



## The Activist Files Episode 58: Black August & The fight to end prison slavery

**Announcer:** Welcome to the Activist Files, the Center for Constitutional Rights podcast, where we feature the stories of activists, lawyers, and storytellers on the front lines fighting for justice and liberation. If you want to know more about the Center for Constitutional Rights and our work, visit our website at [ccrjustice.org](http://ccrjustice.org). You can sign up for our weekly newsletter frontlines of justice, and we'll keep you up to date on important developments and exciting events near you or online. You can also make a donation to help us keep doing the vital work of supporting our partners, movements, and communities. As always, don't forget to subscribe to the activist files and rate us on iTunes, Spotify, and SoundCloud. And now here's the activist files podcast.

**maya finoh:** Black August began in the 1970s to mark the assassination of incarcerated political prisoners like the revolutionary organizer and writer George Jackson during a prison rebellion in California. Black August honors the freedom fighters, especially those inside the walls of our sprawling prison industrial complex who, with their vision, tenacity, and deep love for our communities, are leading us towards the horizon of abolition.

The Center for Constitutional Rights is proud to be a part of a rich legacy of inside outside organizing to transform material conditions and build a world of collective safety without prisons, surveillance, and police. This Black August, we bring to you an episode discussing the ongoing inside outside organizing taking place to put

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an end to involuntary servitude in prisons, or more appropriately named, prison slavery.

We are proud to represent incarcerated workers in Alabama as they seek to abolish forced prison labor, and we will continue to support them until slavery is banned everywhere, once and for all, in all its forms. Not just in the law, but in the practice. So my name is maya finoh. I am the political education research manager at the Center for Constitutional Rights.

And I'm here with Max Parthas, the national campaign coordinator at the Abolished Slavery National Network, and the acting director at the Paul Coffey Abolitionist Center in Sumter, South Carolina, Claude-Michael Comeau, the staff attorney at the Promise of Justice Initiative, and Theeda Murphy, the organizer and operations manager at the Abolished Slavery National Network.

I'm really excited to chat to you all, and I would love to jump in with a question for Claude-Michael. I would love to ask you, how does the Promise for Justice initiative collaborate with incarcerated individuals to ensure their voices and experiences shape your strategies?

**Claude-Michael Comeau:** Sure. So the promise of justice initiative is, you know, New Orleans based legal organization that fights for the dignity, autonomy and value of those incarcerated across the state of Louisiana.

And was founded on a principle of centering those clients. First and foremost in all the work that we do. So PGIs very first lawsuit was challenging the extreme heat in death row at Louisiana State Penitentiary. And that comes from our clients telling us it's hot here. It's really too hot.

And you know, we listen to them and then, you know, try to put their plans into action. And the same goes for when we were challenging incarceration for those with non unanimous jury verdicts you know, people on the inside had been fighting those unconstitutional convictions for years and brought that issue to us.

To help with that and, you know, communicating with those clients and listening to their experiences with being forced to work in various ways across the state is what

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led PGI to investigate various forms of slavery in Louisiana and what that looked like.

**maya finoh:** Thank you so much for that answer. And I really appreciate how you just immediately emphasize how the work is following the lead in the demands of incarcerated people. I really appreciate that. I'd love to move to you, Max. I would love to ask how does the Abolish Slavery National Network, how you're coordinating efforts across different states to build momentum for a federal amendment that would abolish the prison labor exemption in the 13th amendment?

**Max Parthasa:** As we speak, we are currently working with 21 states and Washington, D. C. Organizing for them to do exactly what Eight other states have already done, which is remove the slavery, involuntary servitude exception clauses from state constitutions, which allows these crimes against humanity and human rights violations to be legal and codified in our highest laws.

Some of the ways that we have gotten connected with people across the country is by winning. You know, we did it first in Colorado in 2018, and that created quite a buzz. And we did it again in two more States in 2020. And then we did it again with four more States in 2022.

