James Andrews Oral History Transcription

Abstract

James Andrews is the President of the North Carolina state AFL CIO Federation. Andrews grew up in, at the time, a segregated Warren County, North Carolina. He spent two year serving his country in the Vietnam War, and after being wounded in action, was awarded the Purple Heart. Andrews discusses his career from the beginning as he organized unions in plants before starting his rise in the ranks of the AFL CIO. He also discusses the labor and the state of unions today and beyond into the future and the current problems faced by the movement.

Key Terms

- Warren County, North Carolina
- NAACP
- Frontlash
- Phillips Randolph Institute
- Long Benh
- Purple Heart
- Henderson, North Carolina
- Raleigh, North Carolina
- Dixie-crat Movement
- Precinct
- Collective Bargaining
- AFL CIO
- JP Stevens Plant
- FLOC
- Smithfield Plant Workers
- CWA
- National Domestic Workers Alliance
- Coworkers.org
- Roanoke Rapids
- Chattanooga, South Carolina
- Farmworkers of America
- Field Crest Canon
- Art Pope
- Organizing the South
Interview Transcription

CHATRATHI

(00:00) All right Mr. Andrews, if you could just start off by saying your name, your age, and your current position

ANDREWS

My name is James Andrews. I am 65 years old. I am president of the North Carolina state AFL CIO.

Chatrathi

Great. So I just wanted to start by just talking a little about your childhood and how you grew up. I know you grew up in Warren County in North Carolina. Just can you talk about how you grew up, your family, do you have any siblings, what your parents did?

Andrews

Yes I'd be pleased to talk about those formative years, those years as a young child. I grew up in Warren County as you indicated. (00:50) I grew up on a farm. There was seven of us, children. And my parents and for my most of my childhood we always had one or more relatives, young relatives living with us. Either my aunts' two kids or my uncle's step kids, someone staying in the house. We stayed near a grandmother who was just next door, couple of cousins living next door, this is in rural North Carolina so next door could be, you know, a distance away. But in this case, it was actually literally you know five hundred feet away. So as I said there was seven was. Life on the farm was pretty tough. However, when I was five years old, my parents allowed me to go to New Jersey to stay with my uncle, my namesake, James Andrews, my uncle. I went to New Jersey; I was enrolled in school up there. I spent a little less than a year, but after the tears and the crying saying “I wanna go home”, my uncle and aunt felt it was time to take me back to Warren County. So the kind of crops we grew, would be the next thing I would say. We grew road crops. (02:12) You know, cotton, tobacco, cantaloupes, and watermelons was our cash crops we call. You know, we actually grew those to take it to the market. And we grew a lot of other stuff that we ate. We also, when I was fairly young, we also ran a small dairy, and not a mechanized dairy. We had to in fact milk the cows by hand. Later on when my older brother left home, my dad decided to mechanize a little bit and we bought one electric nickel. But for the most
part it was still milking by hand. So that was some early years during my childhood in terms of growing up. So I know what hard work is like. Getting up early in the morning to milk the cows, feed the hogs, feed the chickens, be ready to go in the field when it’s the daylight. It’s time to go hook the mules up, head to the field, either to pick the cucumbers, pick the cotton, pick the watermelons. We also, as I said, we had cash crops. So tobacco was one piece that we take to the market. Cotton is another piece that you pick and you take out. But the cantaloupes and the watermelons, we would pick them. Early on there was a cantaloupe shed we called, that we’d actually pick them crate them, a short distance away from the house in Ridgeway, North Carolina. We’d take some to the shed and ship them out. But the others, cantaloupes and watermelons, we would sell on the side of the highway. So as a young child for, you know, during that season you would see me on the highway with my siblings, number one highway, selling cantaloupes and watermelons there on number one highway. (04:20) But they were great years, formative year, like I said. You learn to work hard. We were brought up in church. My daddy was an activist in the NAACP. And so we were, you know, fortunate to live on our own farm unlike some of our neighbors around who’d share crops who’d live on a farm that belonged to the farmer up the street from us.

Chatrathi

So you talked about your father being an activist for the NAACP. Was that formative for you in the sense that did you look up to him as an activist? Did you see yourself as an activist? Or even at that age?

Andrews

(05:00) Well, you know, it’s interesting. You grow up on a farm. You go to school with two rooms from first to sixth grade. That’s the school life from first to sixth. And you get into, and after first to sixth you go to another all black school. But during that period of time, you know, you work man. I mean, many days, even in high school for a reporting period, I was actually out of school more than in school. Now back to your question. You know, so I really did not have time to think about activism at that period of time but I know for a fact that I was being developed. Here’s the example; fun example. Even those years, we were active in the voyage. So there was some speaking skills and interacting and learning leadership kinds of things that afforded me. In terms of my dad, you know, we were involved because we owned our land. I couldn’t understand this at the time, right? But later it finally got in. We owned our land, which meant we could do things that the neighbor couldn’t do. My dad could keep us out of school when we boycott the school. I mean I couldn’t understand why as a little young kid, “why we
can stay out of school but the Desmond’s up the street the kids can’t stay out of school.” Reflecting back daddy said, “well, you know, if they stay out of school they got to find another place to leave.” It didn’t really sink deep into me at that point, you know, but looking back on that its very clear that had the Desmond family decided to stay out of school, boycott the schools, the white land owner would have said, who were leading the anti movement against us, would have said, “you got to get up out of here and go.” The Williams family lived on a farm like that. So yes, I would say that during that period of time there was a lot of stuff ingrained in me. Going to NAACP meetings, being active in the youth branch of the NAACP, being somewhat like the voyage, learning some leadership skills helped quite a bit. And in fact, my dad was actually an officer in the NAACP as far back as I can possibly remember until the time I was grown and elected as president of the local branch. And living at home my dad said to me, “look you just got elected president of the branch. There’s nothing wrong with having the president and treasurer in the same house. But its time for me to give this up, and it just doesn’t look right to me. Both officers signing checks in the same house and I’ve been doing this for a while. I’m going to give this up and you go for it.”

(08:00) And so yes, the long answer to a question, I am convinced that involvement on my dad and the NAACP, him willing to take some risks and I look back at it: okay if FCX you don’t want to act right, when we boycott the stores. Hey, no problem for me, I get my truck, I’ll go to Raleigh and I’ll get my fertilizer. I mean he’s independent enough. Oh by the way, you need fertilizer? Ill get your fertilizer back when I come. I’ll drive to Raleigh to get my fertilizer. And so yes, I think the two or three things that grounded me was not that I had a super education, you know, you can imagine two teachers, three different classes, first, second and third, Ms. Harris and Ms. Wright. Fourth, fifth, and sixth, pot belly stove, outdoor bathrooms, not much better beyond that. And you can imagine, when you’re in school, middle school, high school, some days you miss more days out of school than you were in school during the reporting period. But even with that, that was one grounding piece for me. Second grounding piece for me was the NAACP and the involvement and my daddy matured me in that arena, and then my faith, being in church. And to blanket all of that was having two parents at home. My mom was just a gentle till she passed away, people came to her for counseling. Wise, kind of on the mark matriarch family, people, strangers, people we're not relatives but even others would come to her and ask for advice. I mean she was.... And my dad was kind of the financial. I mean he’s the guy that makes the deals. He’s the guy that makes the deal to load up the truck full of kids that picked cotton for the folks around. I learned something production. I learned something about production (10:17), dad says “well, all over hundred pounds you can have” mean four cents a pound. “When you get to hundred pounds, all over a hundred fifty you can have.” I was pretty good at picking cotton, all over
two hundred you can have. I know I’m in trouble now. I could barely get to two hundred so I’m not having much money

Chatrathi

So you seemed to have during your childhood this sort of great safety net of around the African American community but I just want to know what is the dynamic between your personally and sort of the white community who sometimes would threaten to sometimes uproot families.

