

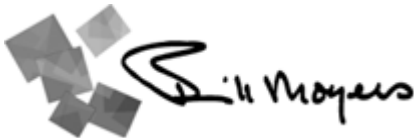
# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

An independent weekly internet magazine  
dedicated to the movement for economic justice,  
social justice and peace - Providing commentary,  
analysis and investigations on issues affecting  
African Americans and the African world.

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**July 12, 2012 - Issue 480**

## **Transcript Guest Appearance BC's Bill Fletcher, Jr. On Moyers & Company**



July 6, 2012

### **Bill Fletcher Jr. and Stephen Lerner on Unions in Peril**

The Supreme Court's doubling down on Citizens United wasn't the only decision this session that seemed designed to strengthen the grip of corporate America and the superrich. Another one – Knox versus SEIU Local 1000 – the Service Employees International Union – would diminish the financial power of organized labor by restricting union dues used for political action. The Knox decision is just the latest attack in the ongoing battle against labor. And like the fight in Wisconsin and other states, it focuses on public sector unions – in part because they're the greatest remaining bastion of labor's power.

The strength of organized labor was once a muscular way for working people to push back against plutocracy. In union there is strength -- that was the old saying and it was true. But the percentage of union members in the American workforce has declined in the last sixty years from 35 to 12 percent, and labor has faced a pounding series of setbacks of which the Supreme Court's Knox decision is just the latest. And yet, with corporations continuing to put the squeeze on employees, with joblessness and inequality rampant, now would seem the perfect time for people to turn back to unions to fight for them against the monied interests. Why haven't they?

Stephen Lerner has spent more than three decades as a labor and community organizer, and as architect of the Justice for Janitors campaign. He was director of SEIU's Private Equity project – which worked to expose the Wall Street feeding frenzy that would end in catastrophe especially for the working class. Bill Fletcher Jr.

graduated from Harvard and went to work as a shipyard welder, along the way becoming a labor activist fighting for racial justice and union democracy. He has worked with SEIU and the United Auto Workers, among others. He's the author of this upcoming book. "They're Bankrupting Us – And Twenty Other Myths about Unions."

Welcome to both of you.

**STEPHEN LERNER:** Thank you.

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** Thank you.

**BILL MOYERS:** Corporate profits are at an all-time high. Wages as a percent of the economy are at an all time low and fewer people are employed than anytime in the past 30 years. Why isn't this the opportunity for an old fashioned, good old fight for the working people?

**STEPHEN LERNER:** The question is less is it the right moment to organize, but what are the ways we organize and what are the things that we have to start doing that really let us take on corporate power.

**BILL MOYERS:** Such as?

**STEPHEN LERNER:** Massive, non-violent civil disobedience. The labor movement was built when it occupied factories which weren't, wasn't legal either. That we need to look at a set of tactics and be willing to take risks and things that we haven't done in years because when somebody wants to destroy you, giant corporations, they pass laws to make it illegal for you to exercise your democratic rights. Then we need to look at movements of the past and other countries. And what they've done again and again is that we're willing to go to jail. We're willing to take tremendous risks to win our country.

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** The difficulty in developing and moving in the direction that Stephen is suggesting is that the leaders themselves have to begin by recognizing that this is not 1970. That, that there's no going back to what we once had.

**BILL MOYERS:** You're talkin' about the leaders of unions?

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** Leaders of unions.

**BILL MOYERS:** And you're saying they don't recognize it?

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** They don't. They continue, they are fearful, Bill, of fundamentally becoming organizations that are viewed as disreputable. They're very worried about being in a situation where they're no longer invited to the White House dinners. And what we have to understand is that unions did not get started based on White House dinners. They got started based on exactly what Stephen is suggesting. That you have to be ready to throw the dice. And most of the leaders of the movement, unfortunately at this point, remain fearful of shaking the table. We

need battle stations. A new level of vitality, a new level of tactics, new strategies, new forms of organization that we have not previously used. That's where we are.

