

# Black Wobblies

Hubert Harrison and Ben Fletcher

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a review of

Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1883-1918*. Columbia University Press, 2009.

Jeffrey B. Perry, *Hubert Harrison: The Struggle for Equality, 1918-1927*. Columbia University Press, 2021.

Peter Cole, *Ben Fletcher: The Life and Times of a Black Wobbly*. PM Press, Oakland, 2021.

Why is there no socialism in America? According to Jeffrey Perry, in his two-volume biography of Black socialist Hubert Harrison, it is because radicals in the United States have unfinished business: winning the full social, political, and economic equality of Blacks. Drawing on the theories of Theodore William Allen, Perry argues that the white socialist and labor movements were afraid to confront white supremacy among their followers, and this led to not only the rejection of socialism by the Black working class, but an acceptance of white privilege instead of class consciousness by white workers. As Perry shows, this was a theory first proposed by former IWW Hubert Harrison, causing Harrison to advocate the idea of "Race First"—that Blacks should organize independently of white liberals and socialists by backing only Black candidates for political office, leading to a Black political party, and forming Black-only labor unions, until white workers and their leaders recognized them as equals.

Harrison did not come to his "Race First" program all at once, but after several years of self-education and participation in radical and socialist politics. Born in St. Croix in 1883, Harrison came to New York City in 1900, specifically the Black neighborhoods of Harlem in northern Manhattan where many Caribbean Blacks had immigrated. Harrison's parents may have been somewhat better off economically than average islanders, living on their own farm, but due to the illness of Harrison's father, the land was lost and the family ended up in poverty. After both parents had died, Harrison had no reason to stay on the island, where unemployment was high. When he arrived in the United States, he was shocked at how much more extreme racism was among white Americans than it had been among the white descendants of the Danish immigrants of St. Croix. In spite of having a higher level of literacy than many whites, Harrison had few job prospects, having to take a variety of unskilled jobs, elevator operator, bellhop, messenger, stock-clerk, while attending evening classes at a white high school. Yet Harrison was not one to accept

racial discrimination as inevitable or "natural" but used what spare time he had to read and attend lectures by Black radicals and reformers.

Almost immediately, Harrison concluded that the gradualism of Booker T. Washington was not working. Washington advocated that Blacks should not antagonize whites by demanding full equality all at once but instead create industrial schools to train for lower-level jobs and thereby "earn" the respect of white capitalists and the white middle classes. Harrison agreed with critics like W.E.B. DuBois who argued that this only led to the perpetuation of white supremacy and did nothing to protect Blacks from the violence of the Ku Klux Klan and job discrimination of the white-dominated craft unions of the A.F.L. Furthermore, Washington advocated that Blacks should not demand that their voting rights be protected, but that instead they should rely on the Republican Party to protect their interests. Harrison began to write letters to New York and Black newspapers critical of Booker T. Washington. When Washington's "Tuskegee Machine" of Black followers found out that Harrison had gotten a job at the Post Office, they used their political connections to have him fired.

Harrison was not easily intimidated or silenced and joined the Socialist Party. It was as a member of the Socialist Party that Harrison came into contact with the "industrial socialists" of the IWW, Bill Haywood in particular. What impressed Harrison about the IWW was that it did not discriminate against Black workers but welcomed them into their organization as equals. The IWW successfully organized "mixed locals" of Black and white workers on the docks of Philadelphia and other eastern US ports, and in the lumber industry of Louisiana and Texas. IWW practice was to jointly chair meetings with both Black and white organizers. Harrison was recruited by Bill Haywood to speak at rallies during the 1913 Patterson silk strike.

