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A (Brief) People's History of Gun Control

Kevin Carson

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From its very beginning, gun control — the attempt to regulate the possession of means of self-defense by the ordinary populace — has been closely associated with class rule and the class state.

In early modern England, regulation of firearm ownership was closely intertwined with the struggle by the landed classes and capitalist agriculture to restrict the laboring classes' access to independent subsistence from the land. This included enclosure of common woodland, fen and waste — in which landless and land-poor peasants had previously hunted small game — for sheep pasturage or arable land. It also included exclusion of the common people from forests via the Game Laws and restriction of hunting to the gentry.

Under the slaveocracy of the American south, firearm ownership was prohibited by Black Codes that regulated free blacks. And after Emancipation, whenever the old landed gentry managed to successfully assert its power against the Reconstruction regime, former slaves were disarmed by house-to-house

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patrols, either under the Black Codes or by such irregular bodies as the Klan.

The same was true of the Civil Rights struggle a century later, after World War II. In areas where armed self-defense efforts by civil rights activists were widespread, they significantly improved the balance of power against the Klan and other racist vigilante movements. Numerous armed self-defense groups — e.g. the Deacons for Defense and Justice, whose members used rifles and shotguns to repel attacks by white vigilantes in Louisiana in the 1960s — helped equalize the correlation of forces between civil rights activists and racists in many small towns throughout the south.

Especially notable was Robert Williams, who in 1957 organized an armed defense of the Monroe, NC NAACP chapter president's home against a Klan raid and sent the vigilantes fleeing for their lives. Williams's book *Negroes With Guns* later inspired Huey Newton, a founder of the Black Panthers Party.

Speaking of the Black Panthers, no discussion of the origins of modern American gun control would be complete without recognizing their role in inspiring the modern right-wing gun control agenda.

Foreshadowing current groups like Copwatch and Cop Block, the Panthers in 1966 organized armed patrols of Oakland streets with rifles and shotguns, stopping to witness police interactions with local residents and provide information and offers of legal assistance when necessary.

In 1967 Republican state assemblyman Don Mulford of Oakland, a vocal enemy of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement and the Black Panthers, responded with a bill to prohibit publicly carrying firearms in California. The BPP's Bobby Seale protested the bill by leading a Panther detachment, armed with .357 Magnums, 12-gauge shotguns and .45-caliber pistols, up the steps of the statehouse ("All right, brothers, we're going inside"), through its doors, and into the public viewing area. There Seale read a statement denouncing Mulford's bill as an

attempt "at keeping the black people disarmed and powerless at the very same time that racist police agencies throughout the country are intensifying the terror and repression of black people," and warning that "the time has come for black people to arm themselves against this terror before it is too late."

Mulford's gun control bill was signed into law three months later by Governor Ronald Reagan.

Irregular workers' militias and armed defense formations played a significant role in labor history, both in the US and abroad. During the Copper Wars at the turn of the 20th century, the governors of several Rocky Mountain states instituted martial law — including door-to-door confiscation of firearms from workers' homes and striker encampments. In some cases, as with the West Virginia Coal Wars and the Homestead strike, workers fought pitched battles against Pinkertons, state militia and sheriffs' deputies.

In Spain it was largely owing to workers' militias, organized under the auspices of the CNT trade union federation and the parties of the Left, that Franco's July 1936 coup attempt failed. In the areas of southern and eastern Spain where Franco's forces failed to carry the day, workers' militias often played a decisive role. In some areas armed workers drove Franco's troops back into their barracks after pitched battles and burned them alive inside.

From its beginnings the state has been an executive committee of the economic ruling class and an instrument of armed force by the owners of the means of production, enabling them to extract surplus labor from the rest of us. I can't imagine why anyone would expect the state's gun control policies to display any less of a class character than other areas of policy. Regardless of the "liberal" or "progressive" rhetoric used to defend gun control, you can safely bet it will come down harder on the cottagers than on the gentry, harder on the workers than on the Pinkertons, and harder on the Black Panthers than on murdering cops.