Andrews

(10:55) Well, again, when you think about the environment that I grew up in, and you think about the faith, the Christian faith, treating people decent and treating people nice. So you didn’t get into the hate you attitude. But I recall all kinds of little stuff. So when I... I walked to school a lot because we had to feed the cows, the mules, and often time we’d just walk to school, probably two miles. Missed the bus. But the bus that takes us to school and drops us off, continued on to the other bus to pick up the white kids. And we knew that dynamic. We knew that we get books and we see these names in second hand books, there was an issue around keeping kids out of school. We pay tax, we oughta have books. Books with Donald Bryer, that’s the kid up the street. Remember real well, Donald Bryer and Catherine Bryer. I mean, so yeah, when you look at that, that’s a lesson itself. The other sort of subtle lesson that often times I reflect on, you know, William Bryer and my dad when we pull up in the yard because our farms were next to each other and sometime my daddy would share crop with them. So he pulls up in the yard and he says, his wife comes to the door, “hey boo, are you looking for Mr. Ernest. And my dad being independent, “yeah where is Ernest.” Subtly she’s trying to say to him, “you need to call him Mr. Ernest.” Now for us, because we’re taught to be respectful to elders, folks who were older, right, so at least to him we would say Mr. Ernest because we’re kids and we expect whether you’re black or white, if they’re substantially older than you say Mr. and Mrs right. That’s the way we were brought up. But my dad would giggle, “well I’ll tell Mr. Ernest, you stopped by.” All the kids come out, “are you looking for Mr. Ernest?” “Yeah where is Ernest?” “Well, I’ll tell Mr. Ernest you come by.” In other words, can’t you call him Mr. Ernest. So, what’s this? And so that. (13:32) But then there were conflicts that you see, like the time there were conflicts that you see like the time that we went over to demonstrate, to march in front of the five and dime store. You’re not hiding in a African American, blacks frequent the store and spend money. And you see the tension there. Not a lot at my age and when I got involved, not a lot of that. We were free enough, right, we were independently free in terms of our own farm. If we need meat, we go and
kill a cow. Kill a hog. Kill a chicken. We got our meat, we got our other stuff that we need. We grew our corn and take it to the meal. If they could not pressure in terms of employment. My mom stayed at home. So other than those kids of examples. So an example of the white only signs, which you know I vaguely remember dealing with some of this stuff. My young cousin who was staying with us one time who’s in the military, he goes down to the bus station and because he’s in the military he’s going to the white side, right? And cops come in and figure out he’s a military boy and let me figure this out, get on the bus and get out of here right? That kind of attitude and not arrest him. That was there but again, like I said, I’m sixty five heading to sixty six and I was in that era. (15:05)

Chatrathi

So, this is, and I’m trying to transition. So did you go to college before Vietnam or did you go after?

Andrews

Well... There’s something about growing on a farm. You’re expected to at least help get the crop in when you finish school. So you finish high school, that’s just the way life is supposed to be. You’re supposed to stay there and help get the current crop in. So, I said to my dad, "I’m ready to get off the farm, this is hard work, I mean I never like hard work.” My dad says to me, you know, “you gotta help us get through.” And I’m like, “dad I want to go to Raleigh.” “Go to Raleigh for what.” I said, “I wanna leave, I wanna go to school. I think I wanna be a welder or something, I need to leave.” I had a cousin living in Raleigh and one was living at the Old People’s Hotel down town and rooming. So really it was a boarding house with a restaurant downstairs, there were a few folks. I remember that. And so, I just said to my daddy, "I’m ready to go.” So he gave me twenty dollars and said you know, "you need shoes. You’ve been saying you need some shoes. Here’s your twenty dollars.” I told ma, “I’m going to take this twenty dollars, (16:28) I’m gonna get me a bus ticket, and I’m going to Raleigh. I’m getting out of here.” So I left home. Dad was...(groan), “because you supposed to help me get this crop.” In Raleigh, I started working at a Valentine cafeteria, and decided at that point I would take some night classes. I took some online classes in religious study and decided get with the Shaw divinity school. They were offering night classes. Life and teachings of Jesus, Lutheran Christian church, some night classes with Dr. Alexander, the dean of the divinity school at Shaw University. And others in the class were basically ministers, I was the young guy in the class. I had no intention of ever being a minister, but again, background, home, being grounded, I figured that was something to do. And then I get this strange
letter in the mail: Uncle Same needs you (chuckles). Being drafted, you know the draft was in place. And so I was drafted into the military. From there, took my basic training and off to Vietnam. But… that’s the period of time. That’s how I transitioned from the farm to my first “public job” at the cafeteria bussing tables while doing that doing independent study at Shaw University with some online classes corresponding classes they call them, not online but corresponding, we didn’t know anything about online, hardly had a telephone. But corresponding classes at the time.

Chatrathi

What were you’re feelings about, you know, being drafted and do you have any…?

Andrews

(18:28) Well my brother, my older brothers, three of us, my sister’s the very oldest, next was my brother, Henry, then another brother, Rufus, and than Dorothy and then two siblings after that. So, I mean I thought it was something… didn’t pay much attention, I hated to go, I knew it was Vietnam time and I had some anxiety about that. I recall one of the young men up the road from my school went to the military, last name Fields, got killed in battle. And so there was some anxiety around that. But again, you know my faith grounded me that I’m going to be okay. So I, interesting enough, and I always so jokingly I probably, if they had done what they had supposed to do I probably wouldn’t have gone to the military. I remember when I went for the exam, my physical, they couldn’t find my veins. And the guy says, “he’s alright.” It was like, you’re alive. Now I look back and say, you know, I need somebody to carry gun and be in Vietnam, you go do it. So there’s not that kind of, you know, conscience. Should I go to Canada, not an option, however, my brother who went in ahead of me. He just lucked out. He went to Fort Bragg for his training, when we got out he was at Fort Bragg. I mean he never left Fort Bragg for the two years. And I put in two years, one year in Vietnam, the other year part of it on the front end doing the training necessary before going and coming out of Vietnam, the last piece of that Fort Knox where I took my other training with armor and heavy tanks and half tanks.

Chatrathi

So you were awarded the Purple Heart…
Andrews

Yeah wounded in action. It’s interesting, that’s why, I mean because of my faith I believe in divine intervention, right. That’s who I am. \textbf{(21:00)} So I’m out with my squad, we are re-conning, we’re shooting, trying to draw fire, trying to see if anything is out there. Just testing. **shooting sounds**. See if anybody fire back, you know what I mean. But also included in that was pitching of grenades. Just kind of okay, we’re here. Part of that is because, when you’re unit is made up of tanks and, we called them half tanks, you can’t hide from the enemy. I mean you crank those big boys up and they know you’re moving. If you got ten fifteen of them, the whole earth is shaking. I mean you can’t hide, they know you’re coming. So in a way, long story short, I still believe, I personally believe that it was friendly fire, friendly. So I believe, that someone who threw a grenade, didn’t throw it out far enough. This is interesting, that’s why I said divine intervention. Right now as I talk to you, I got that piece of metal in my mouth that hit me when I was in Vietnam. That piece of metal earned me a Purple Heart, got me off the front line, and all though I was arguing with me sergeant, he looked at me and said, “Andrews, this happened for a reason. You now have to listen to me, any time you get a chance to get off the front line you need to take it. They’re sending you back to camp, get it checked out, they’re gonna send you back, they’re gonna issue you some orders to stay back at a safe place.” That piece of scrap metal, that you can see right here, just a little piece of metal from a grenade I’m pretty sure and I’m pretty sure its from friendly fire because we did not have any comeback or pushback when we were re-conning by fire, I’m convinced. It got me assigned to a military police unit, back in Long Benh. I had crossed from Long Benh jail just outside of Saigon, and that’s where I spent my, the rest of my tour. I was actually ended up what they call a super pie job. Done a little bit at the depot, where they bring ammo, security, military policy, security at night making sure picked up ammo and ammunition. They got the lights off and all that. But then I got the pie job: CEO driver. And I had a commanding officer who said look, “I don’t need you, I’m driving myself.” So I had time to read, to play pool, military service, one of those pie jobs that very rarely happened. The point I make is that even with that and the wounded in action, because I believe in divine intervention, it just happened and it got me off the front line, it got me to a safe place. I did see action, I did see my sergeant, I don’t talk about this much. I did see some action. My sergeant, who was in the main cue was shot in the head. And we’re shooting again by re-conning by fire. And to this day, to this day, I question, I question, I question whether it was the enemy or… friendly fire. All of that happened, people don’t talk about it. A lot of that happened, I mean… he was shot on the head. We settled down and noticed that he wasn’t on the cue. We looked down and to the half tank and he’s down. Med-a-vac takes him out and he’s gone. \textbf{(25:09)} But then, you know,
of course, I even had some scary months that I think about, wow, things could have happened a lot different. You know, a young man, walking outside the perimeter, you know would go out and we’d go outside the perimeter and make sure that anyone coming in, we’d get to the perimeter and get them in. And a young guy, being my time to watch guard, I’m standing guard. I’m hearing something coming down the road, and I hear Vietnamese talking. No one’s supposed to be here. Anything out here is supposed to be the enemy. So as a young man, just as green as grass, I get up and pull the pin from my grenade and touch the sergeant and I’m holding the grenade with the pin pulled and I dropped like something crazy. I’m holding a live grenade. And the sergeant makes a decision which I thought was very smart on his part, and I thought there’s no way that we could go without, you know, throwing up a flare and go in shooting. There’s no way. We hear them right there by the highway, we out here just at the edge of the road. Do they go and pretend that we not here and go get us, I mean, we’re at war here now, I’m sure. And the sergeant makes a decision, no. We’re not absolutely sure it’s the enemy. Unless we can figure out something, let that go on by. They go on by and I’m sitting here with a live grenade and the sergeant said take your boot strap off and take the strings out of your boots. In the dark now. Didn’t sleep much that night. Wrapped that grenade up. He didn’t bother letting the other guys know, “hey guys look we got a man holding a live grenade, and I think we got it secured but.” So again that was a tough time. I mean because you never know, in the daytime you never know that the kids you’re interacting with, you don’t know or adults that you’re interacting with, you don’t know if they will be shooting at you at night. That’s the difference.

