

## **Text Transcript of “Off the Shelf” Podcast Season 3, Episode 2, with Bill Fletcher Jr.**

### **Augustus Wood:**

Welcome back to "Off the Shelf: Revolutionary Readings in Times of Crisis." I'm your host, Gus Wood, and I want to thank the Humanities Research Institute at the University of Illinois for cosponsoring this. And as we say at "Off the Shelf," we always like to uncover or reimagine those scholarship, the scholarship, the work, the organizing, and other types of concepts we can use to deal with the current crises that we're facing in the African American communities today.

And so today, I'm very just honored to have on... he has so many different titles and so many different things he's involved in: scholar, activist, organizer. Just I mean, yeah, I'm just gonna let him tell you who he is. But this is the great Bill Fletcher Jr. and I know he will probably not like me saying that, because he's one of the, he's one of those organizer people he doesn't like all that, all those names and stuff. But, you know, I just, I'm just very honored to have him on because being introduced to your work, when I first got to Champaign-Urbana to work with Sundiata Cha-Jua, it really was part of my, part of my development as a labor organizer myself when I first became president of my union. And so I'm just really honored that we finally get the time to talk and we can share to the world, not just your story, but a lot of your insights into the kinds of work we're doing. So, I want to welcome Bill Fletcher Jr. So, thank you for joining us today.

### **Bill Fletcher Jr:**

Gus, it's a pleasure and an honor. And you're very flattering. And I appreciate this. And you're working with a good person with Sundiata, who I've known for years, worked with very closely when we formed the Black Radical Congress back in 1998. Yeah, you know, the funny thing I was thinking about what you were saying about me...part of my problem is that I'm interested in everything. And, and I, and I mean that seriously. I'm interested in space travel, I'm interested in astrophysics, I'm interested in politics, I'm interested in international affairs, you know, you name it. And one of the problems as a result is that I often find that I'm getting involved in everything. And this can wear you down. But that's sort of that's the way I've been since high school.

I mean, I, I basically became active in high school. I read the autobiography of Malcolm X when I was 13, started identifying as a radical when I was 14, started getting involved supporting the Black Panther Party when I was about 15... setting up student organizations, went to college expecting that I was gonna go on to law school, and decided instead to get directly involved in the labor movement and in radical causes. And, and so, you know, it's funny, because a few years ago, I was contacted by this Black publication that was looking at the career paths of different people. And, and I said to them, are you sure you want something from me? Because my career path is like, very different. You don't I mean, it's like, it's like, I didn't like necessarily start off thinking, wow, this is where I'm going to end up. Um, and, and that's okay. You know, that's okay.

I've spent most of my life in the labor movement, Black Freedom Movement, been involved in electoral politics. And back in the mid-90s I got involved with a group of people, including doctors, Abdul Alkalimat, who I believe used to teach—I don't know whether he still teaches in Champaign-Urbana—about

**Augustus Wood:**

Yes, he still does.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

Dr. Manning Marable, Dr. Leith Mullings, and Dr. Barbara Ransby in a discussion that started as a discussion about the state of the Black left. And, and it was, you know, very divided. And we decided that there needed to be a summit of Black leftists to talk about the situation, what we could do together. And that idea morphed as we started doing the work, and ultimately became the Black Radical Congress, an actual organization that lasted from '98 until about 2008. And it was an effort that was both successful and unsuccessful in bringing together Black radicals, people that in some cases had hated one another in the past but were able to come together and work together. And a very, should be very proud of that work. But you know it, it had its limitations, and maybe we can talk some about that.

**Augustus Wood:**

No, most definitely. In fact, one of our study groups that I'm involved in, which is a Black leftist study group. We recently, I will say probably a month ago, we actually went through your article on, on the Black Radical Congress, um, you and Jamala Rogers' article. Yeah. And I would have to say that yeah, like when I look back on my experiences in getting involved... I've created two Black leftist organizations in Champaign, as well as leading my union. I was just, I remember when I emailed you, I said, I wish I had read your article before I started that. [LAUGHS] Because much of the stuff you're talking about in there that we're going to get into today are things that myself, I've experienced, too, in terms of the issues that we need to be focusing on, when we're thinking about what kind of movement do we want? What type of focus should it have? And how will you, how do you sustain?

And I think that's one of the biggest things that I would love to talk with you about today is when you look at what's been happening recently, with the George Floyd protests, when you look at 2015, when you look at Baltimore 2017, when you look at these moments of just eruption from Black people, and at the end of your article, you state that it's easy to build, as easy to create an organization it's easy to dismantle it, but it's very difficult to sustain it. And so, talk, can you, can you talk a little bit about what you've seen in your work recently, related to where we currently are in terms of building something sustainable, both either locally, nationally or internationally?