This year, we have two States on the ballot. California is one, which is a huge deal. And that is proposition six. And we also have Nevada on the ballot, which is question four, where people can literally vote slavery out of the state constitution for the first time in U. S. history. So simply by getting the work done has drawn the attention of activists across the country who simply want to get involved.

**maya finoh:** Thank you so much. It's really incredible just to hear the way you've been chipping away via like your successes in multiple states over the years. That's really, really important. And I would love to move back to you, Claude Michael. Can you share any success stories or lessons learned from working with local communities in Louisiana to challenge the prison industrial complex and push for abolition?

**Claude-Michael Comeau:** Yeah. I think in Louisiana, you have these two big obstacles. I feel like to this issue and you have a legal obstacle and a narrative obstacle. And I think there's been a lot of effort to change that narrative of The incarceration makes people safer here in Louisiana, and we have been very

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successful in working with the family members of people incarcerated and the loved ones of people incarcerated to make changes for that.

So, for example, we've worked with in coalition with different organizations here in Louisiana to really make changes. So, like, East Baton Rouge jail, for example, had an insane amount of deaths at that facility and we worked in conjunction with the families of. Loved ones and in coalition with the East. Baton Rouge parish jail coalition to combat that and that is not a lawsuit. That was the organizing people and the people having the power to really make changes there. And so when they spoke these vendors had to listen and had to force out their medical director and put in someone new because, you know, It was just something that they couldn't ignore

**maya finoh:** Thank you for sharing. I also particularly loved how you mentioned there's that legal and narrative dynamic approach to your strategy of like, engaging with both legal and non legal advocacy interventions. Like, I really appreciate you uplifting that that flexibility.

Similarly, for Max, I would love to ask the question in terms of the South. So given the South's historical and political context, what unique challenges does the Abolished Slavery National Network face in advocating for the abolition of prison slavery in that region?

**Max Parthasa:** Yeah, here in South Carolina and working with many of the states in the South, I can certainly speak to my experiences on that.

in the South, like, for instance, Louisiana is one of the last bastions of the Confederacy. You got South Carolina, North Carolina, Louisiana, Florida, Mississippi, Texas. These are hardcore. racist states. And it's very open about their racism. They're very red states in Louisiana right now. Governor Jim Landry is acting like, you know, he's massive and he's putting all these laws out that are really just attacking the Black community.

I've been in hearings where I've had to testify on behalf of the ASNN about our bills and in Louisiana, we saw nine white Republican men stand up and say, no, we want to keep slavery in this state. Like openly say that.

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In Texas, they don't even let the bill be heard in a hearing, they're like, oh, hell no. We like it the way it is. Texas doesn't pay anybody anything for their prison labor, and they have literally worked people to death in the exhausting heat just this year.

So it is difficult in some of these red southern states, but we did manage to succeed in some of them. Alabama got rid of slavery exception clause completely, and now they're in stage two of our efforts where we're challenging the badges and incidents of slavery in court without the protection of a slavery exception clause.

Tennessee has done the same thing and they're heading towards stage two themselves to do that as well. So we have had some successes there but it is difficult in the southern states.

**maya finoh:** Now's a good time to bring Theeda into the conversation. Thank you so much for joining this conversation. I'd love to know what role can the general public play in supporting efforts to end involuntary servitude, and how can they engage with ongoing campaigns at the state and national levels.

**Theeda Murphy:** So one of the things that the general public can do is to help us spread the information and educate people that slavery still exists, and that it is absolutely still legal and practice because most people are under the assumption that slavery was abolished. We were all taught that in school, that slavery was abolished. And so we have to understand that slavery is still legal and understand the ramifications of that.

And so the things that people can do is help us spread the word. Like whenever we're having our Juneteenth celebrations, we need to be incorporating the fact that you know, slavery is still legal. You know, Juneteenth jubilee day should be celebrated, but we have to understand that if the fight is not over, we're still not free.

