

Ben Fletcher

Portrait of a black syndicalist

Jeff Stein

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“I have heard all the big shots of the labor movement over a period of 25 years from coast to coast and it is no exaggeration when I state that this colored man... is the only one I ever heard who cut right through the bone of capitalist pretensions to being an everlasting ruling class, with a concrete constructive working class union argument”, wrote E.S. Marlin, an AFL officer, in 1931. Marlin was not alone in his respect and admiration for Ben Fletcher. Emil John Lever, a white organizer who first met Fletcher on the Philadelphia docks, told Herbert Hill of the NAACP in 1968, “Ben Fletcher, I always thought, was one of the best organizers I knew.” A. Phillip Randolph, himself a well known labor leader, in 1923, referred to Ben Fletcher as “the most prominent Negro labor leader in America.”

Benjamin Harrison Fletcher was born in Philadelphia on April 13, 1890. Little is known about his early life, except that in 1910 he began working on the Philadelphia docks as a longshoreman. The work was hard and dangerous, and the pay was poor. Employers pitted white stevedores and black stevedores against each other. Attempts to unionize the docks had been long hampered by the fact that the white members of the AFL affiliated union, the International Longshoremen’s Association, discriminated against black workers, reserving the docks for whites. This played into the hands of the employers, who had little trouble recruiting black workers to take the jobs of ILA strikers. Racism was common among AFL unions of the time. In an article Fletcher wrote in 1923, he pointed out what was wrong with the AFL:

“The International Association of Machinists as well as several other International bodies of the AFL along with the Railroad Brotherhoods, either by constitutional decree or general policy, forbid the enrolment of Negro members, while others if forced by his increasing presence in their jurisdictions, organize him into separate unions. There are but few exceptions that are not covered by these two policies and attitudes. It is needless to state that the employing class are the beneficiaries of these policies of Negro Labor exclusion and segregation... What a sad commentary upon Organized Labor’s shortsightedness and profound stupidity.” (“The Negro and Organized Labor” *The Messenger*, July 1923)

One exception to this racist policy, was the Industrial Workers of the World. The IWW saw the need for industry-wide unions to unite all workers regardless of occupation, race or sex, in short, “One Big Union”. The IWW was among the first to defy Jim Crow laws in the southern states which prohibited multi-racial meetings and assemblies. It organized black workers in the same

union branches as white workers when it held organizing drives in the lumber mills of Louisiana and Texas in 1910. At the time when Fletcher was working on the Philadelphia waterfront, a wave of IWW organizing was sweeping the east coast. The IWW had just won a major textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts in 1912. Ben Fletcher joined the IWW in 1911, became correspondence secretary of the IWW Local No.57 in 1912, and became an organizer in 1913.

Sixteen hundred dockworkers in Philadelphia went on strike on May 17, 1913 over intolerable conditions. Organizers from both the IWW and the ILA addressed a mass meeting encouraging affiliation to their respective unions. Fletcher argued that the AFL was made up of “labor fakirs” while the IWW was “the labor movement. All else is fake and fraud.” On May 20, the strikers joined the IWW. Fletcher worked hard to bring all dockworkers into the union. Polish, Jewish, and English-speaking workers, both white and black, were lined up. By the time the strike was settled, 3,000 dockworkers had been organized. Most of the demands had been won, including the ten-hour workday, time and a half for overtime, and union recognition.

After the victory in Philadelphia, Fletcher was sent to Baltimore in hopes of repeating his success. The ILA, however, had learned something from its defeat in Philadelphia. The ILA launched a drive to organize all of the nearly 2,000 black dockworkers there. The ILA was afraid if they didn’t, the IWW would. Although this at first stymied Fletcher’s efforts, the ILA soon fell back into its old habits of reserving work for its white members. As a result, a second effort in 1916, quickly brought 1,400 black dockworkers into the IWW.

In spite of opposition from the American Federation of Labor, the ILA, and the local chapter of the Socialist Party, the Philadelphia branch of the Marine Transport Workers of the IWW continued to grow. Successful strikes were waged in 1914 and 1915. The reason for the success was the local’s attention to organizing, solidarity, and education about IWW principles and the evils of racism. The IWW expanded from the docks to include boatmen and other transport workers. When the employees of the Spreckels sugar company struck in early 1917, the Marine Transport Workers struck in sympathy and helped spread the strike to include 5,000 workers. Social and educational activities continued throughout this period, while families of black and white workers came together without any sign of racial prejudice.

Another key to the IWW’s success was its willingness to adopt unorthodox tactics. In a letter written in 1914, Fletcher told how IWW members crossed their own picket lines during a strike and then stopped the scabs from getting any work done. By 1916, the IWW had won job control at all but two of Philadelphia’s docks. The Philadelphia IWW won wages and conditions beyond anything the ILA had anywhere in the country. Using Philadelphia as his base, Fletcher travelled up and down the east coast, spreading the word about “One Big Union”. Fletcher reported in 1917, “It just requires a little more effort to prove to the other marine transport workers that the IWW is the ship and all else is the deep blue sea.”

