

Fremont Panther Caucus

A spectre is haunting GM-- the spectre of revolutionary black unionism. Black and Chicano workers at the General Motors plant in Fremont, California, are organizing around the Black Panther Caucus of United Auto Workers Local 1384.

Over half the workers in the plant are black or Spanish-speaking, and the organization of the Black Panther Caucus has put the GM management extremely on edge-- not simply because of the threat to them posed by the caucus itself, but also because of the very real possibility that white workers at Fremont will follow their example.

During the last two weeks of October, the Panther Caucus organized a campaign against the ratification of a settlement that, as usual, sold out the workers on the question of working conditions (see the Panther Caucus leaflet reprinted on this page).

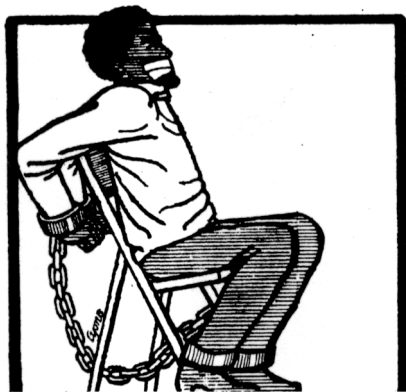
The settlement was eventually ratified, in large part because the membership felt unprepared for a strike at the present time. But the Panther campaign was very favorably received nevertheless. GM was worried enough about the campaign to order its hired guns, the Fremont police, to arrest a leader of the BPC who was handing out leaflets against the settlement.

Like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in Detroit, the organization of militant black workers at Fremont represents an important step forward, both for the struggle for black liberation and for working people generally. The existence of the BPC at Fremont is helping to galvanize the union as a whole, and challenges the conservatized union bureaucrats as well as the company.

As GM and the UAW both know, an alliance between the spreading organizations of black workers and the newly reawakening militancy of the white rank-and-file could build a force capable of shaking even corporate giants like GM to their very foundations.

In recent weeks, a caucus of white militants and radicals has in fact been organized at the Fremont plant, and it is working together with the BPC. The GM Workers' Committee and the BPC cosponsored a rally against the war on November 12, in conjunction with the National Moratorium demonstrations on November 4 and 15.

FREE BOBBY SEALE



BLACK PANTHER CAUCUS



UAW LOCAL 1384
FREMONT, CALIFORNIA



COME TO THE UNION MEETING, VOTE NO ON RATIFICATION SETTLEMENT SUNDAY OCT. 26 10A.M. UNION HALL

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE STRIKE? Working at GM is no bed of roses. Most of us came in Monday night or Tuesday morning expecting to go over working conditions. Ever since "model change over", work grievances have piled up. When the union started pressing the company to better conditions, the company responded by increasing suspensions.

That's been the story for the past 6 weeks while negotiations have been going on. The work loads and the suspensions are why we voted overwhelmingly to strike. We wanted those conditions corrected. But some strange things have been going on -- the grievances are "settled" but our union hasn't bothered to tell us what the terms on the settlement are.

This raises some questions about the whole way negotiations were carried out.

Why have negotiations been kept secret? What was the bargaining committee asking for in the first place? Why didn't they tell us? What did they settle for?

Committee men were kept under virtual house arrest throughout the final days of negotiation: they were ordered by management to remain in the bargaining room for 24-25 hours at a time without sleep and were not permitted to go out on the floor to confer with rank and file. Management wouldn't allow alternate committeemen to function in their place. Why did management

pull that kind of crap?

Discipline was intensified during the negotiations. Even the chairman was disciplined. Why the disciplining? Was management trying to intimidate us? Or were they trying to provoke a strike?

WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED MONDAY NIGHT? How come the formen told us about the settlement first? Why weren't the committeemen around to explain the settlement?

HAVE WE REALLY WON? How come the line was speeded up as soon as the settlement was announced? That's what we were going to strike against. How come more than 20 guys were disciplined Monday night? We were going to strike against that too. And how come 6 guys from passenger soft trim were suspended on day shift Tuesday?