**maya finoh:** Absolutely. Thank you for that. And Max, I also want to give you some space to answer this, if you would like. What role can the general public play in supporting ASNN's efforts to end involuntary servitude and how can they engage with ongoing campaigns at the state and national levels?

**Max Parthasa:** There's two primary ways you can do that. First, you got to change your mind about what it is you're dealing with. We are very confused as a people

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about what we're dealing with. In my experience over these many years, I have found that there are four primary narratives, which are all vying for control as an expression of what it is we're dealing with in the United States. We are not all on the same page. We may intersect in areas, but the narratives are not the same.

And those four narratives would be criminal justice reform, which you hear a lot of in the political arenas and political supporters. Then you would have prison abolition, which is a narrative of imagining a world or a country without prisons. Then you have prison slavery abolition, which focuses almost exclusively on free labor and the exploitation of free labor. And then finally, number four would be slavery abolition, which is what we are. Slavery abolition is where we see it more holistically. We know that by abolishing slavery, we directly affect all of that, including the badges and instance of slavery.

And we don't focus exclusively on involuntary servitude, but there's only three states in the union that have just involuntary servitude. California, North Carolina and Louisiana would be those three. The rest of them very clearly say slavery and involuntary servitude as a punishment for crime. And so that's where our focus are. And those are the four narratives that people mix us all up with because I'm a slavery abolitionist doesn't mean I'm a prison abolitionists. I don't believe you can reform a crime against humanity, which is what criminal justice reform is.

I don't believe you can reform that. You can't reform genocide, how you going to reform slavery, you know, so it's very much about the narratives and understanding what it is you're dealing with. So the first thing you got to do. change your mind. Like Gil Scott Haran said, that's when the revolution begins, when you change your mind.

The second thing is to educate yourself. Now that you've changed your mind, go to our website at [abolishslavery.us](http://abolishslavery.us). We have tons of educational material there, even music that you can explore and go get lost in it for a little while. So you better understand what is happening in the United States. And once you've done that, I'm pretty sure you'd be willing to donate not only Resources, but also your time in order to assist us in making this end.

**Theeda Murphy:** And I might add, if you're in a state that does not yet have an abolition initiative on the ballot, we will be happy to help you with that.

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**maya finoh:** Well, thank you both. And I really appreciate just how this thread keeps coming through and all of your answers and just like the narrative work the narrative strategy and the narrative power.

And also, Max, really appreciate you breaking down these four different narratives. I really, I think even myself, I'm like, oh, like, yeah, a prison abolitionist and a slavery abolitionist are different. So thank you for teasing that out for me and also Theeda for naming that like Juneteenth should be a reminder that there's still work to be done.

I would love to move to a question for Claude Michael. I'm wondering, how do you see the fight against involuntary servitude or prison slavery intersecting with your broader goals, particularly abolishing the death penalty and addressing wrongful convictions?

**Claude-Michael Comeau:** Like Max and Theeda both mentioned, this is a system that's really born out of slavery. This is a system that was never legitimate in the first place and while we're fighting against the harms that are caused by a mass incarceration system born out of slavery, the idea is you fight slavery so that you can delegitimize the system that they've created that sees Black people as less than human. And undermining that system, undermining it in different areas to make it collapse upon itself.

And cause these systems prop up the death penalty. The reason why death penalty exists is because they want to erase Black people that they don't like. They have wrongful convictions because you have a system that wants to disappear Black people into more slavery conditions.

Like, you know, I mentioned non unanimous jury issues before and that is deeply rooted in an effort to reestablish slavery whenever a constitutional amendment bans it and You have an entire system that is dedicated to getting rid of people that they don't want to see, and put them in positions where they have to work in the conditions that they know people shouldn't be working in.

And in Louisiana, it's particularly egregious, you know, like Louisiana has an 84 percent reversal on the death penalty. And it's not concerned of community safety.

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It's not concerned about protecting people. It's concerned about winning a conviction game that is not real.