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

So, one of the conclusions I've come to is that there is an under-appreciation of the importance of organization. And I've been seeing this for years. And I've been trying to figure out why. And then all of a sudden it hit me: Reagan won... that Reagan won. And what I mean by that, that part of what was central to what Ronald Reagan was saying, was that collective work was a no-no. It was both unnecessary but also counterproductive. And that what people should do is engage in individual entrepreneurial activities. There's a straight line between that and what people now call branding,

where individuals are more concerned about their, their particular, their individual brand, than they are about building an organization. They're more concerned about setting up their particular LLC, or, or having an agent, you know, like a publicity agent. I was, I found out recently that there's a labor leader who... a younger labor leader who has an agent as opposed to like an executive assistant. Right?

**August Wood:**

Wow.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

And, and so, I think that part of the problem, Gus, is that people have underappreciated organization and have, have instead glamorized mobilization and individual assertion. You know, people can read their poems, they can read their militant poems, and etc., and believe that that is the equivalent of organizing. Or that you can have a situation as we saw after the George Floyd murder, where we had unprecedented level of mobilization, but very little sustained organization, as a result, which is which has meant that the right wing has, as they always will, come back with a counterattack, and we have very little to defend ourselves. Because people thought that they had won, they made their statements and weren't thinking about how do you police with a small "p"? How do you police the victories that we've won? There was also, in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, what I think to have been a very big message problem by the movement when it started to articulate the demands being "defund the police" and "abolish the police." Now, what a lot of Black radicals don't want to admit is that those slogans did not resonate with most of our community.

**Augustus Wood:**

Exactly.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

And, and most of our, people didn't necessarily want to say that because they didn't want to, like, criticize activists for fighting police brutality. But it didn't resonate. Now, you know how you know when a slogan doesn't resonate, is when you have to explain it.

**August Wood:**

Exactly.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

Right? Now, in the Russian Revolution, the slogan of the Russian Revolution was "peace, bread, and land." Everybody knew what that meant, I didn't have to research it, didn't have to do any extra special explanation. Everybody knew what that meant. When we were doing anti-Vietnam War work, and a slogan was "US out of Vietnam." You didn't have to explain that. You'd have to say, well, when will they leave Vietnam and was like US Out.

The problem that happened with the "defund the police" was that very well-intentioned people substituted their analysis of the demand, what the demand should be, for where a critical mass of our folks are. And as a result, when we started to see the rise in homicides in the context of the, of the pandemic, and other kinds of activity, but particularly the homicides, many of these same people did not

have much in the way of a program to respond to them. Now, some people said, “Well, Bill, you're being unfair, you know, we talked about well, there needed to be more aid for mental health and this and that.” I said, Okay, that's fine. But that's not defund the police. That is demilitarize the police.

**Augustus Wood:**

Thank you.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

All right? That is rethink policing. Right? And so one of the things that we've got to do, it and it really demands some humility, is that when you're in a social movement, there's a very fine line you have to walk as activists and leaders. The fine line between falling behind people, going no further than people, and helping to lead, and then going too far. And so a movement has to be constantly assessing, because part of what a movement is, is an ed-, a collective educational process. But if you move too far ahead, you lose people. The Grenadian Revolution: 1979 to 1983, the island of Grenada in the Caribbean is a case in point where a segment of the leaders felt that things were not going as fast as they wanted. They carried out an internal coup and destroyed the revolution, ultimately, ultimately crushed by Ronald Reagan.

**Augustus Wood:**

Yes.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

But it was, there was a segment of the party called the mutual movement that failed to appreciate, what was what was the mandate that we were operating on? And are we going too far beyond that mandate? And that's often a difficulty for many radicals, not just Black radicals, but radicals in general.

**Augustus Wood:**

Very much so. That's always been my biggest thing when I give talks and you know, when we're sitting down and actually doing our study groups, and we're trying to collectivize, like, what are the things we want to focus on. We often get into the issue of vanguardism, like, exactly when are we, you know, that there, there is that segment of left who want to say that people have veils over their eyes. So I'm going to tell you what the issue should be since you can't see it. Then you have, as you mentioned, you have people who legitimately go in and do a study of the working classes, and find out where they are, use political education so that you can sense the consciousness as you're going along. As you just mentioned, social movements are fluid— they must be if they're going to be sustainable. And then that, that creates your focus for when you're building your goals as you're moving along the social movement ladder.