Chatrathi

I think I’m going to move on. So I think you came back and your brief bio says you were working at a plant...

Andrews

(27:58) Came back and decided... I always been one that like to save money right. So I had sent some bonds home and saved a little money and by the time I got back I said you know, I can’t just sit around here, got to find work to do. Decided not to instantly go back to Raleigh. So it was during the summer and the pickle plant up in Henderson, North Carolina. They were hiring for the summer. And so I put on a little Sunday birches to go up and get a job and I get there and the guy says, “you ready to go to work now.” And I’m like, “okay let me buy some more pants.” “Um yeah, let’s go to work.” And so I went to work at the pickle plant. And while at the pickle plant, six months, maybe a year, maybe less, the whole meat cutter unions
started a campaign there to organize that plant. And as a leader, not the leader, but active in terms of the organizing effort involved in it. Able to talk to workers and using my both my civil rights experience and church experience to talk to folks. And to be honest with you, other than that during that period of time, having my brother, the one that had passed away, not the oldest but the second, he passed away eventually after he retired with a good union pension. But he actually worked at a union plant. And so that was the only connection that I really had and knew anything about a union. They never taught that in high school or in school at all, I mean, about union. Anything you here had to be pretty negative. But my brother worked at a glass plant in Henderson, and often time when I had to go to the pickle plant he’d say, “hey bro, where you going?” “Going to work.” “But it’s a holiday.” “Holiday for you but it’s not for me.” “Hey, where you going?” “Vacation.” “What?” “Well, you get one week’s vacation you get paid for you vacation after you come back.”

Chatrathi

This is your brother...

Andrews

Yeah, my brother had a union though. I mean he’s teasing me, “where you going? Aw man, there a holiday.” “Yeah holiday for you, you’re in a union job, I’m not in a union job, right.” Vacation is lacking. And so for me because I then had license, in fact, I had my military license before I got civilian license. When I got back out of the military I got my civilian license and I used to carry guys to work, brought them to work. And so talking to them about the union and I always remember James Bullock. (30:48) He’s passed away now. But he couldn’t understand this when we were negotiating our contract, talking about union and vacation. He couldn’t understand, “well wait a minute, tell me about this vacation.” It’s the holiday that we got. I remember well it was Thanksgiving, the first holiday from the time that we signed the agreement.

Chatrathi

So you’re working...

Andrews

In the pickle plant, we organized the pickle plant, that’s what I’m...we organized the pickle plant, we negotiated our first contract and that contract we had paid holidays, which we never heard of. Paid holidays? Bullock,
James Bullock, who’s one of my riders could not understand the concept of paid holidays. He’s an old timer, bless his heart. "I don’t understand this paid holiday." I said, “James, this is how paid holiday work. When you get up, get your gun, go hunting all day and the company is going to pay you to hunt. That’s a paid holiday. You do what you want to do, and the company pays you for that day’s work but you’re not working.” “Oh.” So what happens when workers form unions. Although there was all kinds of stuff in the way, I mean company coming to me, you are a smart young man, you look like good leadership, almost everybody’s going to make supervisor, divide and conquer game. We went through all of that. But the workers at the plant had an African American supposed to be somebody that came into the plant, ya’ll shouldn’t form a union, company came her for ya’ll to have a job, but thank god for Spotwell Burwell, President of the NAACP. He came in an he would talk to our workers and get together in the meeting and he said, “how in the world can folks like this saying about a union in heaven and don’t want even want a union at the pickle plant.” How can you have a union in heaven when you’re fighting against the union at the pickle plant? So again, backing up, we formed a union, we organized, we negotiated our first contract, and it was after that point that first agreement, that I became more active in the union and ultimately became president of the works at Perfect Pact, this was an amalgamated local, statewide local. But unlike other shops in the local, we elected officers in our own. Our president organized the workers of the Perfect Pact so we can have our own meetings and we can do our own work. Although the locals are based in Asheville. The structure had its own president and treasurer and the whole bit. And we decided we need our own leadership here first shops chief shop steward and then became president of the organized workers that kind of managed the organized unit, just that unit of pickle at the pickle plant. The plant was an independent brand that was bought out by Heinz the ketchup company and ultimately closed down after some time.

Chatrathi

And you were there for the entire period?

Andrews

(34:05) No, I actually was blessed, a young man in a union. There was an organization there, AFL CIO developing leadership among young workers. And they asked me if I would take some training, go to an institute, a training program with this group called Frontlash, which was the AFL CIO youth program. And so I went off to do that still working at the plant. And as a result of that, and other activity, that was the period of time I was actually
president of the NAACP, after I returned home from the war, during the pickle days, I became president of the NAACP.

Chatrathi

Just want to continue talking a little bit more about that plant because it was kind of interesting, this was kind of your...

Andrews

This was 72...73

Chatrathi

And so the state of unions, just nationally, was it growing like it was in your plant or was it sort of....

Andrews

You know, again, picture this: a young farm boy, goes off to war, comes back, still has no idea bout unions. I could not tell you a thing about unions beyond their plant, the plant that my brother worked, and I knew that telephone workers had a union and that was my scope. But then going to Frontlash and meeting other union folks, and meeting them, “what are ya’ll talking about CWA, what in the world is CWA?” “Communication Workers of America.” You had to argue with folks, stop using, I mean I don’t know what you’re talking about, acronyms. So yeah, I can’t, at that point I could not tell you, the status of unions at that point right? But if you look back at it, you can ask some professor here and other places, there was an economic downturn during the time I was at the pickle plant. The economy was... that was a bad period of time. It could have affected unions, but looking back now, again, I want to make clear, I had no clue during the period of time. I wasn’t connected to national movements, state movements. Someone asked me the structure of the AFL CIO, I mean I had no clue. That’s not who I am. I know I’m in a union, I know it’s the AFL CIO, I know it’s the meat cutters union and we have a meeting every year but we’re doing our own thing here. But I would imagine that if you compare that period of time to know, even at the point, we were much better off. Because following that, some years following that was when I really got involved with organizing much more. JP Stevens campaign which I was involved back then, which was a huge southern, thought that was going to turn the south around.
Chatrathi

So just one more thing about that

Andrews

Go on ahead

Chatrathi

What were the negotiations like? You know, those early negotiations with the pickle plant and the business owners.

