

Ben Fletcher and Local 8: the Mural and the Marker

Posted on June 19, 2025 by Peter Cole

Ben Fletcher might be the most important African American labor leader you've never heard about. Born and raised in Philadelphia, Fletcher led 4,000 dockworkers out on strike in 1913 and shut down one of the country's busiest ports for two weeks. Amidst their victorious strike, Local 8 of the Marine Transport Workers, part of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) was chartered. Local 8 became the era's most effective, powerful interracial union. That the IWW, whose members are known as Wobblies, organized a workforce 1/3 African American, 1/3 Irish and Irish American, and 1/3 immigrants from other European places was not happenstance. In "progressive" era America—what historian Rayford Logan called the "nadir" of post-abolition Black history—many unions excluded Black workers while those that admitted them generally segregated them. By contrast, the revolutionary IWW, committed to achieving socialism via militant industrial unionism and One Big Strike, admitted Black workers and treated them equally. That's why Ben Fletcher became a Wobbly and remained one until his death in 1949.

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I first encountered Fletcher and Local 8 in a few lines of Melvyn Dubofsky's classic, somewhat dated survey of the IWW, *We Shall Be All* (1969). I was tantalized by the fact that Fletcher was the only African American in the WWI-era mass trials of the IWW, the first target of the first Red Scare. I went on to write Local 8's history for my dissertation and first two books, *Wobblies on the Waterfront: Interracial Unionism in Progressive-Era Philadelphia* and *Ben Fletcher: The Life and Times of a Black Wobbly*.

Fast forward to 2020 and George Floyd's shocking murder by a Minneapolis police officer, which launched the largest wave of antiracist protests in US history. In Fall 2021, Matt Atwell and Sepideah Mohsenian-Rahman contacted me on behalf of the Racial Justice Committee (RJC) of the Philadelphia chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA). They were examining racial capitalism, past and present, and had been introduced to Fletcher and Local 8 by Dr. Jasmine Noelle Yarish, a political science professor.

After the first few of many zoom meetings and countless emails, we applied to Mural Arts Philadelphia (MAP), arguably the best such program in the United States. Any resident of the city may apply for a mural or suggest a subject. That first winter, 2021-22, we also recruited city council members to write letters of support along with soliciting them from the Independence Seaport Museum (ISM), unions, and other scholars. Our application was accepted which meant that MAP would fund the creation and installation of the mural, hire the artist(s), assist in finding the location, do all the legal work (including signing a contract with the wall's owner), and support an unveiling event.

MAP worked with our team, which included numerous members of Philly DSA (Sepideah moved, numerous others stepped in, Matt led the way) and the local IWW branch (ultimately let by FW Jax Hebner). MAP included us in the process of selecting the artist, Jonathan Pinkett; like Fletcher, a born and bred Philadelphia African American radical, Pinkett had belonged to the Black Panthers in the early 1970s and had been a professional artist for decades, best known for his oil paintings. I shared my writings with Pinkett, and we talked regularly as he developed his ideas. Meanwhile, our crew went on multiple walks in "South Philly" to identify potential walls near the old working waterfront, along the Delaware River, though the construction of I-95 and containerization long had made the Port of Philadelphia into a minor one.

We very much wanted to build support among unions to uplift the history of a

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radical, interracial one. I reached out to friends in Local 1291, International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), which is something of a descendent of Local 8 on Philadelphia's waterfront. Others connected with local unions including the Philadelphia Teachers Union, AFSCME, and SEIU. Of course, the IWW is a union and some Philly DSA members were active in their locals.

In March 2023, we hosted a virtual event, "The Legacy of Ben Fletcher and Local 8," to raise awareness about the mural, the history and its relevance. Co-hosted by Philly DSA and IWW, the panel discussion was moderated by Kim Kelly, a well-known labor journalist, radical historian, unionist, and Philadelphia resident. Members of Workers United, Philadelphia Museum of Art Union, and ILA 1291 were part of the panel and I delivered a brief powerpoint.

Our project was explored on local podcasts, Laborjawn (on Philly labor history) and Laborwave Radio. The DSA RJC created an incredible multicolor, one-page pamphlet "Who Was Ben Fletcher" in both English and Spanish.

