United Auto Worker, all the union leaders were white, and they didn't really care about what the black had to say. So, they formed, uh, rank and file reform movements and caucuses to try to win more of a voice within their unions and push for more representation in union leadership, as well as having the unions take on more of an actual concern of what the specific needs were of African American workers or other racial minority workers. So, there's been a lot of improvement, I would say. Right now, in 2022, the labor movement in the United States is more socially progressive and diverse than it ever has been.

I mean, and not just in terms of who the members are, but who the leaders are and the kinds of decisions that are made. And the kind of politics that are supported is the most progressive and socially diverse culturally conscious that it's ever been, but when you take into account the fact that it often has been so bad, that, that's not necessarily saying a lot from when you said it.

Professor Floros:

Okay. Yeah. I mean, I was gonna ask this later, but when we think about electoral politics, labor unions have historically been aligned with the Democratic party. The Democratic party markets, or has marketed itself as the party of labor. And unions have been some of the largest donors to Democratic political campaigns.

And I'm wondering if that's still the case because I was listening to a podcast about a coal miners' union in Alabama. And, because they're in coal, the Democratic party has not come to their aid when they've had conflict with their employers. Again, because of the Democratic [00:30:00] party's interest in action on climate change, going to clean energy rather than, than dirty sources of energy.

But the Republican party has also not taken up their cause because they're union, right? And so, I'm wondering if working class whites at least used to make up the lion's share of the industrial unions and maybe still do of the private sector unions. We hear about white working class being affiliated with Trump and Trump-like Republicans. So, what is the relationship between unions and the Democratic party or have people's, like, identities as white working class become more salient than being a worker.

Professor Schuhrke:

Well, before, before I say anything else, like I think the, what you were mentioning about Alabama is the United Mine Workers strike at Warrior Met Coal. This is a strike that's been going on for over a year now.

Professor Floros:

Yeah.

Professor Schuhrke:

It deserves more national attention. And I just wanna say that there's a, a journalist people can look up, Kim Kelly, who's a labor journalist. She's been one of the few people who've been covering this consistently for the last. So, look up Kim Kelly and coverage of Warrior Met coal strike to learn more about that, but yeah, this is a huge question. The the labor movement's relationship to the Democratic party.

Well, it was really cemented in the New Deal of the 1930s with Franklin Roosevelt passing a lot of economically progressive kinds of laws and including labor law reform, provide a legal path for private sector workers to form unions, and to engage in collective bargaining and a number of other things.

That's kind of where this relationship really crystallized. It kind of existed before that as well, you could argue. I'm not alone in thinking this, that that relationship deserves to be reconsidered, maybe cause, as you mentioned, unions give millions and millions

of dollars to Democrats. And in fact, that has been, for the last several decades, for the top labor leaders in the country, that's been their main strategy of how to keep (indistinct) a little less focused on actually organizing workers and going on strike and fighting for more in the workplace, and instead has been focused on 'Let's give money the Democrats and the hopes that they will pass favorable laws and protect us.' And the Democrats really haven't delivered very much. There hasn't been much change.

Like right now, there has been last couple years, a big push to pass an important labor reform bill called the PRO Act, Protecting the Right to Organize, which would make it a lot easier for workers to be able to form unions without their employer interfering, without union busting.

And there was a big hope that once Biden became president and the Democrats took control of both chambers of Congress, that this law would get passed. And, you know, almost two years have gone by now and the law has gone, the House passed it, but it's gone nowhere in the Senate, and it doesn't seem to be any hope of it going anywhere.

This happened under Bill Clinton, this happened under Jimmy Carter. You know, it's the same story. So, the problem is, you know, a lot of other wealthy countries in the world traditionally had like a Labor party or a Socialist party or some kind of party that is meant to represent the interest of the labor movement and the working class.

In the US for a variety of reasons that, that I'm sure you, as a political scientist would understand much better than me, we don't have that. Options are the Republicans or the Democrats. So that's part of the problem is that the labor movement is kinda has nowhere else to go really in terms of politics.

I mean, yes, there have been attempts to form labor parties and third parties, and there's debates about how that works, et cetera, et cetera. There is this kind of popular image in the media that I think is a little bit overblown of, you know, the white working class being conservative and being pro-Trump, and not caring about climate change and wanting to continue working in these industries that are contributing to environmental degradation and global warming.

When you actually talk to a lot of these blue-collar white workers, you find that they're, they're actually far more complicated than the media often depicts.

Professor Floros:

Sure.

Professor Schuhrke:

They, they might like certain aspects of what the Republicans have to say, but they also like Bernie Sanders. They like, you know, his socialist message as well.