And so, something that we often don't see a lot of, and I want I want your comment on this, is the role of political education, or the role of actually developing programs, not just for learning your conditions, but also that section where you're training, you're training your leadership, or you're training whatever type of force that you want in the movement. So, how do you... what's your take on how political education has...and I'm gonna be frank, because this is an honest show, I see it as there's a lot of anti-intellectualism—

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

Oh my God, yes.

**Augustus Wood:**

—flowing, that's been flowing throughout a lot over the past two decades.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

So it's important to begin with the assumption that most people are not stupid.

**Augustus Wood:**

Exactly.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

There are some stupid people out there, don't get me... and I've met a few. But most people aren't stupid. But most people have ways of looking at the world that are contradictory. So, when I think about political education, I often think about the science fiction film that came out in the 80s that I frequently referenced, called *They Live*, was by John Carpenter. And so for those who have not seen this film, the basic idea is that these aliens have taken over the earth, but we don't know it, because of two things. One is that they have created an elite among humanity, kind of neo-colonial elite that is serving them. And the other reason's because they have a device that creates a situation where you can't see what the aliens look like. They look like rich people. And, and not only that, but the aliens have created all kinds of subliminal messages on advertisements and books, etc., that we don't see normally. Our subconscious sees, and influences, you know, things like let's say stay passive, you know, be submissive, have babies, you know, all kinds of stuff.

Okay, so there's an underground group that creates these sunglasses. And when you put the sunglasses on, you can actually see what the aliens look like. So there's a scene that takes place where one of the main stars has put the sunglasses on, and he's trying to convince his buddy to put sunglasses on, and his buddy won't put the sunglasses on. And he says, no, you'll see what's going on in his friend says, I don't want to see what's going on. Right? And then eventually, he puts the sunglasses on, and he sees what's happening. Our job in political education is to put those sunglasses on, make them available.

**Augustus Wood:**

Exactly.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

In other words, to create a framework so that people can look at reality and make some sense out of it. That's what political education is about. And there are different elements to political education, that includes written as well as non-written material. What's increasingly happening on the left side of the aisle, is that we've become so enamored with social media, and with instantaneous messaging, that the idea of reading more than 140 characters, for some people, is oppressive. Yeah. Now, it's interesting

because among the right wing, that's not so much the case. The right wing has study groups, they have, they have created universities, they have people studying, they also use social media. I was, I was talking to someone recently, about an event that I'm going to be doing. And they were very concerned about the number of names I was going to be making reference to, in my presentation, names of historical figures. And the person in honesty said, I don't know who those people are. And so maybe, you know, you need to tone that stuff down. And I said, well, there's another way of looking at it, which is that maybe I do exactly the opposite: explain who these people are and why it's important to know what they're doing. So, what we've been doing is collectively dumbing ourselves down and believing that you don't really need to read and that it's not necessary to be patient in reading. Very, very dangerous, and particularly dangerous in light of the act of right-wing efforts to distort our history.

I had this right winger who's a relative of mine, I hate to say, admit, who was basically telling me that history, teaching history, is not all that important. That it's more important, you know, that people learn how to read, write, mathematics, speak English. History, he said, history's very controversial. Very biased. I said, yeah, right, that's true. I said, there's always battles over history. That's what makes history very interesting, right?

**Augustus Wood:**

Exactly.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

What I realized, ultimately, is that his line, which is essentially the line of the Republican Party, is that we don't need to know anything about the past. We can forget about the past. The past is the past. All we need to do is go forward and pretend like everything is hunky dory. So in our in our downplaying of study, we actually do service to the other side, which is precisely why the slave owners wanted to make sure that slaves never learned how to read. Slave owners weren't stupid, they want to keep us dumb.

**Augustus Wood:**

And I think, again, this is something that is very dear. And the reason why we created this podcast in the first place, to actually bring forth that you have to centralize the study aspect of it, you can't simply just think that you can mobilize people on social media and they're going to, it's going to create a sustainable mass... doesn't work that way. There has to be a studying of three parts: what's happening, how it began, and what can be done.