Unfortunately, time was running out for Ben Fletcher’s plans. In April, 1917 the U.S. entered World War I. The American Federation of Labor made a no-strike pact with the Wilson administration, but the IWW refused to follow suit. Figuring that the industrialists had not patriotically renounced higher profits because of war, the IWW didn’t see any reason for workers to stop struggling for a decent standard of living. The question of compliance with the draft was left up to each member’s own conscience. The IWW was branded as pro-German by the press and the employers took this as an opportunity to eliminate the radical wing of the labor movement. Local patriotic vigilantes smashed IWW offices and state governments passed criminal syndicalism

laws. The federal government was glad to oblige the calls for repression of the IWW by arresting every prominent IWW organizer it could get its hands on.

Ben Fletcher was arrested in February, 1918 and charged with interfering with the draft, espionage, violating the constitutional rights of employers with government contracts, and using the mails to conspire to defraud employers. Fletcher was put on trial with nearly 100 other IWW officers and organizers. Although no evidence was produced at the trial to show that Fletcher had done anything besides labor organizing, he was convicted and sentenced to 10 years in Leavenworth Penitentiary. As the judge was giving out similar harsh sentences to the other IWW organizers, Fletcher commented to former IWW General Secretary-Treasurer Bill Haywood, "Judge Landis is using poor English today. His sentences are too long."

An amnesty campaign was begun for Fletcher and the other imprisoned IWW members. The General Defense Committee of the IWW sent Fletcher's wife ten dollars weekly to help support their son. Personal letters and petitions were sent to the Justice Department signed by housewives, lawyers, labourers, merchants, clergymen, and college professors, all attesting to Fletcher's good character and asking for his release. A. Philip Randolph in his magazine, *The Messenger*, wrote an editorial saying, "Ben Fletcher is in Leavenworth for principle—a principle which when adopted, will put all the Negro leaders out of their parasitical jobs. That principle is that to the workers belong the world."

Between February, 1920 and April, 1921, Fletcher was allowed out of prison on bail. He returned to Philadelphia to find the local IWW in turmoil. Communist-influenced members of the IWW had been elected to the IWW General Executive Board in Chicago. The Communists tried to get the IWW to accept Lenin's policy of scrapping left-wing unions in favor of a policy of infiltrating and capturing the conservative unions. When the IWW refused, the Communists decided to wreck the organization. The Philadelphia dockworkers were falsely accused of loading arms for the counter-revolutionaries in Russia and their charter was suspended, despite depositions Fletcher sent to the contrary. In November, 1921, with a new General Executive Board, the suspension was overturned. Finally in October, 1922, Fletcher received a commuted sentence with the restriction that he "stay out of trouble". When Fletcher returned to Philadelphia, the IWW was embroiled in a strike for the 44-hour workweek. The ILA encouraged scabbing on the strike and the employers locked out all IWW members. The strike collapsed with much bitterness. Fletcher criticized the strike as being the result of "Foot Loose Wobblies... stampeding the union into an insane attempt to wrest... the 44-hour week single handed." The Communists had done such a good job ruining the Philadelphia local's reputation that the blame was put on the local officers. The IWW General Administration sent the Philadelphia local an ultimatum to "remit all funds except \$100 or so from now on to the Central Office, or by the authority vested in the General Executive Board your charter will be annulled and your funds seized."

Outraged at constantly having their loyalties questioned, the remnants of Local 8 of the Marine Transport Workers pulled out of the IWW. An independent union, the "Philadelphia Longshoremen's Union" was set-up along the same One Big Union principles of the IWW. Fletcher believed that the Philadelphia local could go it alone. Unfortunately the earlier momentum had been broken and the independent union died out in the 1930s. Ben Fletcher, however, kept up his personal membership in the IWW throughout this time, trying to help it revive. In a personal letter written in 1942, Fletcher wrote that the IWW "carried the ball further than any other labor movement and... will be in there carrying the ball right over the goal line."

Fletcher died in his home in Brooklyn in 1949. Over 150 IWW members and their families attended his funeral. At the memorial service, fellow IWW organizer Sam Dolgoff spoke the thoughts of many, “Ben, we won’t forget the great part you played in the struggle to emancipate the workers and we will carry on inspired by your example.” Herbert Mahler, a close friend and former secretary of the General Defense Committee read a poem:

Rest, rest old fighter, rest,
Your noble deeds by Memory blest,
Inspire us all in Freedom’s quest,
Rest, rest old fighter, rest.

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