It's something they've created to prop up this system. They get a conviction and now your community is safer, but it's not like we're the most incarcerated state on the planet, and we're not any safer for it. By their logic, we should be, but we're not.

And so it's really clear and apparent that this is a system that's illegitimate, but you have to combat that narrative that they have. They feel that this is a system that keeps people safe. That cruelty to the people that are incarcerated within it is part of that package.

It's just a part of it. And I think combating that narrative is part of fighting against slavery, but it's also part of delegitimizing the entire system that holds it all together.

[00:15:54] **maya finoh:** Yeah, thank you so much for that answer. And I just love how you are immediately dismantling this logic of more incarceration means more safety and how that's not the case and it's proven to not be the case in Louisiana.

I would love to move to a question for Theeda and Max. How does ASNN incorporate the perspectives and leadership of incarcerated workers in shaping its campaigns and ensuring that their demands are front and center?

**Theeda Murphy:** I can start off by saying that the abolition amendment initiative started behind the walls in Tennessee. And it started with the insiders talking to us as advocates and saying to us no matter what you do to change the system, nothing's going to change because we'll still be slaves.

That's what started us on our journey of amending our state constitution. And even now as we are getting our legal strategy together and looking at the laws and researching the policies, the inside lawyers are the ones who are the experts on all of that body of law. And so we are relying on them to do that research and write up those briefs and provide the foundation for our legal strategy going forward.

**Max Parthasa:** Indeed and to add on to that, those who are directly impacted inside and those who are directly impacted outside have always been a core part of



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all that we're doing. In California, the original amendment was written by Samuel Nathaniel Brown, who was inside California prison during 24 years when he wrote it.

The Alabama amendment that we did was completely supported by the free Alabama movement and the activists inside there without their direct involvement and assistance, it would have never have happened. That's nearly across the board.

In New Jersey, just like Tennessee, it was the people behind the bars who said, you know, this is slavery. Let's end it. And the people on the outside said, well, I'm going to do whatever I can to make sure that that happens for us. So they have been front and center. In positions of leadership and inclusion from day one.

**maya finoh:** Thank you both for highlighting examples and just reiterating as I feel like has been reiterated throughout this conversation, the leadership of incarcerated people incarcerated workers is front and center in all the demands and the outside organizing that happens.

I would love to move into a question for all three of you, also giving you the space for any final remarks or thoughts as well. But I kind of wanted to just ground us in the fact that we're commemorating Black August at the end of this month. And how does Black August's legacy influence or inspire your organization's vision or strategy?

**Max Parthasa:** I've been involved in a lot of Black August efforts over these years. We had the Millions for Prisoners Human Rights March in 2017, which the main event happened in Washington, D. C., but there were 17 cities that were also marching in support with us.

And that was a catalyst, I think, moment for the slavery abolitionist movement, because we had all these incredible people come together, like Robert King, Mumia called in as a speaker Ramona Africa was there. I was a keynote speaker and so many others came and we joined forces in order to solve this problem.

I found that although Black August began in the seventies with what happened in California it also started to extend into celebrating freedom fighters of the past, like Nat Turner and all the others who came before us. But not only that, it's also

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continuing to celebrate the freedom fighters of today who have put their lives on the line and made so much difference in the world.

And those are the people that we are working with on a regular basis. So for Black August for me means that not only do I have to respect and honor those who came before me, but I also have to reach out to those who are ahead of me and prepare them for what's happening next.

**Theeda Murphy:** I would say for me, most days, I feel like I'm living Black August all year round. As I work with organizers and working to develop leadership with people who are incarcerated and who have been incarcerated for a long time and as they are waking up to their leadership potential and understanding how, even while they're incarcerated, that they can have an impact.

And all the work that we have to do to keep those lines of communication open between the folks on the inside and those of us on the outside and maintaining that community. You know, to me, that is the spirit of Black August. That's what we do all year round. Let those people know that even though the society is trying to throw them away, we're not going to allow society to throw them away.