Andrews

**(37:25)** Well like I said, the first contract negotiation, I was not a part of the first negotiation that settled the first contract. But being a leader in the plant, developing leadership, and attending meetings, and settling arguments, and helping working with the full committee to put together a proposal as a member was pretty interesting because you can imagine, you’re taking a company that is located in Henderson, North Carolina, a union free environment as they would describe it, the only comparable union would be the glass plant, which makes glass products, a distance away from the plant, they own number one highway. There’s no comparison, right, I had no… But to talk about a real starting that paid holiday? More than one week vacation? Actually having insurance, not after you been there five years but having insurance after you complete. I remember some things around that, the outcome, not negotiation, but the outcome of that was really striking, so Minnie and Bertha. Bertha always white female, thought she was the highest paid female in the department, but in fact there was a black girl named Minnie was the highest paid, right, because they teach you divide conquer. Don’t tell anybody what you make. Give them a nickel, give her a dime, give them five cents, and everybody think they’re the highest paid. That division kept us separate. But once you start negotiating you say, put it on the table. Again, I understand this concept, even though I wasn’t on the table. You put it all on the table, what are the wages and benefits of workers now? What are we negotiation what is the floor we are starting from? Okay like jobs, at that time there were no female operators. And that was another battle that we had to take inside the union, inside the workforce because some of the guys, we never had a female machine operator.

**(39:32)** Wait a minute, at one point there was never a black machine operator. So is it fair to discriminate against Teensy, who says she wants to be a machine operator? And its not heavy work. Ultimately, I ended up being a machine operator, and ultimately the lead person in the department and
leader at the same time. So yeah, I can’t talk about sitting at the table but I can talk about the end results. Yeah. Like I said paid holidays, vacations, sick days, health care, not after five years. There was this notion that if you stay there five years you can get some health care.

Chatrathi

So, you’re president of the NAACP at this point, and you’re about to Frontlash, or is that...

Andrews

Yeah all in the same period of time. From the time I got out of the military I went into the plant, right. Being active in the NAACP, get elected president of the NAACP, and Henderson, and Warren Country Branch of the NAACP. During this three or so year period there’s a lot of stuff happening in my life. I claim to have been in love at that point and decided I want to get married and asked my mom about that. Said mom I got some choices here to make, I want to get married, I want to get a car, I want to get married, I want to get a motorcycle. And she said, get a car. Don’t get married, don’t get motorcycle, get a car. She was a smart woman, said get a car. But I got married and my dad owned a little piece of land separate from the farm that he gave me that he gave me the deed to before I got married and I had a child and so that was one track. But during that period these were the forces that were working, NAACP, transitions to be president of that. (41:38) They organized, I helped the union at the plant become active in the union, following that involved in Frontlash, took a leave of absence form the plant with a child and a house payment to make. Knew that I was gonna make ninety dollars a week to do Frontlash work, but that I really wanted to do this and this was a year that Howard Lee ran for Lieutenant Governor. And I wanted to get people involved and Frontlash’s was mainly motivated for non partisan voter registration and to get out the vote. And also involved in electoral politics in Warren County. I mean if you look at...I was a registered republican when I registered, which is a whole new dynamic right? I mean come on, you’re a registered Republican in Warren County? So working in politics, all that happened in that span of time, the leave of absence through Frontlash. Some months later I get a call from AFL CIO, we want to put out a person of color on our staff. So (19)75. They asked me to come to Raleigh, the President said, “I want to put you on staff, I see what you’re doing.” So I went on staff as Outreach Director. Outreach means just that, reaching out to the community and building relationships.

Chatrathi
Before we talk about AFL CIO, I wanted to talk about Frontlash.

Andrews

Okay, yeah

Chatrathi

Because, there’s not that much literature on it and I got a few newspapers clippings about President Johnson starting it. Can you talk about some of the projects of getting out the vote and getting people, you know, registered especially the African American community?

Andrews

I think the notion that Johnson started it is not correct though. It’s really the AFL CIO program to reach young workers. And that the young workers meaning particular young union workers. But we also connected and moved young workers that are not even in unions and that mirrors to some degree our current effort to reach young workers. Headed up by our now Secretary of Treasurer of the national AFL CIO, Liz Shuler. And you can look at that and young workers program of the national AFL CIO. But at that point the two tenants of Frontlash was to train some kind of apprenticeship on the job training to give them leadership skills so they can run for office and so I always say that I was probably one of their first early recruits, one of their recruits in terms of, you know, preparing for. So voter registration, registering new voters and we ran voter registration drives. And also in Warren County, during that period of time we’re registering voters, that dynamic of the election process in Warren County, if you look at it, changed during that period of time. If you look at that period, of Martin’s period of time, when the Republicans controlled the Governor’s mansion all the election operations at the local and state level were at the hands of Republicans. And so you look at Warren County, there was no white Republican party, it was the black Republican party. Whites in Warren County, to run they knew they had to be Democrats. So they registered as Democrats, they voted as Republicans, but they registered as Democrats. And so during this time, Floyd McKissick was at over at Soul City, and that’s another whole story. This was a new development and Federal funds and John Hawkins, New York. Hometown is Warren County, he hated the Republican party. (46:02) So back to your Frontlash piece, so this worked great with what I was doing with Frontlash, registering new voters. And some might ask, and often times people would ask, “how in the world did you become a Republican in that environment.” Simple, when I went to
register, the lady asked me which party I want to be affiliated with and I stopped, “wait a minute, there’s not a black dog catcher in this county. There’s not a elected official in this county, there’s not a minority elected official in this county.” And so I said, “I want to be a Republican.” And she said, “are you sure?” And I said, “yes.” You sure? I mean you’re black, you’re not supposed to be a Republican. Yes I want to be a Republican. And I would say that I would never, I am proud that I’ve never bought into, even at that time not the notion of what we got now, not the notion of what we got now, but even at that time, I never bought into the Republican philosophy. But knowing that the election was going to be in the hands of the Republicans. Many of my friends, African Americans, changed their registration to be Republicans. So that then in their precinct, many of these precinct were African American, Native American if you look at the population in Warren County with the Ottowa, and so we changed our registration. What’s the result of that fast forward, and I know I’m getting off the Frontlash piece but Eva Clayton from my county ended up being county commissioner, chair of the county commissioner. She ended up being member of Congress. Frank Ballands, a member of Congress all from my county. Theodore Williams, African American sheriff of the county. Right now my friend to this day Johnny Williams is sheriff of the county. I mean we never heard of that. So that period of time, 70 going forward I would say, at least 70 before I got there, 72 when I was there, and then going forward the politics of that county changed and we were able to elect. And they ended up being more of a coalition government there between Native Americans and African Americans and progressive moderate whites if you will.

Chatrathi

Why do you think that so many African Americans said they were Republicans or registered as Republicans?

Andrews

It was not a lot. Let me just be clear. The party, the Democratic party, it was in the framework of the Democratic party that Eva Clayton made that progress, that John Williams get elected, but it was because those of us who changed those others particularly registrars individuals in precincts that decided they were going to change their registration so they can be the registrar of the precinct and they then can register voters and to be honest with you I have been in Democratic meetings during that period of time as a registered Republican, sitting in the back as an observer. Why? Because I know that African Americans in Warren County had to take control of the party, (49:19) because the party was a white controlled Democratic party but no effort to elect African Americans or Native American Indians. So I was
a part of the movement to register voters, but also in terms of the Democratic Party, but also to tell people that “we got our precinct meeting tonight, this is what we’re gonna do. You’re gonna show up five minutes before the meetings but you’re not gonna go in you’re gonna sit in your car. But the meeting starts at seven o clock and I want all of ya’ll to walk in and this is how many you need to run the meeting. Chances are there won’t be but a handful of other folks. Make your nomination when asked for chair” And that happened precinct after precinct that was organized and a couple of those I was fortunate, that I couldn’t vote, I was sitting there. Walked in, sit in the back to watch the proceedings. My mom, my dad, the neighbors, my aunt, all of them jump in there car, they sit on the outside, five minutes till, time the meeting start, they walk in and precinct after precinct was taken over. But the point that you’re driving home is that it was through the fact not a lot but a small group of us, Floyd Mckissick Sr., James Andrews, Henry Hayes. But a lot of nameless folk who changed their registration, I say lot, but a good handful of nameless folk precinct changed their registration to be the precinct registrar and precinct judge. The county continues to be largely, absolutely democratic, I mean look at the votes coming out of there. (51:00) And during that period of time, I only met one attending Republican, I only met one white Republican that would be at a meeting who was Leon Gautchall. He was somewhere and he was working in Soul City with Floyd McKissick and he was a white guy, Republic, Leon Gautchall. Other than that it was a handful of black folks who ran the Republican party. And the Republican party in every election came out great. You look at the Republican party numbers it out performed itself because white Democrats would vote for Republicans for President. And Republicans for Governor and the party out performed itself. So I could be out there getting folks to vote Democrat because I know the white Democrats going to make the Republican party look good anyway. I took you off to a different place.