And, you know, things that don't necessarily logically make sense, but make sense to them. Or they might also be very concerned about climate and be very aware of, you know, environmental problems because they, those problems, they suffer the effects of the pollution. Or what have you, directly, but at the same time, it's like, 'This is my

livelihood. This is my job. What else can I do? Like, there needs to be some way of, some way of me continuing to have a livelihood with a transition to clean energy."

And the working class generally, you know? Yes. When people hear the phrase working class, [00:35:00] I think the image again is like a white, blue color worker. But really the working class is very diverse. It's the image that should come to mind is a woman of color in a service sector job. That's the reality, who is a worker as well as who is a union member today because of de-industrialization and all those changes. I mean, there is some truth in that image of the white working class being conservative and pro-Trump. I think it's, it is more complex than that.

And I think what some politicians, various kind of left wing, socialist politicians like Bernie Sanders want to do, I think their goal is, you know, to not simply say to the white working class, 'Oh, you're so conservative and right wing,' and write them off, and then they kind of just naturally gravitate towards an extreme right wing politician like Trump, but instead, try to say, 'Yeah, we hear your concerns, especially when it comes to economic issues,' and try to build a, a coalition of forces that might seem unlikely to together.

But perhaps, and historically, they have sometimes, you know, when, when there was a big socialist party in the US in the early 20th century, it was strong in what are today the conservative red state in places like Kansas and Oklahoma. That's where the Socialist party was like, had its some of its biggest numbers, biggest strength. And in the Midwest, in Wisconsin, places that, that today are that we think of very conservative, used to be very progressive and left wing.

Music Interlude: Champagne Papaya by Avocado Junkie

Professor Floros:

So, you mentioned the legislation of the New Deal and this included the National Labor Relations Act. What I wanna talk about for a second is the difference in how the law applies to public sector versus private sector and the role that states have in, like, what, what state laws can affect private versus public? Because that's something that I don't really understand. Is the National Labor Relations Act only about private sector and states set the laws about public sector. Can you talk about that please?

Professor Schuhrke:

Yeah. Yeah. The National Labor Relations Act was one of the, you know, signature, New Deal laws passed under Franklin Roosevelt, 1935. It's also called the Wagner Act because the main champion in the Senate was Robert Wagner and yes, the National Labor Relations Act, Wagner Act does only apply to the private sector.

So, it excludes all public sector workers. And also, it excludes agricultural workers and domestic workers. This is part of the sort of racist, unfortunately, a legacy of the New Deal where a lot of the Southern Democrats, to win their support, agricultural workers, domestic workers were left out of, not only the National Labor Relations Act, but also the Social Security Act and some of these other laws, because a large

proportion of agricultural workers and domestic workers in the South were black, or in the Southwest were Mexican-American.

So yeah, National Labor Relations Act is only private sector. Public sector, for a long time, didn't have any legal rights to form unions or collectively bargain. And for non-federal public sector workers, states that have set those laws to decide whether or not public sector workers should have the right to form a union, bargain collectively, the right to go on strike.

So, the laws vary between states. In more traditionally Democratic states, blue states, public sector workers have a lot more rights for unions. The more conservative red states, they don't necessarily have the same amount or, or sometimes no rights that have unions or, or bargain collectively, or go on strike. In Illinois the laws are pretty favorable. Public sector workers cannot only form unions and bargain, but can also have the legal right to go on strike. Like in New York state, public sector workers do not have the right to on strike.

Professor Floros:
What?!?!?!

Professor Schuhrke:
Yeah.

Professor Floros:
So, they can collectively bargain, but the biggest tool enforcing management to bargain with them is not in their toolbox?

Professor Schuhrke:
Correct. Like in West Virginia, they don't have any real rights, uh, including the right to strike. But you saw a few years ago, teachers, all the public sector, school teachers all across the state of West Virginia went on strike anyway, and it's not, it wasn't necessarily against the law. It was just the law didn't give them that right.

There was not, there's not a law that says you can't go on strike. So there's no law at all. So, they kind of went in on strike anyway, which is how the [00:40:00] labor movement in general started. You know, there was originally no legal rights at all, and workers just did everything. So public sector, labor law is state by state except for the federal employees.

And with that, it's like a series of various executive orders that different presidents going back to Kennedy have issued that give federal workers, certain amounts of rights to guys.

Professor Floros:
So, wait, if they're executive orders, then that means that a president could come in and say, I'm signing a new executive order, prohibiting federal workers from organizing.