**STEPHEN LERNER:** I think many of us at least have spent our life sort of waiting for the great leader to come and, you know, come and save us. And I actually am not waiting. I don't think that there's going to be somebody in Washington that's going to emerge and do that. I think instead we have to look at where are the battles that we can have that we can both win but also become symbolic and exciting that inspire and move people. Because the labor movement's suffering very a version of the Stockholm Syndrome. That we've been held captive by capital for so long, we're so used to losing, that we almost identify with our oppressor. And that part of what has to happen here is brilliant strategies and tactics, but there's another piece which is that we just have to be willing to say slowly dying is worse than having a really big fight and trying to win.

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** Let's use this Wisconsin example. Labor has spent very little time focusing on educating its own membership. Thirty-eight percent the families of union members voted for Walker as opposed to voting for the recall. People look at their self interests in very different ways and it's up to the unions to really create a framework where there's a dialogue. Not simply telling people what to believe, but really a dialogue about what's happening with working people in the United States. There are 16 million union members.

**BILL MOYERS:** Private and public?

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** Private and public. The organized labor needs to look to educate those 16 million people, because it's not simply about building alliances between the leaders of different unions and various community organizations or social movements. It's that the members of the unions have to feel themselves that they're part of something larger. People have to have that bigger picture. Unions can do that. They should be doing it now. But that necessitates putting resources that many leaders feel could best go elsewhere.

**STEPHEN LERNER:** It's too easy to blame the bad guys. That sort of corporations try to destroy unions 'cause that's what they do. Is that the labor movement, really for 30 years, 40 years, has, with, you know, with some exceptions of great work, not been focused on organizing private sector workers. It's not been focused. And I think workers are much more likely to organize if they think the consequence of organizing is life gets better than you get your brains blown out, which is really, when I knock on a door and say, "Do you want to join the union?" what most workers are thinking, "Oh, do I want to lose my job?" And so I think part of, we have this funny moment where we have to both inspire people to take a risk 'cause there's a vision grand enough to fight for, but also people have to think there's some hope of winning and that's not what we've offered—

**BILL MOYERS:** But there was a lot of hope of winning in Wisconsin and workers and their families did exactly what you are recommending. They got out in the

streets. They had strikes. They had protests. They prolonged their demonstrations. And still you lost.

**STEPHEN LERNER:** Well, you know, what I would raise as a question is whether the primary field where we're going to change the country is through elections. And that that may not be the place. That may be, that's where, you know, one of the things a good organizer does is try to figure out is where can we maximize our power and how do we play in the field where we're most successful. And it's important we win the presidency and important we do politics, but thinking we're going to vote our way out of this mess when we have a declining base I think is a mistake.

**BILL MOYERS:** President Obama stayed on the sidelines in Wisconsin as he has in so many of these labor fights of the last three years. Do you feel betrayed by Obama?

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** Not at all. First of all, I think that it was correct for Obama not to go into Wisconsin because he would have become the issue. But the deeper question is I don't feel betrayed by Obama. I feel disappointed in Obama. But I think that if anyone has looked at who he was in 2008 they would have understood, this is a corporate liberal.

**BILL MOYERS:** What do you mean by that?

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** He is someone who sees his relationship with Wall Street, with the major corporations, that's the critical alliance for Obama. He was, he saw himself as preserving capitalism and he saw himself not as a champion of working people. He saw himself, he gave wonderful speeches to working people, but he does not see himself as the person who was saying, "We're going to take on the economic royalists."

**STEPHEN LERNER:** I think in 2008 the labor movement failed because we thought one human being was going to fix everything and we went into neutral. And, I think the real moment of lost opportunity was when the economic crisis hit. That unions and other progressives were waiting for somebody to fix it versus being in the street and really challenging the power of Wall Street. There was a moment where the entire country was questioning.

**BILL MOYERS:** Trade unions keep giving money to the Democrats because they, you think they'll come to your rescue and they don't. I mean why do, why does labor keep depending on a party that is always hanging it out to dry?

