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IWW Marine Transport Workers Local 8

**Black lives mattered in this long-forgotten
interracial union**

Peter Cole

2018, Summer

Among the greatest obstacles to a working class revolution in the United States (and beyond) has been, and remains, white supremacy. Far too many white people, past and present, have put their racial identity above their class interests.

A great many white people understand that racism, xenophobia, and other prejudices only divide workers to the benefit of bosses. But the sad truth for the United States is that, before the rise of industrial unions belonging to the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the 1930s, few unions treated African American workers equally.

However, one generation prior, a revolutionary union was founded that not only challenged capitalism and the state but racism as well. Since its founding in 1905, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) challenged white supremacy. Wobblies, as members of the IWW still are affectionately known, included syndicalists, anarchists, and even some socialists who

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believed the proper path to revolution was a General Strike, not some political vanguard.

The IWW and other syndicalists believed workers' greatest power was their potential ability to shut down production. If striking was the path to victory, then the union needed all hands on deck, even black and brown ones. No questions asked. The true war is the class war, nothing else.

With a philosophy like this one—along with Wobblies' willingness to strike—it was no wonder that employers and governments despised and feared the IWW. Not coincidentally, the IWW was perhaps the only union in North America, in the World War I era, interested in organizing a workforce one-third African American, one-third Irish and Irish American, and one-third East European.

In early 20th century Philadelphia, one of America's busiest ports and greatest industrial cities, thousands of longshoremen labored on both sides of the Delaware and Schuylkill Rivers. They loaded everything from Stetson hats to Baldwin locomotives. They unloaded raw materials including cotton from the American South and unrefined sugar from Cuba.

Longshoremen (no women worked ships in that era) typically worked long and hard, for low pay, and in life-threatening conditions. First, the hiring process, nicknamed the "shape-up," was detested by workers who understood the system's vicious exploitation.

Since America's industrial cities teemed with countless thousands of young men—fresh off the boat from County Cork or some county in rural Virginia—hiring bosses demanded kickbacks to be selected; alternately, they picked workers based upon race, religion, family ties, and so on.

Once hired, they sometimes worked thirty-six straight hours for "the ship must sail on time." Even without the dangers caused by tiredness, work was incredibly hazardous. At any moment, a longshoreman could fall down a hold or have a sling of cargo loaded with several tons of potatoes fall and crush

him. Longshoremen usually were poor, primarily because they worked irregularly and even less in the winter. Few lived long lives.

Despite their poverty and oppression—or because of it—dockworkers have a long history of militancy. The collective nature of the work, no doubt, also helps explain why dockworkers have been unusually likely to strike and unionize. In keeping with this tradition, in May 1913, thousands of Philadelphia longshoremen struck, primarily for raises. IWW organizers quickly lined up members into a branch called Local 8.

Off the bat, Wobblies advocated racial equality. However, instead of just talking equality, the IWW instituted policies to ensure it, including by mandating that every major ethnic group have at least one representative on the union’s negotiating committee.

Another key to Local 8’s success was the leadership of Ben Fletcher, an African American already active in the IWW and Socialist Party. Born in Philadelphia to parents who had moved up from Virginia and Maryland, Fletcher was committed to overthrowing capitalism and the key to convincing African American dockworkers to join Local 8. He became a legend in the IWW.

After several weeks out, with the port shut down, Local 8 won its strike and, over the next decade, the union dominated labor relations. Its members proved willing and able to fight for better conditions and higher wages. They ended the shape-up. Under the new hiring system, employers rang up the union’s hall and requested workers. Local 8 enforced its rule not by a contract but, rather, by demanding all workers pay monthly dues that entitled them to that month’s work button.

If an employer hired someone not wearing the right button, the rest of the gang was supposed to walk off the job. It is impossible to know how many “quickie strikes” occurred, but they were a staple of the Philadelphia waterfront in this era, as

they had been on and off ships for centuries. As a result of the members' fierce commitment, Local 8 remained strong.

Beyond winning raises and improving work conditions, Local 8 also insisted upon racial equality. The union integrated work gangs as well as meetings, socials, and leadership positions—all unprecedented on the Philadelphia waterfront and nearly every other American workplace in the U.S. Fletcher was nationally renowned for his speaking abilities (including at least one tour of Canada) and as the best-known black Wobbly. Local 8 also cultivated numerous other African American leaders.

Despite years of powerful presence on the waterfront, few have heard of Local 8 for a reason: it was crushed, for it and the IWW had amassed a great many enemies. Employers never accepted Local 8's power, so used World War I, hand-in-glove with the federal government, to eliminate the radical union. In 1917 through 1918, Congress and President Woodrow Wilson used the war to crack down on Wobblies, Socialists, and other radicals—many of whom opposed the war.

The US Department of Justice arrested Fletcher and five other Philadelphia Wobblies on charges of “espionage and sedition,” along with several hundred other Wobblies, nationwide. Fletcher eventually was sentenced to 20 years in the federal prison at Leavenworth, Kansas as were many other Wobblies.

While Local 8 survived, newer leaders proved less capable. A huge strike in 1920—involving more than 9,000 workers—belonged to a postwar spate of labor militancy that failed in its primary objective, the 8-hour day. Finally, in 1922, employers locked out Local 8 and, with winter coming, broke its hold.

Worse, employers successfully exploited growing ethnic and racial divisions in the nation (the Klan had millions of members in the 1920s), appealing to specific groups (Italians, Poles, etc.) to take the jobs of their fellow black workers. Whereas, previously, Local 8 withstood this tactic, but it couldn't in 1922.

In the late 1920s, the more conservative International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), part of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), brought unionism back to the Philadelphia waterfront. Unlike most AFL unions, the ILA accepted blacks though generally segregated them and treated them “second class.”

In Philadelphia, though, the ILA could not wipe away the legacy of the IWW nor ignore the reality of thousands of African American longshoremen; hence, locally, a more equitable sharing of leadership existed. Still, the ILA tolerated (arguably welcomed) the return of the shape-up and segregated work gangs.

Today, the history of Local 8 and Ben Fletcher is largely unknown, yet he was among the most important African American labor organizers in US history. Local 8, the union he helped found and lead, was almost certainly the most inclusive labor union before the CIO, itself quite influenced by the legacy of the IWW. And their motto lives on: “An injury to one is an injury to all.”

Peter Cole is a professor of history at Western Illinois University, and author of *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia*. His book *Dockworker Power: Race and Activism in Durban and the San Francisco Bay Area* will be published in late 2018.