Professor Schuhrke:

Yeah, Trump did, not an outright like ban on organizing, but Trump issued a number of orders that made things a lot more difficult for federal employees that Biden undid the moment he came to office. I think this has happened a lot with, you know, Republican and Democratic presidents. Speaking of who the president is, the National Labor Relations Acts, this is private sector work. The federal agency that enforces it is the NLRB, the National Labor Relations Board, and the top people in the NLRB are appointed by whoever the president is. So, when we have Democratic presidents, the NLRB is generally sympathetic to unions and can help unions to win union elections.

The NLRB will crack down on employer, union busting and interference and say, 'That's illegal. You can't intimidate your work trying to form a union.' But when there's a Republican president, they put on more anti-union people on the National Labor Relations Board, and it ends up being a lot harder to form union or to arbitrate disputes, things like that.

So, it's always a, it's just a kind of constant back and forth, depending on who, who the president is.

Professor Floros:

So, is this a reason why these Amazon and Starbucks unionization efforts have been successful recently? Because they're not being stepped on by the Labor Relations Board under a Biden presidency.

Professor Schuhrke:

Yes. I think that is a big reason. I mean, of course it's the workers themselves and they're organizing that is the real driving force. But the fact is that the federal agency enforcing the law around forming a union is sympathetic to them. And as Amazon and Starbucks have been doing an incredible amount of union busting and a lot of illegal things, tactics that violate the National Labor Relations Act.

The Labor Board is cracking down on them and saying, 'You can't do that.' And filing complaint and trying to stop them. That has been a big help. I think a Republican president we'd still see a lot of the same organizing, but I don't know if we would seeing the same amount of victory

Professor Floros:

States have passed laws that make them Right to Work states. Can you explain what that is, what it means if your state is a Right to Work state?

Professor Schuhrke:

Yeah. Right to Work laws are part of private sector labor law. So, the National Labor Relations Act was passed in 1935, federal law covering all private sector workers. And in 1947, there was a, a series of amendments put on the National Labor Relations Act called the Taft-Hartley Act, which was passed by a Republican majority. President Truman vetoed the Taft-Hartley Act, and the Republicans in Congress overrode his veto.

And what the Taft-Hartley Act did was it, it took the National Labor Relations Act from the New Deal and imposed a whole bunch of new anti-union measures into it.

So, the, the, the original legislation was meant to help workers form unions and Taft-Hartley Act made it more difficult. And one of the things the Taft-Hartley Act says is that it says individual states, if they want to, can pass Right to Work laws.

First of all it's, uh, the phrase right to work is like propaganda from an anti-union, the actual lobbyist who first popularized that phrase in 1940s, he was from Texas. And he was like, uh, an open racist and open anti-Semite and hated labor. And he's the one who came up with this idea, 'Let's call it Right to Work cause it sounds good.' Whoever wants to have, have a job and to work. But, um, what it basically means is if you are in a workplace that is represented by a union and covered by a union contract, you can opt to just not pay any dues for the union. And the problem with that is when you're represented by a union, that the, the only way unions are funded, it's from member dues.

It's not getting like outside donations or, or anything like that. Unions are funded by the members. This is what makes unions good democratic organizations, in my opinion, that they're not accountable to someone else for their money. They're only accountable to their own members. They're the ones paying for it.

And the idea is, it [00:45:00] costs money to, to organize and to negotiate a contract and to have staff who are helping to enforce the contract and, you know, to print materials, to have an office, all of these basic things of running a union. You know, it requires a budget. And the money comes from members paying dues.

And so, the traditional idea is if you're covered by a union, if they're representing you and making sure you get raises and benefits, then you have to contribute your share the same way that as citizens, we have to pay taxes for the basic services that are provided by the government. And when you're not paying your fair share, then this is what, you know, economists call free rider problem where one can get services for free.

And if one person can get it for free, then another person says, 'Well, then why am I paying?' Then another person says, 'Yeah, why am I paying?' And then the next. You know, nobody's paying and then the services fall apart. Or in this case, the union ends up being defunded. And that's the whole point of Right to Work laws.

It's, so I think right now it's about 27 states have passed Right to Work laws, many of them just recently, in the last 10 years. And in Right to Work states, union membership of course is a lot lower cause unions are being defunded, and also wages are generally lower. There's all kinds of other negative economic impacts that researchers have found Right to Work states.

Now with the public sector, something really kind of, in my opinion, really terrible happened in 2019. Or 20, no, 2018.

Professor Floros:

I was gonna bring this up next. (Floros chuckles darkly)

Professor Schuhrke:

Which is the entire public sector in the United States came effectively, Right to Work. And this was through a Supreme Court case called the Janus v. AFSCME case, where the conservative Republican justices on the Supreme Court took away fair share dues out of the entire public sector, basically making the whole public sector effectively Right to Work, but the idea of defunding public sector unions.