**STEPHEN LERNER:** I think the things that unions, and it's not just unions, but progressives need to think about, is who really has the country in a mess? And I think we've been very nervous about really, with red-hot anger, naming who the bad guys are and then talking about it in terms that resonate with people. Not abstractions about trillions of dollars. But talking about this teeny group of people at the top that are pillaging the country. And I think when we start to focus that and then

have ways that people can act that's not just about rhetoric. I'll give you a specific example.

In California there is a program to pass a series of laws that defend homeowners and protect them from their homes being foreclosed on illegally, protect, if a bank forecloses on a home they now get fined \$1,000 a day every day if they don't maintain the home. There's a whole set of legislation that's been passed.

Many of the people who should support it haven't supported it. Right? And so the way we've gone about getting them to support it is not to say we would or wouldn't support them, but we actually took people that were facing foreclose and took them to the lawn of some of those politics and did ads saying, "Here's Mary Smith. She faces foreclosure. This is her state representative and he won't, he won't do, support the law that would save her home." It's those kinds of things that are pressuring politicians to do something that really matter. That are about workers saying, "We want to start getting our money back from Wall Street."

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** I think that the two party system is so undemocratic that it makes it very difficult for a third party to emerge. But labor needs to be thinking in those terms. We need to be creating worker candidates who are running. People that are representing the interests of economic justice, not simply funding someone who's going to kick our rear end the least.

**STEPHEN LERNER:** We feel like we've been screaming to the public for years, "You destroyed unions, you're going to destroy democracy," and folks didn't hear it. So I've sort of moved beyond, you know, the panic that labor movement's in trouble and start, you know, saying, "What is it that we actually do that doesn't make us dependent on, you know, liberals who don't really support unions who might be good on social issues?" And what are the kinds of things that let us start to build a movement that workers want to be part of and that can really challenge the power of capital.

I think the problem has been, is that people know they're weak and they're terrified of getting wiped off the face of the Earth. And so—

**BILL MOYERS:** Why are they weak?

**STEPHEN LERNER:** They're weak because we've been under a corporate assault for years going back to the '50s. I think the question that I wonder about is there are moments where we've won. You know, in my own life, in the Justice for Janitors campaign, hundreds of thousands of immigrant workers stood up to the real estate industry. There's right now, a strike in Louisiana of guest workers that work at a crawfish factory that's a supplier to Wal-Mart.

And I think we need to look at these moments where people are taking action and say, "How do we magnify those and what are, what are the seeds of a movement that we can learn from in there?" Because I think if we can spend all our time that we

keep talking about why we're weak or why somebody did something that wasn't strong enough, we need to figure out what are the things that we can do.

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** But I would say we're weak because in the late 1940s in the face of the Cold War organized labor ceased being a social movement. It gave up being the champion of economic justice and took on more of the form of a trade association. And so in that it lost the moral standing that it held with millions and millions of people. There was a point when people would say, even if they weren't in the union, "I'm not going to cross that picket line. I'm with the union."

Their issues are correct. Over the years as unions stepped further and further away from being the real champions of economic justice and I'm not just talking about a good speech. I mean real champions of economic justice, real allies of community groups that are fighting for them. When we stepped away from that of course we were going to become weaker. We were going to become more isolated. And we'd be looked at as special interests.

**BILL MOYERS:** Why the resentment among so many working and middle class people who've been exploited themselves? Why are voters not standing up?

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** Because it's it is easier for regular working people to start blaming someone that they can physically identify, someone that is not very strong, someone that cannot penalize them, rather than actually taking on the real powers. They're focusing on other weak, and I'm using the term broadly, weak sections of the population rather than focusing their attention on who really, who holds the power.

**STEPHEN LERNER:** But the thing on this that I think is really important is none of what's happening now is a surprise. For 30 years many people have said again and again and that if the private sector isn't organized and private sector workers lose pension plans and private sector workers lose their healthcare that they'll then be convinced they shouldn't fund it for other workers. In going forward there is no way out of this mess unless we organize millions of private sector workers. You will not have a public sector labor movement that survives if private sector workers are, have been impoverished in the country.

