

Author interview: 21 myths about unions

Bill Fletcher, Jr. — who went to work as a shipyard welder after graduating from Harvard University — has spent most of his adult life as a labor activist, working as an organizer and educator at United Auto Workers, National Postal Mail Handlers Union, Service Employees International Union, the AFL-CIO, and presently at the American Federation of Government Employees. Now he's authored a book, "They're Bankrupting Us: And 20 other myths about unions." Published by Beacon Press, it's due to arrive in bookstores this month. Northwest Labor Press associate editor Don McIntosh spoke with him by phone Aug. 7.

Who is this book for?

This book is for people who know very little about unions, and particularly for people who watch too much Fox News.

Your book lists 21 myths about unions. What do you consider the top three?

That they bankrupt us, that they're all corrupt, and they were good once but are not needed any more.

That last one — that unions were necessary back in the day, but are no longer needed because laws protect workers now — what do you think of that?

The reality is that for most workers in this country, there is no protection for their basic rights in the workplace. In a workplace, you have no freedom of speech, no right to assembly, no right of individual protest.

And when people say "unions were needed once," they are often referring to the days of the sweatshops. The problem is those sweatshops are coming back. If you look at growing industries in Los Angeles, it's not auto plants and aerospace, it's light electronics, textiles and garments. It's small shops that are incredibly oppressive and very easy to shut down by the owners when they feel threatened. And who is there to protect all of these workers? In light electronics, they're largely Latino and Asian immigrant women. So there's been a reemer-

gence of things that people thought were gone.

[Partly it's because] we're still dealing with the ideology of Reaganism, the ideology of get rich, go on your own, collective action is useless. This is an ideological problem we have to face up to. When people go into a workplace and say, "this is horrible," their first impulse is not to organize but to get out. The idea that collective struggle pays is an idea that we have to win people back to.

What about the idea that unions bankrupt us: Want to address that?

In the public sector, the notion that unions bankrupt us looks at how much money is spent on salaries and benefits, but it does not look at where the public sector should be getting its money or why there's been a decline in the contributions by the wealthy. So instead of having a discussion about how we fund the public sector, we discuss how you cut costs, and you inevitably get to the question of contracting out, capping wages, eliminating benefits, cutting services. Unions often go on the defensive, in some cases trying to accept cuts in order to show that we're understanding, or in other cases trying to show that we don't cost that much. What we don't do many times is go on the offensive and say let's talk about where the money lies, and how to raise the money. How do we raise the money so that the University of California system, for example, can be what it once was?

And the idea that unions are corrupt?

Some union people are going to be very upset with me for having broached that subject, but I felt this book needed to be credible, and we all know that at different points in time there's been corruption and there's been the mob. So let's deal with it directly and also dispel myths. It's largely a historical question. There's been a lot done to clean this up.

The main thing I wanted to get across is that they said in the report [of the President's Commission on Organized Crime, in 1985] that unions that have a healthy culture of democracy and activism tend to be the unions that have less mob influence.

And I wanted to make a distinction between corruption and the mob. We've got to put it in perspective. Very few people decided after the Bernie Madoff scandal that we should end capitalism. I didn't hear Fox News come to that conclusion. But when there is a problem in a union, the right wing will seize upon that to make sweeping allegations about unionism.



BILL FLETCHER JR.

Your book debunks the idea of "union bosses." I always thought of that phrase as an age-old slander that the real bosses and their lackeys use, but lately I've been seeing the term used even in news articles in newspapers. What's wrong with the term?

Many things. When people see the term, it brings to mind an autocratic regime, and it conveys that there's no difference between a leader of a union and a leader of a company. It's defamatory, because in any other part of society, you wouldn't hear, for example, the president of AARP being called a "boss" or the person that's the head of United Way. [The fact that union leaders are elected] is ignored with the term labor boss. And the other thing about the term is there is a very subtle suggestion of the mob. It's a term that we should forbid.

Your book focuses on union myths that are believed by people who are not in unions. Are there also myths that union members believe about unions?

Oh yes. That there's no point in trying to change anything because the fix is in, that there's a leadership group and it's never gonna change. That the union has goobers of money. That the union exists to take care of me as an individual. And that I don't need to do anything, because the union will take care of it for me.

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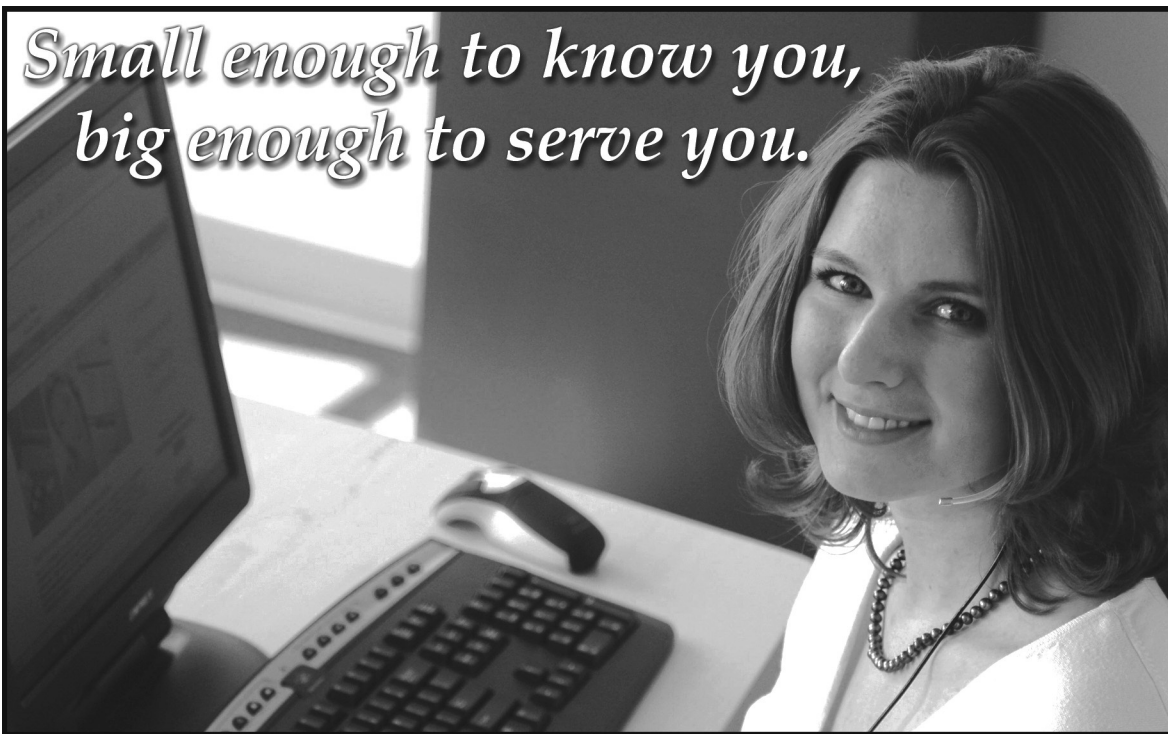
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