We need them. There's too much talent. There's too much intelligence. There's too much potential behind those walls for us to just leave them there. We cannot afford to do that.

**Claude-Michael Comeau:** Yeah I echo both of those sentiments and I think that it's a constant reminder of who we're fighting for.

In our lawsuits, we have named plaintiffs that are inside of a prison that is overseeing them completely. They have full control of their bodies. They have control of the food they eat, the rooms they can be in, all of that. And they're risking a lot to be involved at all in this in any process, they can face retaliation. They often do.

They can be punished, which has an effect, not just on, like, their treatment while they are there. It has an effect on their ability to be in contact with loved ones. It has an effect on their ability to buy basic necessities with the no money that they earn on these jobs. It affects their ability to get parole, to get clemency, any of that.

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It affects their freedom, literally. And I think it's a constant reminder to know that they are who we're fighting for.

And so we think it's important to really change a narrative structure and a value exchange in Louisiana. We want to stop using language like prisoner or inmate and use person first language. And we want to educate people on, when we talk about slavery in the it's not like everyone said, it's not in the past.

We coexist with slavery right now. And look out for, the dehumanizing messaging that happens from elected officials, from people in power. And I think that's kind of the message to be taken away from Black August and we know who we're fighting for, we want to put them first.

**Theeda Murphy:** I want to thank all three of you for your willingness to share your expertise, your brilliance, the work that you and your organizations engage in. I often think about Black August as you all have already uplifted as a commemoration of the Black female struggle, both historical and ongoing.

That's we know the work still continues. And I really appreciate the ways in which you all have uplifted the stakes of this work. And just the necessity of walking alongside and centering the leadership of incarcerated workers and organizers.

**Max Parthasa:** I think we have to be careful about our language, particularly when we start qualifying slavery. So we say prison slavery, which is qualifying it to just people in prison, but we focus exclusively on prison labor. Slavery has never been just about labor, and we all know it. There are actually more people who are affected by the 13th Amendment who are not in prison than there are those who are in prison.

I'm talking about the 4. 5 to 6 million people who are denied the right to vote because of felony disenfranchisement. The four million people on probation and parole whose rights are habitually violated where you can just come in their house anytime you feel like it, no matter what the Fourth Amendment says.

So qualifying slavery really limits the scope of what it is that we're dealing with. The Constitution says slavery and involuntary servitude. We should say slavery and involuntary servitude.

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**maya finoh:** Thank you, Max. And I feel like what you're highlighting is also the importance of saying like slavery abolition rather than prison slavery.

Theeda, I would love to ask you a question in terms of what successes. Have you found working to convince voters in states like Colorado, Tennessee, and Vermont to support amendments that remove the exception for slavery and involuntary servitude?

**Theeda Murphy:** I believe we were successful in Tennessee because our timing was good. We were part of that second wave of states that were successful in abolishing it and we could get it under the radar. So at that time we were able to talk to Republicans and say, Hey, you know, nobody wants to be associated with slavery, slavery is over.

You don't want to be associated with slavery. And none of them did. So we were able to do that in that window of time, if we were doing it now, I don't think we would be able to get it through. Honestly, but at that moment in time, we were able to talk about it just in terms of slavery has abolished.

We need to get this vestige of slavery off of our books. And everyone was on board with that. And most people, when you talk to the general public assume slavery is done with, because that is what we're taught in school. We're taught that the 13th Amendment abolished slavery. And one of the most effective things I did when I when I made a presentation was put the wording of the amendment on the board and highlight the word except.

And then you would see the people's, the light come on and say, Oh, except. Oh, yes, that makes a difference. And when you point that out, then people understand.

**maya finoh:** Thank you, Theeda. I really appreciate you just naming the necessity of political education in this work, and it's in the advocacy of your work. We're probably running out of time but I just want to thank you all again for your willingness to participate in this conversation.