The reason, this was not an accident. This was something that various anti-union lobbying groups and right-wing conservative groups had been pushing for for many, many years and had been bringing cases to the courts and the hopes of getting the Supreme Court to do something like this. Cause as I mentioned before, the public sector is where unions are strongest today. This is where unions have their most strength and powers in the public sector. So, if you're anti-union and you wanna destroy the labor movement, the place to target is the public sector. And public sector workers across the country can opt out of paying their dues if they have a union.

I think a good sign is that so far, it doesn't seem like unions have, public sector unions have been bankrupted by this yet. If anything, we've seen more public sector unions working harder, organizing harder, becoming a little bit more, like, militant at the workplace, of going on strike more with various teacher strikes, graduate worker strikes or faculty strikes, to try to push for the best possible contract they can get is a way of, you know, proving to the members that this union is worth it. 'We're fighting for you. We really are fighting, and you should be paying your fair share of dues to keep this alive, because as soon as it's gone, lose everything we fought for and won.

Professor Floros:

Okay, so let, let me just summarize to see if I understand this. So, the National Labor Relations Act made it easier for private sector unions to organize, have collective bargaining, et cetera. The Taft Hartley Act from 1947, basically clawed, I mean, so they could still organize et cetera. But if a state chooses to pass legislation to this effect, then you have to be an active card-carrying member of the union. Only those folks pay dues and others who don't join the union, even though they're covered by the collective bargaining agreement, they don't have to pay dues.

Professor Schuhrke:

Right.

Professor Floros:

So that's the private sector. In the public sector states have always had the right to determine whether everyone had to pay dues regardless of union membership or not, but the 2018 Janus case said it doesn't matter if the state said you had to pay fair share, it's a violation of your first amendment, right to free speech to make you pay. And so now, regardless of what a state law says, nobody who is not a member of the union has to pay dues to a public sector union.

Professor Schuhrke:

Yes.

Professor Floros:

Okay. So, the only people who are compelled to pay union dues, if they are not members of the union, are private sector unions in states that are not Right to Work.

Professor Schuhrke:

Yes. And even [00:50:00] there, and this was something true of the public sector before Janus, is that workers who like, say you're a, you're a worker in a unionized workplace and you're covered by the union contract and you're benefiting from it. But you don't like unions, or you don't like the fact that your union is giving money to Democrats. Say you're a Republican or you're an independent, and you don't like that your dues money is going towards Democrats.

You can do something that's, I think it's just called fair share or agency (inaudible) where you can say, I only want my money going towards the actual work or the union, of negotiating the contract and enforcing the contract. I don't want any of my dues money going, (inaudible) the political things. That is an option that people have, and that's something that existed in the public sector before Janus. And then Janus said, 'No, forget that. Just they don't have to pay anything.'

Professor Floros:

Okay. So, I can't opt out of paying taxes for things that I don't support. Right. Okay. That's good to know. So, I do just wanna make the point that Janus versus AFSCME, so AFSCME stands for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. The AFSCME in this case is the Illinois branch of that union. And this case was actually started by the previous governor, I believe, Bruce Rauner. The case was kicked out because... So, he sued in order to basically make public sector Right to Work in Illinois, and it was denied because he didn't have standing.

And so, Janus, and I think somebody else who was an actual person, like, stepped in to fight on their own behalf. And so, we can thank Illinois, Bruce Rauner for Janus.

Professor Schuhrke:

Yeah. And, and Mark Janus himself. And again, this was not, this was all very coordinated. There had been another case before this, like the year before.

Professor Floros:

In California?

Professor Schuhrke:

Yeah.

Professor Floros:

Yeah.

Professor Schuhrke:

It, it made its way to the Supreme Court, but then Scalia died.

Professor Floros:

Yeah.

Professor Schuhrke:

And so, it ended, but if he had been alive, it would've gone through then. So, it was kind of just a matter, this was a long term strategy. Very deliberate.

Professor Floros:

Yeah. Okay, great. All right. So, let's talk about Amazon and Starbucks. Why are we seeing unionization efforts in these places? Is this new or is it just getting more attention because these are such big companies? Or have working conditions changed or the type of workers who are in these types of jobs? What is leading to at least the awareness of, of these unionization efforts and are they new?

Professor Schuhrke:

I think it's more than just attention. I think it is new or significant on its own. I mean, yes, there have been people trying to organize in Amazon and Starbucks and a lot of other famous brand name companies and major employers for a long time. I mentioned the Fight for $15, a little bit ago, which was in some of the biggest, fast-food chains that was starting 10 years ago.