In winter-spring 2024, several muralists on MAP staff turned Pinkett's painting and vision into reality. That spring, MAP hosted a "community paint day" at the facility where the mural was being created. A wonderful way to include people in the artistic process, more than fifty people of all ages attended.

Ultimately, we found a location for the mural–a city-owned building along the riverfront, just a stone's throw from where Fletcher and other Wobbly longshoremen had worked. The Penn's Landing Operations Building (301 S. Christopher Columbus Boulevard) is just south of the ISM and owned by the Delaware River Waterfront Corporation, a nonprofit that manages much of the waterfront on behalf of the city and state. That meant the mural was where city workers labored every day. Since there's a large garage door in the middle of the wall, Pinkett's design was creatively divided into two parts.

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Honoring Ben Fletcher © 2023 City of Philadelphia Mural Arts Program / Jonathan Pinkett, 301 South Columbus Blvd. Photo by Steve Weinik.

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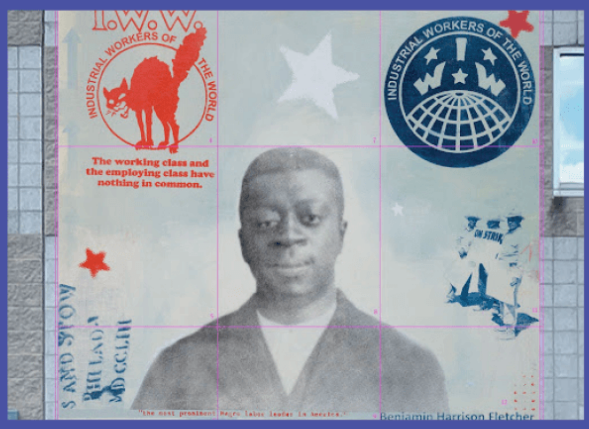
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Mural Arts Philadelphia
Roots & Reimagination
40th Anniversary

Mural Dedication

Ben Fletcher



Rendering of Ben Fletcher Mural by Jonathan Pinkett.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Born in 1890 Fletcher was one of the most influential working-class unionists, revolutionaries, and organizers in all of US history. Mural Arts Philadelphia is collaborating with the Philadelphia General Membership branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), Philly Chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA), historians, and local unions, to create a mural in honor of Fletcher. The new mural is designed by famed painter Jonathan Pinkett and painted by Efrain Herrera.

Please join us as we dedicate this new mural and pay tribute to Fletchers many contributions.