Chatrathi

(52.13) So, I mean, you got involved sort of with the AFL CIO through the Phillips Grant Foundation...

Andrews

Well yeah, well actually the A Phillips Randolph National office talked to the President of the federation and said, you know we can make this happen for you in terms of an African American on staff. And the then President said lets make this work. And so it was not a big grant they put five thousand dollars in. Because the A Phillips Randolph Institute at the time was thinking how do we start helping new leaders, African American leaders and train them and sort of an internship program among trade union folks, black trade
union people So they can take leadership of their union and become staff. And so in fact there were several of us, I was one of their first. Five thousand dollars to the state fed, state fed said well five thousand dollars that I will put on, we got a person who did some Frontlash stuff who got some energy down in Warren County so they called me and said come, we want make you this offer. And they did. That was in 75. I remember that day well. Because my first day on the job I get a call from home, “your second baby is being born, you better get out of there.” March 25th was my first full day on the job, dashed out to see this young daughter of mine. So yeah that’s how I got involved. But again, my job was outreach director. What did I do as outreach director? I was the community organizer. (54.19) And so it was not uncommon for me to be with Charles McClain and other folks who were doing that kind of work. And then following that with Carolyn Coleman who is now on that national board of the NAACP, when she was serving as the executive director of the NAACP here in the state. Not uncommon for me to be in meetings bringing messages back. But also organize a lot of, we had twelve A. Phillip Randolph active chapters across the state at the time. And places like Morganton, New Burn, and one in the rapids that still exists. So we organized those local A Phillip Randolph chapters. Job was also to do voter registration and get out the vote but also being the link between the labor movement and the black community so that piece took off. And I did that up I was appointed in 84 to be Secretary Treasurer when there was some, we used to have some legal issues within the federation back in those days. Wilbur Hobby had some legal problems then the secretary treasurer of the state AFL CIO had some legal issues, not related to the AFL CIO but some outside related to the credit union. And the executive board with the support, and I must give Chris Scott, who was then the leader of the federation, surprised a lot of folks when he asked the board to ask me to complete the term of the Secretary Treasurer. That was in 84. And in 85 I ran for the position of Secretary Treasurer and stayed on that position until 97 with the current position as President.

Chatrathi

So during the late 70s, early 80s when your kind of moving up the ranks, what were your thoughts of labor as we were kind of starting to see that kind of slow decline in unionization among laborers?

Andrews

(56.48) You know, again, it’s the lens and where you are at the time. I mean, because I never…I mean, I look at the glass not as half empty but as half full at all times, I mean, even at the worst of times, we’re growing we’re doing stuff. Because if you look at that 70s through the early 80s, there was
some great campaigns in the early 80s, which brought about one the biggest organizing efforts in the south beyond the historic Dixie movement back there but JP Stevens. That was JP Stevens’ campaign. But as a young person with the AFL CIO, there was, again, I think Unions got it wrong, often times when they’re organizing there’s a lot of African Americans workers that organizing staff did not always reflect the make up of the workforce. So I was often times sent to work with different unions. But one of these campaigns that I’m so pleased of that I worked on was the JP Stevens campaign. So I worked Wurnell Rapids had a big complex here and I’ve been down into that. (58.03) But was assigned to plant down in South Carolina, big Stevens plants down in South Carolina and Laureenberg, North Carolina and working in those campaigns with the organizing staff. And they won that campaign. And the plant stayed there for along time until they do what most companies find a way to do which is to produce their product off shore or sell out and merge and all the other crazy stuff. But that was a major campaign, but back to your organizing point, to me this was exciting work. Whether that’s organizing, and again, I don’t know the big picture. If you asked me what the world looked like or what North Carolina looked like during that period, I can only tell you and recall those kind of campaigns that I was involved in. America Inc. right on a big textile mill that’s a diesel engine right on the highway down in Whitaker, North Carolina. Big American Inc. plant, working with the textile mill plant we organized that plant. Never did get the contract but we organized the plant, huge plant operation. So for me the excitement because when I walked out of my office to assist operating engineers with a plant some textile with a plant, I was energized so I only know that so I can’t tell you what labor statistics look like what the national figures in terms of unions look like because to me its all exciting and its growing.

Chatrath

Can you elaborate on some of the campaigns you were working on, maybe the contracts that did work out?

Andrews

I think the JP Stevens. A lot of folks, again I say this time and time again, whether it is the Volks Wagon in Chattanooga or the Auto plants here in North Carolina which got little play when the workers and several huge plants here in North Carolina went through a similar process here in North Carolina. Folks are saying that this is going to turn the south, this means that labor is going to open up a new door in the south. (1.00.15) But let me just drill down because you’re asking what’s the bounce back, what are the benefits? Let me give you just a word or two about three major campaigns
that I participated in and that was three major campaigns if I look at my life
here. JP Stevens, one. Young kid at that time we had Andy Young, former
mayor of Atlanta, to come up and speak to the workers and had some other
issues going on but it was a great campaign particularly in this area North
and South Carolina, huge workforce. They got a contract and the lives of
workers took off. But I think in each of these situations there have been an
untold story about the political implication in raising folks out of poverty, or
a whole community out of poverty and the tax base improve because
workers bring home more money. And they bring home more money and
they spend the money in the local economy. They negotiate for wages and
benefits and they are much more likely to sending their kids to college and
school and buying the things they need. That is the life of the JP Stevens
workers. But again much like my own plant where workers had very little if
any vacation of paid holidays or pension plans. If you look at my friend
Bennett Taylor, and I knew him when he was a young guy at the pant, he’s
retired now, president of the NAACP, he learned skills through the A Phillip
Randolph Institute he headed an A Phillip Randolph Institute, he learned
skills and he’s now leading the NAACP in North Hampton county. Still a very
close and dear friend of mine. I met him in the plant, working in the plant.