Harrison's Wobbly sympathies got Harrison into trouble with the conservative wing of the Socialist Party led by Victor Berger and Morris Hillquit. After losing his civil service job at the Post Office, Harrison increasingly had trouble finding work. He came to rely upon work as a teacher and paid lecturer. Harrison took a position as a paid organizer for the Socialist Party to organize Black workers in the Harlem district of New York. Supporters of Berger and Hillquit did not think organizing Blacks was a priority, nor did they like his pro-IWW views, so they cut Harrison's pay to the point where he could no longer depend on his Party job for income. To help make ends meet, Harrison took a job as a lecturer at the anarchist Modern School, where he met Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman. Harrison never considered himself an anarchist, but he did support the rights of anarchists to speak and publish literature. Eventually Harrison got tired of the hypocrisy of the Socialist Party and quit the organization in 1914, after he was given a three-month suspension for disobeying an order not to participate in a debate.

Hubert Harrison did not give up on socialism, however. Instead, he modified his views that as long as white socialists put white workers first, Black socialists needed to put their own race first. Harrison pointed out the hypocrisy of the AFL for denying Black workers jobs, and at the same time accusing them of breaking strikes when they took jobs as replacements for white workers. Neither was the Socialist Party particularly concerned with protecting the rights of Blacks to vote, nor passing laws against lynching which might offend Southern whites. If the Socialist Party and the AFL put white workers first over their common interests as a united working class, why should Black workers not do the same?

As Perry notes, Harrison told Black workers they should

"not wait for white labor to act in its own class interest by struggling against white supremacy. Harrison pointed out that 'the Black worker was opposed by the general run of white working

men, who kept them out of their unions for the most part, and yet called him 'scab' for getting their jobs at the only time when those jobs were available to him.'...when confronted by racist unions—form your own unions.” (Volume 1, p. 279)

Harrison did not remain active in the IWW after the Paterson strike. Although Harrison continued to admire the IWW for its multi-ethnic and anti-capitalist views, he turned his attention towards his writing and efforts to build a race-based radical organization. Perry does not provide a good explanation for his reasons for leaving the IWW and claims that the Paterson defeat spelled the end for the IWW in the east. However, IWW organizing on the Philadelphia docks and on other ports continued well into the 1920s, long after the Paterson strike was over. A more likely explanation for Harrison's departure was that he wanted to create an all-Black organization and that was not what the IWW was about, despite its advanced practices when it came to race matters.

The second volume of Jeffrey Perry's two-volume biography of Hubert Harrison deals with Harrison's efforts at building an all-Black radical organization. After the First World War started, the Black community in the US was confronted by two major challenges. The first was whether or not to support the war, the second was the mass migration of Southern Blacks to the industrial cities up North, the so-called "Great Migration" of 1915 to 1920. Black leaders, in general, supported the war effort, assuming Blacks would be rewarded for it later. Not being a U.S. citizen, Harrison was not required to register for the draft. Instead, he wrote a number of anti-war articles arguing that this was a war of the European nations over who should control the African and Asian countries, their resources and markets. As for claims that the war had something to do with "making the world safe for democracy," how could this be true since the colored peoples of the world had few democratic rights in any of the countries or their colonies, including the United States?

During the war, economic opportunities opened up for Black workers in the North and gave them the chance to escape the poverty and Klan terror of the South. An estimated six million Black workers and their families took the chance, moving to places like Chicago, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and New York city, including the Harlem district. Many were receptive to Harrison's ideas and his newly created Liberty League. Among those attending Harrison's meetings was Marcus Garvey. Garvey, who had come to the United States from Jamaica with the idea of forming an industrial education association like the one created by Booker T. Washington, began to adopt some of Harrison's ideas. Garvey joined the Liberty League but eventually created his own organization in 1918, the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA). Lacking Garvey's personal charisma, Harrison agreed to work with Garvey and took over editorship of the UNIA's newspaper, *Negro World*.