So again, a lot of the things that we talk about with this are pieces that were like, you said, the backlash has been so thick now, is that once you start seeing the rise of... and you can, you can start talking about this a bit, that there were critical questions of the structure that came about, but of course, with the dialectic, what happens is the right wing starts going after all the public education, they start taking positions in local school boards, they start sitting on textbook adoption committees, they start donating money to private for-profit schools to you know, to shift the money away from the public stuff. So yeah, like you said, Bill, there's a big planned strategy in terms of the reaction of the right wing, when there's even an ounce, that there may be intellectual critique coming from either the left or from the masses in general. So I'm glad you brought that up, though.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

No, it's very, very important. I mean, the what, what the right wing that we're seeing now, which kind of morphed in late 60s, and, and started calling itself the New Right, had a multi-decades plan for achieving uncontested power. And part of what was central to them was the ideological struggle, the debate around ideas, which they took into every field that they could go, as progressives had in the past. They went into schools, that, whatever, and there was no elected position that was too insignificant for them to go for. So school committees, etc. City councils, they went for them. Now, in the aftermath of the George Floyd uprisings, when the right-wing counter attacked, they started doing precisely what she was saying, they're going into schoolboards, etc. Where were we? We were sitting back texting, right? We're texting people and tweeting about how bad this was; the right wing was there. They were there in the rooms. They were there intimidating people. And, and what we got to understand is that these people aren't playing any games. When they show up, we need to show up with double the numbers.

**Augustus Wood:**

Exactly.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

That there's the expectation that some people have that this is a matter of some sort of pendulum that has swung to the right and it will inevitably swing left is an illusion. History doesn't work that way. These people don't go away on their own. They go away when they're driven out.

**Augustus Wood:**

Yes. But we kind of hinted at this earlier, too. When we're talking about that, you said, Where were we at?, where you also have that segment, people that call themselves the ultra-left, who believe that any sign-, any type of work in the grassroots at the local level is meaningless. They just, they tweet against the right wing, and they tweet against any radicals who try to build local power and say that we're not doing that. [LAUGHS] But you also...

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

No, exactly. They don't call themselves ultra-left, we call them ultra-left. They think, they think of themselves as the genuine left, right? But you're right. It's, um, it's, it's what I referred to as the surfers' view of struggle. And the surfer's view is that, you know, how a surfer would get this surfboard, it's all made up and everything, and they paddle out, right? And they sit there, and they're waiting for the great wave to come. And then they're going to just simply ride that wave then.

Well, you have leftists that have the same view, they basically believe they got their stuff together, they don't have much to learn from anybody else, they're going to position themselves so that when the mass, masses wake up, and rise forward, right, that they will just come into shore as a result of the mass pressure. It's a very manipulative, arrogant approach. But it's a very, it's a very popular approach.

Now, you also have, you always have younger people. And I include myself when I was younger, that are going to make some really dumb mistakes. You know, as you're getting into stuff, you think you know everything. You think that struggle is much simpler. You can't figure out why there needs to be patience. That is something that happens in every generation. But it's, therefore it's up to experienced activists to help to educate, mentor younger activists, but also learn from the younger activists, because it's not like we won and we can tell him to shut up, sit down and shut up, right? It's like, we didn't win. There's things that we can learn but we can also learn from them in terms of how they're thinking, which is going to often be quite different from ours. And for many older people that's really difficult. The idea of learning from someone who might be 40 years younger than you.

**Augustus Wood:**

So, let's let's dig deeper into that, because I thought one of the best parts of the article on your on your building of the Black Radical Congress was your reflection on your relationship with the younger people. And you often talk about the issue of the walk-away mentality. So I know it's been what, that I think that it's been almost 12 years since you wrote, you all wrote this article. But can you reflect on since that time period have you seen any type of change from this mentality of the walkaway work?

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

I haven't. Yeah. Let me let me first explain what I mean by the walkaway thing. So I'm a baby boomer. When I was a younger radical, if people of my generation—and I'm talking about when I was in my teens and 20s, particularly—if we experienced something, particularly with older generation folks that we thought was pretty funky, we would rise up. I started noticing beginning particularly in the 90s, what I call then, which you'd mentioned, this walkaway phenomenon. And it was when there was a challenge, when there was a difference of opinion, an argument of whatever, instead of trying to struggle it out, people would just walk away and never returned.

And I was blown away by this because when I was becoming radicalized, and I would go to Black Panther Party political education meetings or something, they always struggled against what they called a no-struggle attitude. You know, in other words, when there were people that said, I'm not even going to bother struggling in the south, when someone says no, I'm out of here, you got criticized for that. Right? Because it was like your obligation to fight something through at least until it became clear that there was no possibility of change.