**BILL MOYERS:** And private sector are now how much, what percentage of the workforce?

**STEPHEN LERNER:** Only 6.9 percent of private sector workers are now in unions. It is now lower than it was at the start of the Great Depression. What the right wing has managed to do is get workers who have been crushed angry at somebody else. You know, their neighbor her, their neighbor who has a little bit better, than against Jamie Dimon. And we shouldn't be afraid to name names. Or the guys who are the cause of--

**BILL MOYERS:** Which raises the question why conservatives have been more successful than progressives in appealing to populist anger and populist aspirations?

**STEPHEN LERNER:** We don't connect with people 'cause we're not saying who the bad guys are. And the second part is if we're in bed with and afraid to take on the people who have caused the crisis in this country, then why would people rally behind us?

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** But there's another issue, Bill, which is that the right wing has a story. And they have a story, particularly right wing populists have a story that is very compelling, particularly to white people. A story that's intertwined with the myth of the American dream. And they use that story as a way of focusing on scapegoats. Of moving people away from real issues of power. Of playing upon people's resentments. And what we on the left side of the aisle often do is throw facts at people. You know, we'll say to people there's this vast polarization of wealth. Well, that's true. But people can draw different conclusions about that, including that maybe if they play the right number they too can be on the upside of that.

We have to have a story that puts these pieces together. That explains to people how does Wall Street operate. What does this mean when we're talking about changing taxes? What is this issue of power? Who is to blame?

**BILL MOYERS:** But why haven't you done that? I mean—

**STEPHEN LERNER:** Totally. Well, here's the—

**BILL MOYERS:** We've been through the biggest economic collapse since the 1930s. And yet four years later the capitalist class that brought it on is riding high in politics. It's far more influential than labor is.

**STEPHEN LERNER:** But this is why I think we need to look at some of the good things that are happening. When we did the demonstrations at the shareholder meetings of Bank of America and Wells Fargo, we did a version of what Bill just described, which is we talked about housing, we talked about how they treated workers, we talked about their role in funding private prisons and we talked about their role in destroying the environment and we talked about money in politics. And all the groups who normally don't work together came together. And in the case of Wells Fargo, lots of people are arrested, both inside and outside the meeting we sat in. And we took all those issues and said, "You know what? It all stems, the story, from the same problem which is the power of giant banks." And so when we were in Charlotte, North Carolina, the city invoked an emergency order and said, it suspended civil liberties in downtown Charlotte for this march. But we built enough pressure that we backed them off and we sat down and took over downtown Charlotte for two hours.

But the thing I'm trying to pull out of this is issues that are normally separate and siloed, became the same issue. It's how do giant banks hurt the environment. How do they hurt workers. How do they hurt communities. How do they hurt immigrants. And in looking at that you can imagine the kind of movement we need to build. That's not separate movements. One movement to focus on who these guys are.

**BILL MOYERS:** I can understand and appreciate the victories that you win here and there. But there's another side of the ledger too. And I looked at the details of those votes in San Diego and San Jose where voters who went for Barack Obama in 2008 voted by large margins to cut the pensions of public employees. The folks you care about.

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** I'm not surprised when people vote to cut pensions because what they look at is that they say, it's like crabs in the barrel. "These folks have something I do not have." And almost no one is saying to them, "Yes, that's true, but you lost it because of what happened and we need to fight to get it back."

**STEPHEN LERNER:** So let me give a specific example of what public employee unions could do that would make a difference. What I'd love to see, which I think could actually demonstrate leadership, and the Chicago Teachers' Union actually did this. They said that they would take a wage freeze if the mayor would move his money out of all the banks that are continuing to foreclose on people in Chicago.

I think one of the things that we could do that would really make a difference. Is we need to turn collective bargaining into a vehicle not just for the narrow group of people who are bargaining, into a battle for the common good. So if public employee unions said, "We're willing to strike to force the city or the state to renegotiate debt with Wall Street," then I think people would rally behind them and say, "Oh, that's where the money went. It went to Wall Street. It's not goin' to those workers."