(1.02.00) Formed a union, became president in his local union, active in his
masonic large group, learned those skills and so that’s one positive. The
other one I would bring to mind is the whole Canon Mill Pill Tex. And I got a
special reason to be fond of Pill Tex and Canon Mills and that is I married a
woman out of there. Didn’t know her during that period of time during the
organizing campaign but eventually I married a young lady out of the
Virginia plant. But again, years, years in the making struggle campaign after
campaign, and our involvement support from the state AFL CIO, the
campaign, what does it mean to workers when they’re able to look at their
employer across the table in contract negotiations and say that for the first
time I am at equal footing with you. I can look you, because the law gives
me the right to sit here and negotiate, I can look at you across the table and
I can debate with you about what’[s fair and just in the workplace. I can talk
to you and if you want to we can work together to make this product the
best product and get it to the market in a timely way and you’re making
money but as you’re making money you got to share it with the rest of us.
That’s power. (1.03.27) That’s tremendous power so yeah it took years for
them to do that, I mean, so even with the bankruptcy. It was the unions
standing there and saying look here, you cant put workers at the back of the
line to get paid. You going to pay all of these other debts. The company owe
these workers and they need to bring that up. You know at least being that
voice for those workers. Helping them with transition when the plant shut
down, Murdoch decided to run away with the money. That was something
that brings pride. And then the last one I would mention is the Smithfield
workers. And I would put that one alongside FLOC and sort of shared both of
these because they mirror each other in many ways. So you got a slaughter house. Thousands of workers in the slaughter house. (1.04.19) You got folks who are picking cucumbers and want a union. And you say, "how in the world are you going to organize a slaughterhouse in eastern North Carolina. How the world are you going to organize, primarily an immigrant workforce in the fields of eastern North Carolina, where people have language issues and their frowned on by many folks of all races. They are seen in the community as outsiders. How you going to form a union among those groups? And I am so proud that our state federation stepped in early days with FLOC. I mean I went to Washington to Baltimore to meet with John Sweeney to talk about the campaign here. We lent our voice to help that campaign, provided space for them to work out of our office when they need to. Again, back to you original question, what are the benefits? You see the benefits of this, if you look at and talk to the workers of the fields in North Carolina, not just cucumber pickers anymore, now we’re talking about other workers, tobacco, and other products, apples in western North Carolina. You know, you’re talking about workers who are able to do this collective bargaining, I mean, I’m still in awe. I’m thinking. I’m sitting and pulling up to Pulley Memorial Church when the company, the Growers Association, the workers are signing a union contract almost in disbelief. They’re sitting here negotiating a contract, and the workers, the immigrant workers are signing the contract and passing it down to the boss, the company, to sign it and then passing it over to the Grower’s Association to sign the collective bargaining agreement. I mean, is this real, am I on something? (1.06.11) But its real, and the benefits of that, again, its still not where it needs to be, there’s still all kinds of issues in the workplace, at least once or twice a year I go down to see these labor camps and the conditions are still horrible conditions that they’re still living in. but if you couple that with our effort to say that there oughta be clear drinking water in the field, they would at least have drinking water, okay they oughta have at least a mattress to lay on, come on folks, when they get off work they oughta at least have a mattress to lay on. They oughta have some kind of running water, right, facility right? Progress have been made. Whether Smithfield or the Farmworkers, there’s a voice for workers, the union provides a voice, a collective voice that are able to look at their employer, not as trembling slaves but as equals. And in fact that was the same notion when we organized our plant, in fact. It was not about wages. It was about, why are you bringing Joe in here your white buddy and he has to be my supervisor and I’m training with the dude. A lead person and I got to train with the dude. He has no experience but because he’s your cousin’s cousin son, he gets in here and gets the clean job and we get the... why does he always have to be the one running the machine? Why can’t you hire someone to be a black mechanic in here in this plant right? Somebody. So the same upward mobility that exists, for me, exists in these other situations be it with the Farmworkers in a different kind of vein given
that the law that covers them, there’s no bargaining rights in the National Labor Relations Act that covers them. Or the Smithfield, and I just went down to, I was just in that area, the other day at Mount Air where they’re targeting a group of porch workers. An awesome union, awesome union. Leadership, super, workers are committed to sharing what they’ve learned through unionization with the two thousand workers at Mount Air at the porcher plant. And they coming out, cold day, but their out their celebrating. This is appreciation day, appreciation day for Mount Air workers at that plant. So those are some of the campaigns, so when I look back at my life and say what are some the union organizing campaigns that kind of come to surface? It would have to be my early days with JP Stevens, it would have to be the Canon campaign, it would have to be Smithfield, it would have to be Flock. And there was a lot of other efforts that were made a lot of other smaller ones but those were the ones that saw almost the worst of conditions that folks were put in. (1.09.16) The Farmworkers, the worst of conditions, I mean as I said to my leadership, if folks can organize immigrant farmworkers in eastern North Carolina then there oughta be a way that we can organize in the country because these folks got everything going against them. But yet, their determination and resolve and even with folks throwing stuff at them, it happened. And these are the sort of campaigns that made a... what’s left of them? FLOC is still there. Of course you know what happened to Stevens and Cannon. But there are still some folks who found some other union jobs. Because we found some other union jobs and we said, “wait a minute this is way worse than what we used to have at these union jobs.” And I’m sure that none of those workers have yet to unionize. And then you get the two that are still alive, the Farmworkers and the Smithfield workers, those four, that are still going.

Chatrathi

I mean, you talk a lot about how it takes a lot of determination, it takes a lot of motivation in a lot of ways. So there had to be a lot of adversity for the joy to come, there had to be some, you know, backlash. So I just wanted to talk about, want you to elaborate on some of that, you know backlash from probably business leaders, business owners

Andrews

(1.10.46) Well, I mean it never changed. It never changed. I think the one thread that runs throughout every one of these campaigns, two threads that runs through them, that’s absolute on all of these campaigns. One is the issue of racism, the divide and conquer. I mean, every one of these
campaigns, JP Stevens was about unions for black folks and folks that don’t want to do anything. If you talk about Flock if you talk about Smithfield, the very same thing, if you talk about Canon, it’s the very same thing. So the whole issue of divide and conquer by the employer and the surrounding community to get up involved with that and we’ve seen that in Chatanooga. It’s absolutely clear. That’s one. The second piece the business owners that are subject to benefit from that, often times get caught on the wrong side of history, on the wrong side of these campaigns. Because, in fact, when workers unionize and get their pay wages, it is the local businesses that ultimately benefit from that because they’re gonna benefit, particularly if you’re talking about a service industry, grocery stores, furniture stores, car lot dealers and the whole bit. It is, that’s where they’re going to go, if they’re in the Roanoke rapids, its not likely their going to go to Raleigh just to get a car, if there’s a car dealer in town, a used car dealer in town that they can get a car from. They’re going to find a car and spend the money but because of the attitude then they’re caught in to this in terms of opposing the unions because the unions can be bad. (1.12.34) And then if you lay that with an overarching feeling that somehow the company is going to leave, that then hits the workers in a bad way but it also hits the business in a bad way because that business depend even on the lousy wages because you’re going to come in here and buy your coke here or you’ll buy some things. But its better to have this low wage, anti wage anti union company then to not have it here, even thought its competing with offshore wages, mentality. I mean, it’s the Minka Haley South Carolina video, and I would suggest that if you really want craziness at its ultimate, I mean, look at that video. So that thread runs through most of these kind of campaigns, you can count on the business, you can count on the Chamber of Commerce being opposed to you, you can count on the fear tactic even if its illegal you know. Whether it’s my plant, Steven’s filed, Fieldcrest Canon plant, Farmworkers, Smithfield plant, I always say there’s a process they go through. First they want to love you to death, I’ve never seen Mr. Ruben, plant manager at the time, until we start talking about union. But then he comes out and he’ smiling and he’s waving and he’s talking to everybody, we the best, captivates meeting with audiences, everybody’s going to be a supervisor tomorrow, you got good potential, military. And then everybody’s going to be a supervisor all of the sudden. And then if that’s not working then it’s the scare tactic. Throughout all these campaigns, how do you scare people? How do you put fear so deep that folks lose hope for anything better than what they’ve got. And they’re capable of doing that and to be honest with you, we’re not the smartest folk in the world on our side. I always when I do conversation on the other side, we could be blamed for a lot on our side. Not telling our story, not capable of telling networks to tell our story. Union members that are union members but their family members are not even aware that their union members. So back to you point there, those are
some of the threads that runs through all of these campaigns and it certainly ran through the campaign in Chatanooga Tennessee a few weeks ago.

Chatrathi

So, I kind of want to talk about current, this is a similar thread that you can see today as well you talking about Chatanooga. So in North Carolina there’s a lot of Republican pressure especially in the government, you have, you know, strong motivation by the Republican party today to, you know, squash unions. A lot of people would say that they’re succeeding with the low rate that North Carolina has. I just wanted, what do you think the motivation is of the Republicans, in the sense that, do you think that there is hope for the future?