This settlement means a lot to all of us -- it will determine whether they will steadily worsen between now and contract time. The union is our representative -- it has an obligation to clearly explain things to us from first to last. It shouldn't act in secret but should consult with rank and file on our opinions on negotiations. Let's get it together and make sure that's the way our representatives are functioning.

COME TO THE UNION MEETING SUNDAY 10:00 A.M. AND LET'S TAKE A LONG CLOSE LOOK AT THE "SETTLEMENT".

REPRINT OF A BPC LEAFLET

Interview with Kenny Horsten

Black Panther Caucus at Fremont GM

The largest industrial plant in Northern California is the General Motors Assembly Plant in Fremont, located between Oakland and San Jose. In 1968 a group of black GM workers formed the Black Panther caucus. A number of the leaders of the caucus were members of the Black Panther Party, but the caucus also attracted large numbers of workers not in the Party. While the base of the caucus remains the GM plant, the caucus now has membership from a number of UAW plants in the San Francisco Bay Area.

The IS talked to Kenny Horsten, founder and Chairman of the Black Panther Caucus.

IS: Would you describe the general situation in the Fremont plant?

KH: When the plant moved from Oakland to Fremont in 1963, General Motors stopped hiring black workers. They didn't come out and say it, but they set a policy that they would not hire anyone who lived outside the Hayward-Fremont area. Well, at that time there were no black workers living in Hayward. They were all living in Oakland.

A group of brothers demanded that this practice be stopped. Management's statement was that they were having too many problems with black workers: "they were always gambling and fighting, they never came to work on time, they never paid their bills, they were always drinking on the job, and in general, they were just unreliable workers." This was the position of GM up to about 1965. But as production increased and GM found they had to increase the work-force, they started to slowly bring in more black workers.

Racism at Fremont

IS: What about racist practices once black workers do get hired?

KH: Any black worker in any UAW plant or in any union can tell you that racism does exist. In Fremont it is so subtle that some workers do not relate to it. They've even got a vice-president who's a black guy, who stands up and says that it does not exist. Our shop chairman and international representative took a position six years ago that there was no racism in the plant.

But now with the increase of black workers at Fremont, naturally the problem has come to the front. We find that the majority of newly-hired workers are black. They hire about five black workers to every two white workers. But after that ninety-day probationary period, we find that there is only one black worker left, and those same two white workers are still there.

IS: Are there some jobs that are reserved for white workers only?

KH: I think you should say "reserved for black workers. There are such jobs mainly in the body shop, usually referred to as the sweat shop, the dark room, or the hot house. And they call it this because the body shop is where you do the welding and the sparks fly around. You get burned, and there is no ventilation. It's so thick you're actually breathing that gas. That's where most black workers go.

Or they are in the pit where the cars roll overhead and you have to work underneath, where the oil from the transmission and the gas and water drip down into the pit. For eight hours a day you have to drag around in that, and the stuff they've put on the floor that's supposed to absorb the oil. Well, after awhile, they've put so much of it down and you're dragging around in all that wet gravel and stuff and you're cussing all that stuff that's dripping on you - in your face, in your hair, and all over you.

And then there's the spray area on the production line where you have to climb inside the cab of a car or a truck and spray paint. You know how small it is inside of a car and you have to wear a mask because when you spray it comes back on your face and gets into your nose and eyes and ears. You can hardly breathe through that mask and if you don't wear it, then you

choke on the paint fumes.

Then they have other jobs that are called water jobs, with what they call wet sand. For eight hours a day you have to trudge around in about two feet of water with boots on that have holes in them. You have to be either a duck or a fish in there, but that's where a lot of black workers go, those kinds of jobs. That's where management prefers to put them.

IS: When it comes time for promotions and getting better jobs, is there clear preference by the foreman and management for white workers?

KH: Yes. It is shown by the degree to which management gives the black workers the hard jobs because they know they will have to stay there because they have nowhere else to go. They give the easy jobs to white workers because they know that if they give them the hard jobs, that they'll just quit and go someplace else.