So, there we have seen this kind of organizing before, but what's new here is the amount of success in terms of winning union elections. These are supervised by the National Labor Relations Board. You know, Amazon labor union winning their election in Staten Island on April 1, that was the first time an Amazon warehouse won a union election and all these Starbucks as well. This is a new phenomenon. Trader Joe's, uh, Apple, REI, other big companies, have been actually not just organizing and protesting, but actually winning union elections. That is something new and significant, I think.

Why it's happening? I think, yeah, there's a number of reasons. One of them, the biggest, maybe, being the pandemic and how that shaped a lot of people's opinions and ideas about work and what work is and their, what kind of rights they have and how valuable they are. Many people, of course, being laid off in service sector jobs, in restaurants and bars, cafes. When they had to close down, people suddenly being unemployed. If it weren't for the federal government stepping in with COVID relief packages, expanded unemployment insurance and stimulus check, all that, eviction moratoriums.

A lot of people would've been completely out on the street, devastated. Would've been like the Great Depression or worse. So that people, a lot of people recognized just how precarious they are. Also, a lot of, like, grocery store workers, warehouse workers had to, you know, were deemed 'essential,' right? Essentially.

And they had to continue coming to work, even at the height of the pandemic. There was no vaccine and they didn't necessarily always have the best safety, they didn't have, um, personal protective equipment. They didn't have masks. Obviously healthcare workers are dealing with this the most on the front lines, nursing home workers. And then other workers being able [00:55:00] to work from home and having a whole different experience of spending more time with their family, having more time for themselves and realizing a lot of the stuff that they do, they could just be an email, you know? They don't, they don't have to sit through all these meetings and, and all this stuff. They don't have to be in a workplace from nine to five. So,

yeah, for many different reasons, people were able to kind of reevaluate their relationship with work. And at places like Amazon and Starbucks and Trader Joe's, you know, a lot of workers said, you know, we're worth a lot more. We're, we are providing a valuable function to the economy and we're not treated with respect.

And a lot of workers found that their employer doesn't really care if they live or die. I mean, that was the actual... We're very troubled to discover this.

Professor Floros:
Yeah.

Professor Schuhrke:
On top of that, there's just the larger trend of growing economic inequality for many decades as unions have gotten weaker, as corporations have gotten stronger, as there's been more deregulation of the economy, etc., growing inequality with workers having a harder time advancing professionally or being able to have a home, buy a house. They have a family, student loan debts, which is, you know, a big topic today as Biden is set to announce, uh, some debt cancellation, maybe. More and more of the workforce, especially at these, like, service sector jobs at these big companies are workers who are college educated. A lot of the Starbucks workers and Amazon workers are recent college grads, or at least have had some college education and they have student loan debt.

You know, people go to college thinking that they're going to advance in life, going to get a career and, and instead they get burdened with debt, and they get stuck in these service sector jobs that don't pay them very well. And that treat them like garbage. They get fed up with that. And on top of all that as well, um, more activism, especially with the Black Lives Matter movement, the George Floyd uprising in 2020, the #MeToo movement, and numerous other movements, the climate justice movement, et cetera. There's been a lot of social movement activity, uh, immigrants' rights, et cetera. That young people, uh, working class people have been directly involved in based on, as I said before, the working class is more diverse now than it ever been in the US, so based on their various identities and communities that they're involved in, different kinds of movements and being able to bring that same energy into the workplace. As in sixties and seventies, civil rights movement kind of made its way into the public sector union movement. All of those things I think are contributing.

Professor Floros:
Well, unfortunately we have reached the end of our time. Professor Schuhrke, thank you so much for joining me in The Politics Classroom and sharing your expertise.

Professor Schuhrke:
Thank you. It was my pleasure.

Professor Floros:
Professor Jeff Schuhrke is an incoming Assistant Professor of Labor Studies at the SUNY Empire State College Harry Van Arsdale, Jr. School of Labor Studies in New York.

His book, *Blue Collar Empire: The AFL-CIO and the Global Cold War* will be published in 2023 by Verso Books. You've been listening to The Politics Classroom, a podcast of UIC Radio. I'm Professor Floros, and you can find me on Twitter and TikTok @Drfloros. If you're interested in more information about the topics covered in today's episode, please check out The Bookshelf section of the podcast website at thepoliticsclassroom.org, where you can also find a transcript of the show.

I'm trying to get the word out about the podcast, so if you're so inclined, please highly rate and review the podcast on Spotify or Apple Podcasts. I would really appreciate it. And I'd also love to hear if you have any suggestions for future episodes or guests to interview.

Thanks for listening today. That's all I've got for this week. Class dismissed.

Outro Music: Three Goddesses by Third Age