What I've noticed and what someone once said to me, that they wondered to what extent it was directly related to cable television. In other words, that with the proliferation of channels you don't have to watch certain things, you just flip channels. And you can go through hundreds of channels and not feel any degree of obligation to sit and watch something if it does not immediately grab you... which means by definition that there's a lot of great material out there, old films and things like that, that are not necessarily going to grab you in the beginning, but all of a sudden catch up on you. And this person was was saying was raising this with me and I said, I think you have a point, I think that there's a way in which the culture shifted in such a way that immediate change, immediate satisfaction, if you don't get it immediately, you move on. And you're like, one of my sisters, my sister, one of my daughter's friends, years ago, not that long ago, she would never have, you know, she, she'd have these one boyfriend



after another. And my daughter said, you know, part of the problem with her is that she believes that if a problem emerges in the relationship, it means that the relationship was not meant to be. And therefore, disses the person and moves on. Whereas I was brought up saying, understanding, that in any kind of relationship there's going to be problems. And the critical thing is to try to work them through to the best of your ability. So I think that this, again, if this is related to Reagan, in many ways, this kind of hyper individualism, this idea of no struggle, that if there's a problem, it means it ain't meant to be. And this is what encountered going to BRC at our founding conference in Chicago the there was a big flare up in the youth meeting, which was a flare up around more organizational things rather than political things. But it got intense. As a result, a lot of those people just signed off, they wouldn't return. And I'm throwing my hands up in the air saying, like, What the hell is going on here? It was a difference. It wasn't actually even a splitting difference. But, you know, they moved on. I think this is a terrible problem. And it's one that we've got to struggle through.

**Augustus Wood:**

Yeah. So in getting getting back to a lot of these things that we've been talking about so far, you know, we talked a lot about the issues of political education and the studying. And so I want to kind of dig into your past a bit. And I want to know more about the kinds of stuff that when you were coming about and you were developing, like you said, at a very young age, you were already identifying as a Marxist. Somebody like me, I didn't, I didn't come into that until I was in my late 20s. And, you know, I grew up in Atlanta, in poor parts of Atlanta, so I couldn't understand the class stuff as well, because like you said, we were, we were bombarded with so many things about, hey, at least you're living in a Black city, you may be poor on this part of Cascade, but on the other side, at least they got money, you should be happy for them. And so it was that kind of thing. And it wasn't until I started doing more organizing and started reading more that I kind of got it later on. So when you were younger coming up, besides *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, what kinds of other things were you reading that helped you continue to develop over time?

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

Well, it actually started well before that when I was quite young and started reading a lot about history and about wars. And I was fascinated by both and, and geography. And so, so when I read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* it had come about at a point when I had been doing, I had been doing a lot of reading. But after that, I started just eating things up. Che Guevara's *Guerilla Warfare*, Vo Nguyen Giap's *People's War, People's Army*. Started reading Marx, *Wage Labour and Capital*. Walter Rodney's *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Reading from different political parties, left wing political parties around the world, reading Mao, Cabral, I mean, the list goes on and on. And um, and, and I went through certain periods when, like in the 90s, the mid 90s and early in the mid-90s, I went through this funny kind of slump. I was, I con-, I still consider myself a Marxist and a socialist but I was working for the Service Employees International Union and I was having a great time. Was the best jobs, just best set of jobs I've ever had.

I was education director, field service director at a couple of other positions, and I had a great team of people I was working, fantastic group of people. And we were kickin' butt. And one day, I woke up and I realized that I wasn't doing big-picture thinking anymore. I had narrowed my thinking to the world that I was working in, the trade union world, which is a big world, but it wasn't big big. And I realized that if I

continued going along this path, that I was going to end up in the forest. Apologizing, rather than taking on capitalism. So, I've said to many people that what happened at that moment was the equivalent of when you've been with somebody for a long time apart. And you wake up one morning, and you realize why you, why you love them in the first place, and why you still love them. And that's what happened between me and Marxism. So, I literally woke up, realizing that I needed Marxism, I needed the analysis. I needed, and I needed to continue to think big thoughts. And this sort of re-shifted me, and in many ways contributed to the work of building the Black Radical Congress, as well as some other projects that I was engaged in this attempt to build, pull together the left wing of the labor movement, called the Labor Left Project.

And I think it's, I think it's inevitable that in any relationship you go through slumps. In personal relationships, one of the things in this society we're not trained for are the inevitable slumps in a relationship. And we overly romanticize relationships. And I say that as a romantic, but I mean by that, that we think of relation- that a relationship has to be perfect at all times. And so you're not ready for the difficult moments, the moments when you have to renegotiate the terms of the relationship with someone else that you've been with and where you thought all these questions had been settled, only to find out that when you're in a long-term relationship, nothing is ever settled permanently. And so you have to have a different mindset. And that's true with politics, that if you, if you're not growing, you really are dying. If you're not learning new things and asking yourself questions, new questions, sometimes old questions, you will stagnate. You will ossify.