As far as getting out of the pits, the body shops, the wet sanding area, or the spray booths, management has a provision in the contract that says they retain the right to job assignment and this means they can assign you to any job they want to. If you want to protest, you have to go through the grievance procedure, which might well take anywhere from 30 days to 7 months and by that time, they might come around and take you off the job.

IS: What percentage of skilled jobs are held by blacks?



KH: There are about 300 or 400 skilled jobs and I think we have seven blacks. And they came within the last three years.

IS: You raise two issues in describing these degrading, dehumanizing conditions. First, of course, is fighting against blacks or chicanos being given systematically the dirtiest and hardest jobs. The other is fighting against the conditions themselves so that no one is forced to do these jobs. Is there any general struggle over working conditions?

Working Conditions

KH: There is a section in the contract on work standards which is the only clause we can strike over after the union goes through procedures. Say an individual is protesting a job; usually it is in the soft trim or the body shop. He files a grievance. The grievance is processed and it takes months before he gets a reply to it, or before he hears anything else about it.

Then there may be a settlement which works this way: if you've got ten guys working in that body shop and all of them are breaking their ass doing a job, then one of them might write up a work standard grievance. Then, if he is the fifth man in line, after months the settlement will take the work off him and put it on the ninth man in line. Then the ninth man will have to turn around and write a grievance and management will stick the work on the first man or something like that.

So it's not just enough to deal with individual working conditions. We have to get rid of those jive-ass grievance procedures, written by management and the

union. Only then can we begin to deal effectively with those working conditions, because these procedures disarm workers, making them think they have some kind of redress when they really don't.

IS: Have there been any wildcat strikes over working conditions?

KH: No. The last wildcat strike in the plant was, I think, in 1964 over something about wage scales and working conditions. The leaders of that are no longer there.

IS: What about some of the broader political issues? What is the feeling in the plant about inflation, repression, the Nixon administration and the war in Vietnam? What's the feeling there?

Broader Political Issues

KH: The broader political issues are almost non-existent in our union. I think that these issues are almost non-existent in just about every union you have in this country, because of the bureaucracy of the union leadership. By consolidating their power the way that they have, they decide the direction in which the workers will go on the broader issues. Now when I say isolated, it's not like the guys don't know what's happening. They do know what's happening because they read their newspaper wherever they live.

If there's any position taken by the union, it is set down by Walter Reuther in Detroit in the form of a letter, and he informs the rank-and-file what their position is. They are able to do this by directly and indirectly discouraging the rank-and-file members from attaining union leadership or from even actually participating in any political program other than the Democratic Party.

They set up an organization called the Political Action Committee and the COPE Committee and all these other committees. All these are political committees that are geared for the Democratic Party. Nobody else, no other direction, no other way, and there is nobody inside those organizations that is going to take it from that. If they try then they're out. Simple as that.

IS: Is there much discussion of these issues on the job or on breaks?

KH: Well, yes, there's something like that. Everybody will say, well, yes, inflation, it's Nixon's fault. And they forget all about it. There is really no meaningful dialogue coming out of the rank-and-file concerning any of the issues outside their local union.

IS: Would you say that the bulk of the workers favor the war, oppose the war, or consider themselves part of Nixon's "silent majority"?

KH: Well, I would say that they're split for and against the war. Not necessarily for it as hawks, but for it because of their patriotic feelings - that if we were to leave, we would lose face, even though some have never seen Vietnam. Then you've got the other guys who are against the war because we're spending too much money in Vietnam, that kind of thing. Our caucus held an anti-war rally November 13, and the rally was fairly good. We got a fairly good response out of it. We didn't get as many people to attend as we wanted because of the time involved. But the guys came over to hear speeches, and that is the first time that something like this has even been done outside of the structure of the union leadership.

Women Workers

IS: How many women work at Fremont?

KH: Very very few. I think there might be 25 or 30 out of about 5,000 workers.

IS: That's not the office sections?

KH: No, that's in production. There might not be that many women; I'm just estimating.

IS: Are there any women in the caucus?

KH: At this time we're engaging upon bringing some of the women to the caucus, but they do not want to participate because of that fear. Well, they don't know yet. Most women out there have families and are work-