At first the UNIA gained a huge following, but Garvey's megalomania and business schemes headed it toward disaster. Garvey issued stock to investors in several businesses, but used the money to run the UNIA, pay himself and his cronies huge salaries, and buy a number of dilapidated old ships to form the "Black Star Lines," with the vision of using the ships to create UNIA colonies in Africa. Garvey proclaimed himself "Provisional President of Africa," much to the annoyance of Africans themselves, who considered him little more than a charlatan. Harrison left the UNIA and *Negro World* to avoid getting caught up in Garvey's corruption and provided evidence for Garvey's eventual 1923 prosecution for securities fraud. Garvey ended up serving in prison and deported to Jamaica in 1927. Harrison tried to revive his own organization and created the International Colored Unity League in 1924. Harrison also worked with the various Black la-

bor groups and was courted by the Communists, until he found them just as opportunistic as the Socialist Party and AFL. Harrison died from an attack of appendicitis in 1927.

*Ben Fletcher*

Peter Cole has given us a second edition of his biography of Ben Fletcher, the organizer of Philadelphia Local 8 of the Marine Transport Workers, one of the largest and most successful revolutionary industrial unions of the IWW. In contrast to Hubert Harrison, Fletcher was more a labor organizer and less the intellectual. Fletcher was born in Philadelphia in 1890 and grew up in the southern part of the city, a mixed neighborhood of Jews, Poles, Lithuanians, Italians, along with African-American families like his own. As soon as he was old enough, he began doing menial jobs around the docks and joined the IWW in 1910 or 1911. He joined the Socialist Party about the same time, suggesting that one led him to the other, and that like Haywood and Harrison Fletcher was an "Industrial Socialist." He developed a talent for soapboxing, standing on a street corner speaking about the issues of the day and the ideas of "revolutionary industrial unionism," similar to those of anarcho-syndicalism. Like many working-class revolutionaries, Fletcher was an autodidact, who made up for what he had not learned in school with his own reading and listening to other speakers. He was able to break down complex social and economic issues, and explain them mixed with a rare sense of humor and wit.

Fletcher was one of the "class of 1913," the dockworkers who struck the Philadelphia docks and "re-entered the Labor Movement after an absence of 15 years" (p. 13). Four thousand dockworkers, about half of whom were Black, walked off the job. Representatives of both the IWW and the International Longshoreman's Association (ILA) showed up and tried to recruit the strikers. The ILA would have split the strikers into two locals, one for white workers, one for Black. The IWW would have none of that. The strikers chose the IWW. As Cole says,

"Ben Fletcher's role in this vote, and the strike more generally is conspicuously absent from the documentary record, but he surely was central. It seems obvious that Fletcher, already a local leader in the IWW and working as a longshoreman, must have played a decisive role in the strike and subsequent decision to affiliate with the IWW." (p. 14)

As soon as the strike was won, the dockworkers organized Local 8 of the IWW. One of the accomplishments of Local 8 was the elimination of the "shape up," where at the beginning of the day anyone wanting to work was forced to line up and a foreman chose who would get hired for the day to load or unload the ships. Local 8 replaced the shape up with a hiring hall system. The dock bosses had to tell the union how many workers they needed and the union would send union members for the work that day. This took away the power of foremen to play favorites and pit workers against one another. To enforce these rules, the IWW introduced a colored button system to identify union dockworkers and make sure the foremen were not substituting scabs.

Fletcher and other organizers of Local 8 realized that their power on the job was limited if the IWW only controlled one port. In 1916 Fletcher was appointed an international organizer by the IWW General Executive Board, a similar position to Frank Little out in the west. Fletcher travelled to Baltimore, Providence, Norfolk and other eastern seaports to get dockworkers there to join the IWW. He met strong resistance from not only employers, but also white workers who did not want to be in a mixed-race organization. Cole recounts a story Sam Dolgoff heard from Fletcher.