**BILL MOYERS:** Twenty California counties allow some public workers to make more in retirement than they did while working. And then there's one county executive retired at 62 so she could bring down a pension of \$272,000 a year for life. In a county whose public pension system is underfinanced by 3/4 of a billion dollars. Now, against that minute particular, a telling story repeated over and over again in an election, you're trying to say there's another story that will mitigate that example?

**STEPHEN LERNER:** Well, I tell you a funny piece of it is one of our weaknesses is that we're not, that we're afraid to sometimes just to say, "Yeah, that's wrong." And here are things—

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** Yeah, exactly.

**STEPHEN LERNER:** --and we have this knee jerk defense. Of course it's absurd.

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** People will respond to the story the you just told, because, again, it relates to something I was saying before, that it's easier to blame that public sector worker who is gaming the system than to go after the people in Wall Street who have walked away with billions. It's much easier.

**BILL MOYERS:** But Bill, with all due respect, the voters in San Diego, and San Jose see the particularities of this particular county—

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** But--



**BILL MOYERS:** --executive more clearly than they do Jamie Dimon's situation.

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** We have to provide some answers, better answers than we're giving. I don't mean just in simply explanations, but what people can do about the morass that they find themselves in. In addition to saying, "Yeah, this is a problem," we've got to say, "This is how we would--"

**STEPHEN LERNER:** So let me give a very specific example. There's 16 million homes, which is really 30 million people are underwater. Their homes are worth less than they paid for them. They're overlaid with all the key battleground states. So we've launched a thing called The Home Defender's League—

**BILL MOYERS:** We being?

**STEPHEN LERNER:** We being a bunch of different community groups and unions. We've, in the last couple weeks, called half a million people. We're having meetings around the country. We have a very simple demand. Every mortgage should be reset to current market value.

That would put \$700 billion in the economy, create a million jobs, save the average homeowner \$5,000 a year and it would extract the money from Wall Street who stole it from them in the first place. Very concrete. An answer. Good math. Economist supported. And we have a chance to win that.

**BILL MOYERS:** What's the website?

**STEPHEN LERNER** You go to [homedefendersleague.org](http://homedefendersleague.org).

**BILL MOYERS:** Many of the people who are in their homes are not losing them. They're property owners. They're paying taxes. And they're fed up with what they perceive to be the heavy burden imposed on them by public employees.

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** And the person that you're describing that's paying those taxes and is feeling squeezed, we need to begin with the fact, you are being squeezed. There is a squeeze. It's not your imagination. So the question is then where is the money? Is the money to be found in crushing public sector workers or is the money to be found in reversing a practice over the last 50 years of decreasing taxes on corporations and on the wealthy?

Because the problem is that what's happened as the tax burden on the wealthy has shrunk, of course the people in the middle are bearing more and more of that. And they're resentful. And they should be.

**STEPHEN LERNER** The majority of those people, as mad as they may be at a public employee, know when in every poll, every discussion, the systems imbalanced, the people at the top are sucking up all the wealth. Financial capitalism is failing as a model in this country and in Europe. And I think as they start, if we

survive this period and if we go on offense and let me just be clear. Offense is not defense yelling louder. Offense—

**BILL MOYERS:** So what is offense? What's your strategy? What do you want people to do who believe in what you've just said?

**STEPHEN LERNER:** So I would say, one, we should take the fight on underwater homeowners and foreclose that's already stopping, where people are occupying homes around the country. A wonderful way to connect with regular people in the fight against banks that's happening all over the country. There's a woman in Arizona, Lily Washington. Bank of America foreclosed on her while she was visiting her son who had been shot in Afghanistan and threw away her purple heart. A wonderful moment when they foreclosed when veterans, not radicals, regular veterans delivered a purple heart to her house saying, "We are with you in your battle against Bank of America." We need to look at the places where we can have battles we can win that put people in motion, that name Wall Street, that start winning victories. I'm worried less about Washington and much more worried about what happens to communities all over this country and how we start to fight back and win in those. And that's the kind of thing that builds the excitement and the energy to take on the bigger fight about how the system's been co-opted.

**BILL MOYERS:** Stephen Lerner, Bill Fletcher, thank you for joining us.

**BILL FLETCHER, JR.:** Thank you very much.

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