Andrews

(1.16.11) There’s always hope for the future. You’re looking at a guy who, even when I’m down, I’m up because when trouble comes it means I have to stand up stronger and taller and fight harder, you know. There’s always hope, and so dealing with the issue you raised now. I think you can go back and say, and again, its not that I’ve ever been tied to the Republican philosophy. Even for my life time, be absolutely clear historically that we talked about. Where Republicans vs. Democrats. But lets start with, the anti union attitudes is not a Republican phenomenon, its not a Republican owned process because whether its Republican Democrats, we have not had Democrats to stand up and say, not allowing public sector workers to allow bargaining collectively. Democrats or Republicans stand up and say that that’s unfair, and we oughta have Republicans and Democrats open those doors up. But what we’re seeing now takes it to a whole new level, I thought I’d never see this in my lifetime. At least, and I say this time and time again, I’ve never seen the anti almost everything but big business but corporate donors but millionaire and billionaire but almost everything else you’re anti, and so what I often say to folks is what this group of leaders now has done something I’ve never seen offer, we are used to being the devil, we are used to being the whipping by. I mean unions are terrible and that’s the reason unions are falling down. Well tats the reason North Carolina is the least unionized state so how can we be the... but big union bosses, but wait a minute you just said that we’re faded out, we’re ineffective but because it’s the election cycle we’re the big union bosses. So what were seeing now is a n effort to whip up the factionaires, the extremists and to understand it is to the financiers, the folks that put the money that are developing many of these policies, the legislative finance council, ALEC right, that drafts all of these anti union anti everything, anti voter law, voter suppression I mean
name it. They’re the ones that are drafting some of that stuff and putting it forward. (1.19.06) And the leadership of the state, this state, is swallowing this like something I’ve never seen before in my lifetime. But that makes me excited, I mean that gives me energy, because I see not just a labor movement developing but I see a movement of a broader group of constituents, teachers, and doctors, women, young people, all kinds of people, all weighing in here like I’ve never seen before, so I’m not depressed I am… I wish it was something different but it gives me energy it gets me up in the morning, I say I got another day to go after that and things are starting to turn around. The voucher program, the court said, “oh maybe hold up here” or cutting dues for teachers, the court says, “wait a minute hold up here after twelve o clock at night but maybe you cant just deny teachers, because you hate them and you said that you dislike where they put that money, maybe its not right to deny them dues check off at one o clock in the morning.” The court said, “no, no, no maybe you oughta…” So there are some victories here that people are not talking about.

Chatrathi

I mean in Charlotte they had the six to five vote to make sure, you know, union dues could be...

Andrews

(1.20.42) Deducted. But what did they do? They came to Raleigh and put in a piece of bill. Raleigh bless its heart, represented well. They put in the bill that these other folks that said Washington shouldn’t tell North Carolina what to do. These are the folks that said state rights. State oughta have the right to do everything they want to do. Lord I’m glad states don’t have the right to do everything they want to do. Or we’ll still be in bondage down here. But these are the same folks that dictate to the city that say the city, and this is the jist of the legislation, that say the city will no longer have the power or the authority to make the decision for workers at their own, I mean its workers decision, workers got to say, “ I want this eight dollars to come out of my check and this is where I want it directed.” Just as I would do with the United Way or any other. Now these legislator who are all about state rights, want to say to the city that ou should no longer have the right to do that that we should make sure that... well it made it through the house, its pending in the senate, conversation with folks lets see if they want to take it on. Yeah that’s the kind of far reaching legislation. But when, you know, its not just about unions, you got to understand this. I mean the transformation that takes place in the city. I mean if you look back at history. I mean if you look back at Winston Salem, if you look at the tobacco workers and their organizing up there, that was a political movement if you look at the history,
Maisy Woodruff they were old timer, but I connected with those folks that were apart of that, I mean it was historic. I mean you can look at many other examples in this state. I think the role that the Stevens workers start to play in the Wurnell Rapids area politically had an impact. Fillcrest Canon, and I expect the same kind of bubbling coming out of Smithfield. So, in addition, to what happens in terms of a relationship in the plant, most conservative extremists understand that when workers get together and start together in the workplace some of that is transferrable relationships in the community, and when that starts happening than the electric changes a little bit. Folks might start registering and they might not be drinking the same koolaid that we were given all along, they might start drinking a different koolaid, or at least be open to drinking a different koolaid flavor.

Chatrathi

You know, part of the problem, I think you know, is just the funding is a bigger issue. You got some of these bigger businesses who have so much money for advertising. And it’s a little bit more smaller funding for, you know, even like AFL CIO. So just wondering how do you overcome the funding issue that you might have?

Andrews

(1.23.45) Well, we are one of the big players in politics when it comes to funding. I would say that you would be hard pressed to find three candidates in the state of North Carolina running for any political process that have received a thousand dollars from our political pact. It’d be hard to find three candidates in the state of North Carolina. One candidate came to me the other day and said, I need your help, you know. You’re fifty dollars would help me a lot. I mean that’s not where we play, because we have no capacity and we pull that. I mean, I put my payroll deduction to our pact, every pay period I put a little something and we raise a little dollars. But you’re absolutely right, the notion that you have here is that you have even more so with united opening and corporations and individuals, and fund can come in without even telling where its coming from. That’s a whole new political game. And you see what happened during the takeover of the general assembly here. It’s absolutely clear. I mean the king pin of the right brags about. I think it was twenty one seats that he target, eighteen or nineteen of them he won because he invested his corporate dollars into that an amassed a lot more than that into these races and he was able to win. But at the same time, and I sit here and say that im getting to be an old man, but at the same time, what happens to our democracy when a pact you have, citizen owned lection pros, that folks who are running for statewide office and judicial office was able to get public funding and these
very folks in power says, “no that might mean that a regular everyday
citizen might be able to collect enough fifty dollar bills and hundred dollars to
qualify and then you’re gonna put this other money in that they might even
compete with me.” That sounds like a great idea to me. But not these folks
said, “what we’re gonna do is, we’re gonna get rid of public financing and
we’re gonna increase the amount that can be given in the political race.”
Now wait a minute I don’t get five thousand dollars. Very rarely do I write a
check to individual candidates. I give dollars to my pact but you mean to tell
me that the answer to our problem is to do away with public financing and to
increase the amount, we’re not talking about forty to fifty dollars, we’re
talking about thousands of dollars four to five, we’re gonna increase that
amount that can give. Now I don’t know about you (1.26.46) but I can’t
give five thousand dollars to multiple candidates. So again you get back to
the question, the great financier Art Pope orchestrated the take over. And
that mirrors what we see at the national level with that whole group of folks.
They’re the ones that are orchestrating the money game and it will continue.
What is the answer to that? The answer is, what I’ve said over and over
again and said to our national federation as recent as a national meeting in
Houston over a week ago, is to develop a movement regardless of which
political party is in office. Develop a movement, educate, train, involve and
engage those individual to a movement and umbrella so wide and so deep
that if you are not a multi millionaire, and even if you are, if you believe in
fair and justice and kinds of, there’s space for you under this umbrella, and
this is the point I want to drive home. Would we take pleasure in is money
cant vote. Money might be about to persuade voters with lies and trickery
and whatever gimmicks that you put out there. But they can’t lay a
thousand dollars and put it at a booth and say go cast a vote. But you can
put it on TV that can convince some folks that have a thousand people that
believe the sickness that you put out. And so I’m still having hope, young
man, I’m still having hope that the movement, umbrella semblance of what
were doing is the way to go. And that itself over a period of time, cause
they’re trying to buy teachers off now, making a big mistake doing that but
they’re trying to buy teachers off now. And they’ll try to separate some
others. But I think people are beginning to wake up and I am just as hopeful
as I can be, excited that I can be. Not we’re collectively going but we’re
coming out of this.

Chatrathi

So with that being said what are the main initiatives that the AFL CIO is
following through with?