"Fletcher...was addressing an open-air street meeting attended by white racists out to make trouble. They flung the sure-fire embarrassing question: 'Do you approve of intermarriage or sexual intercourse between whites and Blacks...have a nigger marry a white woman?' To show

that the racist troublemakers were hypocrites when it was common knowledge that intercourse between white men and Black women produced lighter skinned children, Fletcher remarked: don't see anyone as Black as I am. But we all damn know the reason.' The meeting proceeded without further interruption." (pp. 24-25)

Although the IWW never won job control outside of Philadelphia, they did establish active Marine Transport Workers (the industrial union which included dockworkers as well as sailors) branches all along the coast. The growing threat of an IWW takeover of the industry drew the ire of the ILA, the shipowners and the government. With all these forces arrayed against them, Fletcher figured that when the First World War broke out, Local 8 should not openly disrupt shipments of war materials to Europe. The pro-capitalist AFL had signed a no-strike pledge for the duration of the war and the ILA would have liked nothing better than to break Local 8 by sending scabs to Philadelphia. However, this decision not to obstruct the war didn't protect Local 8 from President Wilson's crusade against the IWW.

As an international officer of the IWW, Fletcher was put on a list of IWW leaders to be captured and placed under arrest. Although Fletcher made no attempt to hide from the Bureau of Investigation (forerunner of the FBI), Fletcher went for several weeks without being arrested. Eventually Fletcher had to turn himself in at the court where the trial against the IWW was being held. The bailiff did not believe that a Black man was a union leader and at first refused to let him into the courthouse.

The outcome of the trial of the IWW for supposedly obstructing the US war effort was practically a foregone conclusion. Despite all the evidence that the IWW was not guilty of anything other than union activity, the defendants were convicted of committing violence to sabotage the war effort and given long prison sentences. Fletcher was fined \$30,000 and given ten years in jail. As Bill Haywood reported to the IWW, "Ben Fletcher sidled over to me and said: 'The Judge has been using very ungrammatical language,' I looked at his smiling black face and asked: 'How's that, Ben?' He said: 'His sentences are much too long.'" (p. 32)

Losing Ben and other experienced union leaders came at a critical time for the IWW and Local 8. Not only was the union under attack by President Wilson, several state governments, the bosses and the AFL, but also by the Communists. Like other revolutionary syndicalist and anarcho-syndicalist unions, the IWW was under pressure to join the "Red Trade Union International" created by the Russian Communists as an auxiliary organization to the Comintern, the international organization of the Communist Parties aligned with Lenin and his Bolsheviks. As a condition of joining, the IWW was required to dissolve as a union and infiltrate the pro-capitalist AFL to take it over for the Communist Party. The IWW refused. This answer was not good enough for members of the IWW who had joined the newly formed Communist Party as individuals. In the power vacuum created by the conviction and imprisonment of former IWW officers, some of the Communist members were elected to the IWW General Executive Board and to head the MTW.

What the Communists were not able to win by persuasion and democratic means, they were ready to use more bureaucratic methods. In 1920 Local 8 was accused of loading arms for Wrangel, a counter-revolutionary Czarist general fighting the Bolsheviks in Russia. Communists on the IWW General Executive Board and the MTW leadership suspended Local 8's charter. The Philadelphia IWW was able to show that no arms had passed through Philadelphia since the end of the war, and likely Wrangel was being supplied out of west coast ports. Foiled in their first attempt to destroy Local 8, the MTW next accused the dockworkers of charging new

members an initiation fee of \$25, violating the IWW Constitution prohibition of inexpensive initiation and dues (\$2 in 1920) and free transfer between IWW industrial unions. The IWW rule was supposed to encourage new members joining and discourage the sort of job monopolies of the AFL craft unions.

This time Local 8 was guilty as charged. The reason for its initiation fee was to limit the number of IWW members on the Philadelphia docks where the end of the war had created a surplus of workers trying to find jobs. Rather than organizing job control elsewhere, workers were taking advantage of the IWW's policies and thus threatening the union's job control. The IWW General Executive Board suspended Local 8 and demanded it discontinue the initiation fee and until the Local began to comply with the Constitution and other rules, the Local should turn over all its funds to the General Executive Board except for \$100 a month "for expenses." For all practical purposes, Local 8 was being placed in receivership.

