

Guns, capitalism and race

A conversation with radical thinker, writer and labor leader, Bill Fletcher Jr.

BY EMILY GREEN
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Gun enthusiasm is rooted more in racial suppression than in the Second Amendment, Bill Fletcher Jr. told an audience at the SeaTac Hilton in April. From their banquet-room chairs, more than 100 union organizers and labor scholars leaned in, eager to catch every word of Fletcher's highly-anticipated diction.

They had gathered for the Pacific Northwest Labor History Association's 50th Anniversary Conference, where social justice issues collide with labor history during a three-day series of presentations and documentary film screenings.

A panel that afternoon was the third time in six months that Fletcher, who lives in Maryland, shared a Seattle-area stage with Kent Wong, director at the University of California Los Angeles Labor Center.

That's because figures at the forefront of a burgeoning labor movement, one that calls for broad workforce unity in order to achieve better conditions for all working people, have found excitement in Seattle's recent working-class victories.

It's where labor activists banded together for the first successful Fight for \$15 campaign, it was one of the first jurisdictions to require that employers offer paid sick time to workers and, more recently, Seattle has joined a growing number of cities that require fair scheduling practices.

Fletcher is considered one of the nation's leading labor intellectuals. His thought-provoking and at times controversial lectures prove authentic as he seeks to bring historical context to ongoing labor struggles in a tumultuous political climate.

Since he was a young man, Fletcher has been deeply engaged in America's labor and class politics. His parents instilled a respect of unions in him at a young age. Later in life, he came under the influence of the Black Panther Party and its focus on the working class and poor, as well as the late Dr. Ewart Guinier, who was chairman of Afro-American studies when Fletcher studied at Harvard.

Fletcher has held leadership positions at labor organizations such as the AFL-CIO and SEIU, and most recently was president

of TransAfrica, a foreign-policy advocacy group in Washington, D.C. He's written several books about labor, including "They're Bankrupting Us! And 20 Other Myths About Unions," and is a syndicated

columnist and media commentator, as well as consultant at RoadMap.

Street Roots sat down with Fletcher while he was in SeaTac to learn about his views on today's labor struggles and the relationship between race and capitalism in America.

Emily Green:
You said something interesting during your speech: You said guns are important because of racial suppression, not because of the Second Amendment. I was hoping you could elaborate on that.

B.F.J.: Absolutely. One of the problems is that the right wing has – and some people are not right wing but just really into guns – has advanced a notion that the issue of gun ownership and why people feel so strongly about it has to do with protecting Second Amendment rights. What we have to understand is that the importance of gun rights really goes back to the 1600s, with the colonization of the United States and the introduction of racial slavery – and that gun ownership became synonymous with whiteness and with not being a slave.

A slave could not own guns, Indians weren't supposed to have guns, except under certain circumstances. So the idea of gun ownership was proof-positive that I'm a free white man. The Second Amendment, all that does is it essentially codifies it.

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