**Augustus Wood:**

Man, that that means a lot I'm just so happy that you, that you're saying these things. And it's like, to be able to learn your, your thought processes behind this, as somebody, like I said, who is involved in a lot of organizations and really has to be disciplined, like you said, in evaluating and assessing, always being attuned to being able to look back and reflect on not only your vision, but also what are the steps and things you've taken over time, because like you said, there has to be there, there seems to be this kind of fluid rekindling that comes about because you're deeply invested in evaluation, always looking to assess different parts of it.

And I think that's one of the biggest, I think that's one of the biggest things, outside of the anti-intellectualism, is there is a severe desire to evaluate. It's that, a lot of people when they think of evaluation, like you said, they think of it as a condemnation. Like they don't want to, they don't want the critique. You know, they think that they see all critique as this homogenous, negative space. And people are just like, well, we don't want to engage in that. I mean, you know, being in the history, that's one of the biggest pitfalls of our field over the past 20 years, is that there's been little to no critique. And so a lot of this postmodern and abstract anti-history and anti-Marxist stuff comes out. And people just let it sit there and allow it to gain notoriety. And so yeah, like, that's something that I've always been really invested in since my transition to Marxism is, I've always been attached to the idea of evaluation, being able to be always being able to know and respect and understand the dialectic, and being able to study how it occurs and how fluid it is. So I'm glad you brought that up.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

There's a French Marxist, he defines himself as a post-Maoist named Alain Badiou, A-D-I-O-U, and he wrote something a number of years ago, where he said something to the effect of: in examining an issue or movement, what's critical is not to identify what's important, but to identify what's new. And I thought, this is very profound. That when you're looking analytically at a phenomenon, with a social movement or otherwise, do a qualitative analysis. What's new, not just like, what happened? Not just the simple categories. But what's new. And as a result, what can we learn from this? What are the factors that influenced the post-George Floyd mobilization, for example? That was not a replication of 1968 or 1967. It was something very different.

**Augustus Wood:**

Exactly.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

And, and so for instance, what was new? Well, one of the things that was new was that it wasn't just a Black thing. That that is one of these under-discussed issues. That the post-George Floyd mobilizations around the country, were very mixed racially, ethnically, certainly gender.

**Augustus Wood:**

Yes.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

Well, what do we make of that? What is that saying? Among other things, to me, it gives me a lot of sense of hope. But it's it's very important because it then raises some interesting strategic questions that we have to look at. Like, how do the oppressed, or how can the oppressed, start looking at themselves crossing racial and ethnic boundaries, and look at themselves as being part of a collectivity? If the George Floyd, if the post-George Floyd mobilizations, just to pick up on that for a second, had been exclusively Black, that would have been quite understandable and also predictable. And there's all kinds of conclusions that could have been drawn. But one of the things was that it wasn't. So let's look at that.

Another thing that was both new and not so new, is that there wasn't a great deal of organization built out of that. If you look at the aftermath of the uprisings of 1967, 1968 for instance, there were a lot of organizations that got formed. And if they weren't formed, they in some cases were renewed, pushed forward. Black Panther Party, for instance, you know, got a jolt from all of that. In the post-2020 period you can't say that, Gus, you can't say that oh, wow, we've got a proliferation of organizations around the country as a result. Not that there aren't organizations. But there was mobilization that did not translate into the building of a whole plethora of organizations. That's something that needs to be studied.

**Augustus Wood:**

Very much so. And so one of the things that I also love to do, because again, big, big believer in international, Black working class solidarity, and I know that you are involved in quite a number of things, some of them being outside the US... so in terms of what is your, what is your perspective on

where the world is in relation to building social movements, building Black Power, those kinds of things, and other spaces that either you fought in, or spaces that you've read about? Like, what what's your analysis of what's happening right now across the globe?

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

We are in an unusual period because of the convergence of two things. So metaphorically, if you think about tectonic plates that come together, well beneath the surface, and at a certain point, they hit, they clash, when they clash, they can create earthquakes, and they can also build mountains. We have the tectonic plate of the environmental catastrophe, and a very profound economic crises, a crisis that is multilayered, that includes a crisis of overproduction, over accumulation, and the crisis of the neoliberal economic project, or what I like to think of as capitalist fundamentalism. And when you have these clashes, which everybody feels, everybody feels it, and it creates a sort of permanent anxiety, it is laying the foundation for very profound destabilization all over the country, all over the planet.