Designed by
Jonathan Pinkett
Painted by Efrain Herrera

301 S Christopher Columbus Boulevard
Philadelphia, PA

Beautify
Inspire
Empower

Saturday
May 18, 2024
2pm - 4pm

Phil Asbury
Director of Community Murals
phil.asbury@muralarts.com

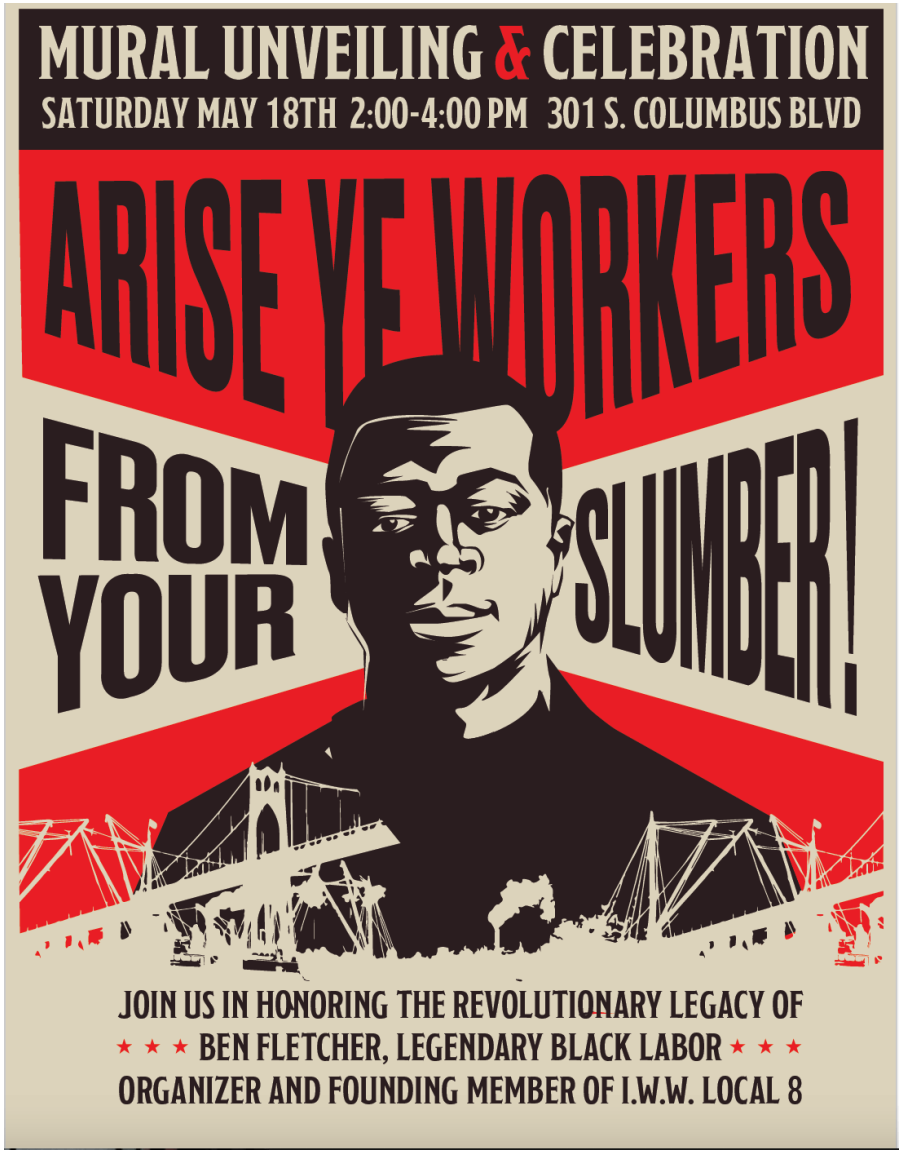
PARTNERS
Philadelphia General Membership branch of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW),Philly Chapter of the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA).

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The “Honoring Ben Fletcher” mural was dedicated on Saturday, May 18, 2024. I arrived in town a few days prior and delivered a talk to a packed house at the Wooden Shoe, an anarchist bookstore in South Philly. To promote the event, FW Jax and another Wobbly artist created screenprints and posted them around the city and distributed more. Upwards of a hundred people attended the unveiling, greeted by Wobbly musicians. Jonathan Pinkett spoke, as did Atwell, Hebner, and myself; so, too, Jane Golden, founder and executive director of MAP. City Council members Mark Squilla (whose district is where the mural is located and was our first political ally) and Nicolas O’Rourke spoke, as did State Senator Nikil Saval. We received excellent coverage in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* whose dek read, “The mural is located on the Delaware River where Fletcher fought not just for wages but for fairness and justice” and Hidden City Philadelphia.

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Back in 2022, we also applied to the Pennsylvania Historical & Museum Commission for a marker. Our application eventually was approved but, predictably, moved slower than envisioned. We hoped to unveil the mural and marker simultaneously, but COVID-related delays seriously slowed down the marker's creation, paid for by the local IWW. At noon on Saturday, June 21, 2025, the Local 8 marker will be unveiled at Spruce Street Harbor Park, a popular space located between the mural and the Independence Seaport Museum. While this event will culminate a four-year collaborative effort, involving dozens of labor, political, and cultural stakeholders across the city, the mural and marker dedicated to Ben Fletcher and IWW Local 8 hopefully will educate and inspire Philadelphians for many years to come.

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Author



Peter Cole

Peter Cole is a professor of history at Western Illinois University. His most recent books, both edited, are Ben Fletcher: The Life and Times of a Black Wobbly, 2nd ed. (PM Press, 2021) and Presente: A Dockworker Story by the late Herb Mills (Hard Ball Press, 2024).

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