Andrews
Well, I think the main, overarching piece that we will work on going forward, and our national AFL CIO embraced that as well, and in fact, I said to them if they really want to see this in play, they should, in fact, look at what happened here in North Carolina the night before I made the statement and that is the Organizing the South. So I think the overarching issue is raising workers’ wages, raising wages. (1.29.46) Under a banner of raising wages, you can put a lot of things. Trade agreement, a fair trade agreement that allows workers and the United States to raise their wages. Need for legal labor law reform and collective bargaining rights, raising wages. Need for not just a minimum wage but a living wage, telling the employer that we want you to make profit, good profits but we really want you to raise wages. If you’re talking about finances for our government institutions, raising wages helps put finances for universities for community colleges, for entities. So under that big umbrella of notion and I would hope that our federation here in the state team up with fast food workers and Walmart workers and others who are pushing the issue of raising wages as we’ve done and as we’ve continue to do. Then at least in the bottom rim whether its farm workers, raising wages of farm workers, get them up, raising wages of fast food workers, gets them to a better standard of living, brings people out of poverty. Raising wages helps people with their safety nets that must be there. And if you look at a study, recently I just glanced at it. (1.31.17) I think it was in this morning issued by the North Carolina Justice Center talks about that safety net that pulls over time that pulls people out of poverty. And now they’re going after that, going after food stamps, how much food stamps have helped folks bring them out of a point where they get brought out of poverty. Minimum wage, some politicians now say that maybe we oughta do away with it right? But the notion that there’s not a floor, and some notion that it kills jobs is crazy. I don’t anybody who would hire a person and don’t pay minimum wage and don’t have a real job for them to do out of the goodness of their heart. Because its only 7.25 now. But oh I’m gonna only pay them six dollars so I can give ten people a job, that’s not the way it works. If I don’t need ten people, I’m not gonna hire ten people at six dollars nor am I gonna hire them at 7.25. But if I need them, if I really need them, and I’m making a profit and I know what I’m doing, its not going to kill me McDonalds, to put in ten dollars fifteen dollars and make them loyal.

Back to the pickle plant, I mean this was the summer, people just got… once we got our union in, and we started negotiating wages, oh yeah, it smells. You know pickles smell. It can be a dirty and hard place to work but workers stuck it out. Now I’ve got vacation, I’ve got holidays, raising wages is one frame work. Now how are we doing that, we’re doing that by connecting with some of the current stuff going on, we’re gonna make arguments about labor law reform, workers should have a right to organize without being intimidated without the federal elected official getting involved, those kinds of things. And then the other last one I would say. We’re kicking off some
training at our place, compiling a program called Common Sense economics. How do you talk about the economy in such a way that makes sense? How do you talk about in laymen’s terms what’s happening with the economy? Is it something that’s out of our control? No. So how do you take this and have these kind of conversations on the shop floor? That takes workers from drinking the kool aid of the folks on the right but having real conversations about, you know, what happens truly when you raise the wages of workers, does it really do away with jobs or are you bringing people out of poverty, or are you making so that they can buy more of the product that you are producing in your union shop or your non union shop? And I think it’s the latter not the first.

Chatrathi

(1.34.28) Just, two more questions. Do you have any specific examples of where your seeing these battlefronts? You said McDonalds

Andrews

Well, certainly Walmart is a monster and, you know, and they came in with a different model. There’s some real stories about the pressure that they put on their supply chain to et the deals that they get and now deals are able to push a lot of folks out. But at the same time, when you’re talking about a company this size, making the kind of profit that they’re making and yet at the same time our tax dollars go to support, to supplement the income of their associates and the folks that work for them. Something is wrong with that picture and I think principally we gotta always be there not so much that there will be a union there tomorrow or the next day but I think for the courageous workers that stand up, we got to be there for that group of workers. We’ve always got to be there on the issue of immigration. That’s one that folks often time miss the picture here. And even folks in my own African American community sometimes miss the picture here. We have got to be square on immigration, meaningful comprehensive immigration reform, and I want to be absolutely clear, with a pathway to citizenship. I don’t know where these folks are getting, this idea from, that immigration we can fix by giving folks some kind of legal status but not a pathway to citizenship. We’ve gotta be about a pathway to citizen ship and I think that if we are going to take the high moral ground that I think we are required to do as a movement then we gotta be for reuniting families, right?, as a part of that and as an element of that, we gotta be for citizenship we gotta be for every worker that works on the job be covered by the same work rules. Short of that you’ll get the patch made situation that we have now with an exploited class of folks, and that’s what we see now. (1.36.43) That’s what we saw even before immigration became a problem.
Chatrathi

There’s a point of optimism in the sense that Hispanic and Asian Americans citizens are sort of a growing demographic and are more unionized than past years so I think that’s a level of optimism that I think the secretary of the AFL CIO even mentioned in several articles. Just last question, there’s an idea that, and you’ve given the example, there’s an idea of a traditional union, but there’s a lot of literature and a lot of journalistic articles about kind of a new idea of unions, sort of like Coworker.org or the National Domestic Workers Alliance

Andrews

Oh yeah, taxi cab drivers

Chatrathi

Right

Andrews

Oh yeah, we gotta get into that. And let me just say that I’m excited about all of that. I think the, and this has been my position and certainly I believe it mirror much the position of our federation is that we represent of all workers. (1.37.55) I mean, we can’t just be the voice of union workers, average union workers. And so where do we find those opportunities to stand with and speak for and help and aid a group of workers that will probably never get through a process, a traditional union process. I’m so excited about Working America, it is a AFL CIO community union started a little over a year here in North Carolina. We were able to convince them to come to North Carolina. They landed in the triad area and a little more than a year they’ve got thirty thousand members by going door to door and talking to folks, not about gun gays a god but about the economy, about their own issues that they’re concerned with, you know, unemployment benefits, you know, those kinds of issues that takes them away from the hotspot. Thirty thousand folks now just in the triad region that are union members that are AFL CIO members that are signing up at the door. You take the taxi cab drivers in New York or the taxi cab association in Houston, you talk about the janitors in Houston, different kinds of campaigns. (1.39.18) You take the fifty thousand or so CWA that are not defined with a collective bargaining agreement but they’re called sort of associate members. That’s not, they do not have a collective bargaining agreement but they’re coming together with a voice, I mean that’s some exciting stuff
and it’s growing. And I think there’s a movement that we gotta continue to find space and I would say that we’ve got to continue to find space for young folks in our movement as well and I’m just so excited about what we’re doing here but what we’re doing nationally to open up the door with the Young Workers initiative of the federation and what we’re doing here. I am the oldest, yes, I’m older than water working for the federation but if you look at the other three staff folks working in our office, Merdee MacMillan, smart, young, sharp female, second officer, and our two campaign persons and operation manager and communication director, young guys right? So we’ve gotta find that space and that means creating another vehicle and also I must say, and I’m the worst at it, new technology. Our communications person has been saying to me, we’re gonna sit down one day and we’re gonna learn this new technology. Oh yeah I know how to get on the email and I know how to do a text, and I’ve set up a Twitter account and Facebook, I got one but I don’t look at it much. I mean we’ve gotta figure out this stuff but there are endless possibilities young man, and I think it’s an endless possibility for labor. \(1.41.13\) And I’m excited and I still got fire in my belly and I’m ready every day to get up, and I’m ready to fight whatever that fight might come to me.

Chatrathi

And one last question, a little more personal, 2007 you were the first black president of a state federation, the same year that Barack Obama was elected, just what are your feelings about that?

Andrews

Okay, you’re going back to 2007-8, I mean I’ve been President of the federation for much longer than that okay, since 97.

Chatrathi

97, okay

Andrews

When I was elected president of the federation, I ended up being a principal officer, I mean Secretary Treasurer which I mean is first full time. We had in South Carolina a young man, who’s president was for the South Carolina AFL CIO but he worked full time for his union, he was basically chairing meetings. And so I look at that and its historic but the truth is, when you look at labor, labor’s got to be true to itself. We often times are slow getting
on board in terms of what we needed to do internally. And we still got work to do, as recent as this past week, I had a meeting in my office and when we got opening the meeting up I just yelled out and someone said, “what’s wrong with you” and I said “why there no women in this meeting?” And we had five or six women and for some reason they didn’t show and it could show in the meeting. So in terms of race and gender, young folks, I mean we’ve gotta be, you know, back to your question here is that I’m excited, you know, Barack Obama is a first, yes, I’m pleased, I’m sad in one way I should have been the, you know, the hundred fiftieth African American leader in the state fed but we are on the projector that gets us there. And now Fred Mason, my counter part up in Delaware, I mean I can name state fed African American leaders and I mean certainly here in the south. I mean we can run with in Virginia with a female principal officer and South Carolina female Principal officer, Texas principal female officer. So we’re making progress young man but we’re not there yet (1.43.41) and we’re not gonna be there until we learn to do more of what works and less of what doesn’t work.

Chatrathi

Great. Thank you so much Mr. Andrews.

Andrews

Yeah. You’re welcome.

END (1.43.55)