So, neoliberal economics, with the privatization of the economies, has resulted in a changed role for the state. So the state, which we have been brought up to believe in to be an institution that was at a minimum supposed to guarantee some level of stability, and some level of protection for people at the bottom, doesn't even pay lip service to that anymore. And the state is very much focused on repression. So when, um, so when people look around and they see that their living conditions aren't getting fundamentally better, maybe declining, and trying to figure out why...that's the moment we're in, and that... the answer to that question of why can be answered from the right and from the left. So, the right are people like Trump, or Orbán in Hungary, Putin in Russia, that put emphasis on ethno-nationalism, racism, sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, xenophobia, finding the culprit, finding the scapegoat, and deceiving people in terms of what's going on.

From the left, there's a range of views and include people like Bernie Sanders and others. I would put even certain Democratic party politicians like Barbara Lee, I'd include on the left, that are, they, and then you have various left wing formations out there, organizations, Democratic Socialists of America being only one, but there's many others, Liberation Road, the Communist Party, New African Peoples Organization, etc., that are basically saying that the problem is the system, that capitalism itself is toxic and is antithetical to human survival. So that's what we're seeing on a planetary level. It's just playing out in different ways.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has been horrible, and and yet, you have actually some leftists are trying to defend it. But this this invasion that has resulted in massive catastrophes. It's, it's laying the foundation for famines in many places but also takes us away as a planet, in focusing on the environmental catastrophe that's facing us. So, these are some of the challenges that we're facing as a planet.

**Augustus Wood:**

And so, with these challenges, you mentioned something earlier, where you were, you said that you saw hope in some of the elements in the, in the aftermath of the George Floyd murder, that there were elements of hope that you witnessed. What, or are there other other elements of hope that you

witnessed? Because, again, you're involved in a lot of campaigns in different parts. Besides what happened in the George Floyd aftermath, are there other issues, or other signs of hope that you've seen in other work you've done recently?

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

Oh, absolutely. So whether you want to talk about the Women's March after Trump was elected, if you want to talk about the kind of work that's being done throughout this country around voter registration, and against voter suppression, if you want to talk about the increase of union organizing that's going on. I mean, right now, the Major League Baseball Players Association is doing something that they'd never done, which is going out and organizing minor league baseball players, something that's been an issue for me for years. So you see this spirit of fight back, that is out there. That's that's very, very important.

The, but it will go nowhere unless we build our organization and also develop strategies that are focused on really winning. And I'll give you an example. A number of years ago, I gave a talk in Texas to some activists. And so when I was finished, you know, you had the Q&A segment. And so the people from the audience stood up, and they were telling me how bad the situation was in Texas. So I listened. And they said, well, what do you think? I said, how do we take over Texas? And they just like, looked at each other looked at me, like I was nuts. Right? They just told me how terrible the situation was. Yeah. I said, no, that's what I want to know. That's the only question I want to answer. How do we take over Texas? I know it's bad. But what do we have to do? What are the key cities that need to be won? What are the counties that we need and don't need? What are the social movements? Who are the key opinion makers? What are the religious institutions, etc. I said, let's map this out.

I said the same thing to a group of activists in Florida, who was saying to me, this was about a year ago, were saying almost exactly the same thing. It's like, oh Bill, the situation in Florida is terrible. I said, Okay. So how do we take over the state? And in that case, they got really excited because they had never thought about it like that. They've never thought about, wow. Okay, so we've got to really then come up with a strategy. I said, That's right. And you need to think about how do you get into areas of the state and I was talking to a group of color, people of color. How do you get into the areas of the state where there's no one that looks like you, right? But you need to win people over. What do you do? I said, that's the kind of discussion that we need to have. And then we can go from there. Unfortunately, too many of us are on the defensive all the time.

**Augustus Wood:**

Yes.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

And, you know, any fighter will tell you, you stay in a defensive, you're going to lose, doesn't matter how big you are, you're going to lose. And so at some point, you have to come out knocking. And that's exactly what I'm talking about.