The ILA took advantage of the chaos created to begin organizing Black dockworkers. When the IWW reorganized Local 8 in 1922 and called a strike, the employers and the ILA were ready for them. By that time Fletcher had received a release from prison and advised against the strike. The employers responded with a lockout of the IWW and the ILA took over their jobs. With the ILA giving work to Black dockworkers, the mostly white dockworkers left in the IWW tried to maintain the strike. After the IWW failed to win the strike and lockout, Fletcher blamed the defeat on the interference of the Communist head of the MTW and the General Executive Board and an influx of western IWW members into the Local 8 who came from the Agricultural and other unions, with no appreciation of what the older Philadelphia members had built. In an attempt to bring some order out of the chaos created by the General Executive Board, an independent union of dockworkers was organized in 1923 by Fletcher and Dan Jones, another Black longshoreman, the Philadelphia Longshoreman's Union (PLU) which was modeled on the former IWW Local 8.

The PLU and Fletcher were brought back into the IWW fold in 1925, but the IWW never regained job control in Philadelphia. The employers gave work to ILA members while denying it to IWW members. The worst of these was the Jarka Stevedoring Company, which the IWW struck but could not get any support from Black dockworkers. Fletcher thought the most likely explanation was most of the Black workers were younger men and had no memories of the 1913 strike and what unions could be when run by workers themselves. After the failed 1925 strike, the ILA took over the Philadelphia docks. The ILA went back to its old ways and segregated the work crews, cut sweetheart deals with employers, and wages and conditions dropped below what they had been when the IWW had job control. No longer able to find work on the docks, Ben Fletcher eventually moved to New York, where he continued to visit the MTW hall and keep up with friends in the IWW until his death in 1949.

Both the books on Hubert Harrison and Ben Fletcher contain a wealth of information about the IWW and the early 20th century anarchist and socialist movements. The first volume of Jeffrey Perry's two-volume biography will interest anarcho-syndicalists more since it covers Harrison's activities in the IWW and among anarchists. The second volume covers the Garvey movement, which may interest Black anarchists since it covers Harrison's attempts at building "Race First" organizations and gives an insider's view of the UNIA. What I found especially interesting about Peter Cole's biography of Ben Fletcher were the first-hand accounts of Fletcher and Local 8 in the Appendix. Don't forget to read them after the biographical section.

After reading these biographies, I am skeptical that Harrison's strategy of "Race First" was likely to produce the social revolution he thought. The Marcus Garvey movement was plagued

by opportunists, including Garvey himself, and seems to have done more for pushing the Black community towards capitalism and statism, even if Harrison himself remained a socialist at heart. Peter Cole quotes Fletcher and makes it clear that Fletcher thought Garvey was on the wrong track, and wanted nothing to do with a movement that divided Black and white workers. That does not mean Fletcher totally rejected the idea of unions made up mostly of Black workers, just that Fletcher did not see it as an organizing principle. That was why Fletcher stuck with the IWW, even after having once organized an independent union when he tried to salvage Local 8 from the interference of IWW officers and the Communists.

The American labor movement suffered from job trusting practiced by the AFL, and the racial discrimination of the socialist political parties. These practices, however, were not tolerated in the IWW nor the anarchist movement. The examples of Local 8 and eastern dock workers, the Brotherhood of Timber Workers in Louisiana, and Harrison's inclusion as a teacher at the Modern School, showed that Black radicals were welcome. It is unfortunate that the "Great Migration" arrived at a time when the IWW and anarchists were suffering from government repression and fierce competition from the Communists. These two biographies remind us of the possibilities of a social revolutionary movement that could have been, if both anti-white supremacy and anti-authoritarian socialism had developed together.

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