**Augustus Wood:**

Developing offensive strategies, versus always playing on defense. And that's, that's something that Lou Turner always talks about to me as well, is this idea of, you have to you have to, at some point, sure, when, especially when you're in right-wing regimes, there's oftentimes where you're going to be playing defense, because they're going to be taking away material resources. But when you do have some air to breathe at some point, then you need to be planning strategic offensive maneuvers as well. And so again, like you said, it's this idea of, you're building your base so that there's power to start thinking of structural change. Because because if you don't build your base, and you have, like, we talked about the other, the ultra leftists who say that, well, it doesn't matter if you get on the school board or the city council to get supermarkets built or to stop gentrification, etc., guess what happens then? Your base is always thinking of survival first versus fight back. So you know, I agree with you that there has to be, we need to complicate what we understand as strategy and building social movements. And like you said, if it really comes down to it, what are the aspects of the state or the area to where you can obtain power? And so that's the word that we don't we that's that's one thing that we didn't hear much of after George Floyd was that word "power." And that's why I always say it's not about defunding the police. It's about depowering the police structure.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

Exactly, exactly. Changing our entire thinking about what's involved in producing. You know, I got into arguments with people in connection with the issue of the police, because a few years ago, my daughter was held up at gunpoint. And she and her friends were out partying, and these two guys were tracking them. And then one pulled a gun. And I said, you know, if a cop had put a bullet in that guy's head, I wouldn't have cried a tear. And I said, you pull a gun on an unarmed civilian, you get what you get and don't come to me complaining. Don't give me some sociological argument. You pull the gun, you get killed. Life is rough. Right?

Well, I'm a radical, right? I'm on the left. There's a lot of people that a lot of people that feel even more strongly about this, who have had deaths as a result of all kinds of violence and you know, or or not just deaths could be rapes or whatever, right. And people want an institution that is going to respond to their needs. Our struggle needs to be to insist on accountability, right? To insist on a demilitarization to recognize that you, the cops should not have a license to blow a hole in the head of someone who is bipolar, who happens to be, not be on the meds, right? That there needs to be things that other people need to be protected. They need to both protect themselves, but also be protected. And you don't walk... I had this argument with this guy, very well, well, good natured. And I posed to him I said, so what do you what do you? It was like, a forum and I was asking questions. I said, so what do you say to someone like me? And he said, well, you know, what you do is you got to tell people, well, he shouldn't have had any guns in the first place. And I said, you lost me, right?

**Augustus Wood:**

Yeah.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

You lost me. And you lost all these other people out there that have have had family members and friends who've been victims of violence, right. You lost me. You didn't address, and you didn't attempt

to address what is supposed to happen. And I feel like as leftists, that's part of what we gotta do. You've got to address, we've got to address people's needs and their realities.

**Augustus Wood:**

I think, I mean I think that's the that's the really the best way to end it. Because I find that to be the hardest hurdle for us to jump is that we spend so much time theorizing and thinking and creating our own ideas about things. But oftentimes, as you mentioned, a few of us will actually go into the community to find out what their needs are, what the masses want, what they need, etc., and build our focus, our central focus, our goals, etc., through those lenses.

Because as you mentioned, Bill, when you talk to working class people, when you do one-on-one organizing, you go into areas, townhall meetings, etc., they're very smart, they know what their conditions are, and they don't like their conditions. But as you mentioned, when you go in and tell them that you should, that you should destroy your police force, then this is what they're gonna do. They're like, that's, that's, that's, that's not what our issue is, and they're never going to get there. Especially when it comes to the i-, issues of protection and building power for people in general. You can get through, you can get to a community police situation, you can get to all these other alternatives. But if you tell them that there shouldn't be any protection for society, as you mentioned, they've already tuned you out. So yeah.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

Even if they hate the police, even if they hate the police, it's like they're going to still say but if someone in my house is raped, if my house is broken into, if someone is shot, who will call? Ghostbusters?

**Augustus Wood:**

[LAUGHS] And that's, that's what we that's why I always go back to looking at what happened with the Paris Commune. Because when they were taught, when the issue became about about them building their army, building an army or whatnot, or having some type of force, then that's yet all the stuff erupts and then of course, the troops come in and destroy the commune. And it's like this will say, that's why studying history and studying the debates and strategies, etc., studying the development, and then the declension of the Black Radical Congress... these are things that we have to understand and debate and talk about if we're going to be serious about legitimate sustaining, not just building, not just ending, but sustaining. And I really appreciate you bringing these elements to this interview, as well as the work you've written and the work that you're currently doing in all the different spaces.

**Bill Fletcher Jr.:**

Well, thank you. Thanks very much for having me on the program. And this has been real. So good luck to you.

**Augustus Wood:**

Most definitely. So, you've been you've been listening to Bill Fletcher Jr. on "Off the Shelf: Revolutionary Readings in Times of Crisis." We will see you next time. This is season three. Always, power to the people and free the land.