

The  
**LEAGUE OF REVOLUTIONARY  
BLACK WORKERS**



**Selected Readings**

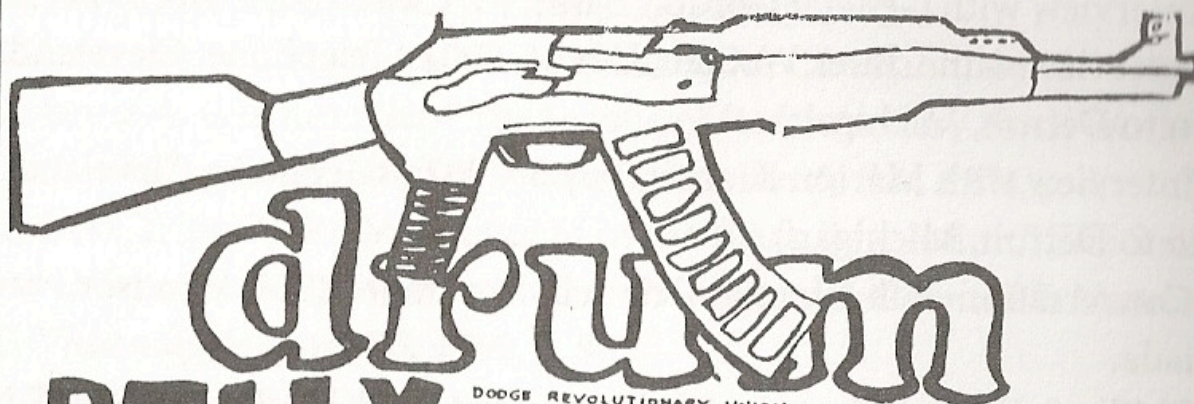
**IWW - Black History Month 2011**

## Introduction

This packet, put together by a loose grouping of IWW members across the US and Canada, is meant to serve as a jumping off point for discussions about the historic significance of 1960s Detroit's League of Revolutionary Black Workers. It is meant to be brief and easily digestible; it is by no means a definitive or exhaustive history of the organization. Rather, in collecting these documents we want to begin a conversation about the similarities and of course, differences between the two organizations, in hopes of better understanding and improving our own practice as revolutionary union organizers.

The first piece is a brief contextual essay written at the time of the League's formation, by Martin Glaberman, an autoworker and later professor at Wayne State University. While Glaberman was one among many radical educators who came in contact with the league (Glaberman taught Marxist economics to the Executive Board of the LRBW in the late 60s), we hold him up as a revolutionary thinker who most closely represents the "IWW perspective" at that time and that place. The second piece is by Luke Tripp, a leader in the LRBW writing at the time about the conditions in the plants and in the UAW that led to the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement and the League's formations. Tripp's article gives an inside look into the realities of racist oppression of workers in auto from all sides while also documenting the counter struggle by the workers. This is followed by "Dying From the Inside" by Ernie Allen, from the book, [They Should Have Served That Cup of Coffee: Seven Radicals Remember the 60s](#). Allen's piece takes a look back at the League from a critical perspective, as he tries to pick out some of the fundamental reasons for their decline. Finally, we try to close on a hopeful bookend from Glaberman, a short speech of his that posits the LRBW as one possible model for future worker-led forms of organization – a crucial, inspirational example of workers self-activity outside of the constraints of the official union strictures.

The short life of the League still holds these important lessons for the IWW, in that it sought to bring together explicitly revolutionary, independent organizations of workers struggle under one banner. In the history of the United States, it is rare to come across genuine mass shop floor organizations with openly anti-capitalist politics and an emphasis on building organization autonomous from the traditional union apparatus. The LRBW was one such project situated within the context of widespread black rebellion in America. While we must concede that DRUM and the League were unable to last organizationally for more than a decade, we hope to contribute to prolonging their legacy of fighting for true freedom from wage slavery for all workers.



**RALLY** DODGE REVOLUTIONARY UNION MOVEMENT **FOR BLACK WORKERS**

THE  
**ROLE OF THE BLACK WORKER IN THE  
BLACK LIBERATION MOVEMENT**

**5 SPEAKERS**



- #1. HISTORY OF THE BLACK WORKER.
- #2. ROLE OF THE BLACK WORKER
- #3. HISTORY OF D. R. U. M. / "ITS PRINCIPLES & PROGRAM"
- #4. ORGANIZING THE BLACK WORKER (CITY-WIDE) (NATIONAL)
- #5. COMBAT LIBERALISM IN THE U. A. W.

**3 PRIZES TO RAFFEL**

1ST PRIZE / NEW M-1 RIFLE ... 2ND PRIZE / NEW SHOT GUN ... 3RD PRIZE / BAG OF GROCERIES & TURKEY

**SUN. NOV. 17<sup>TH</sup> 6:00<sup>PM</sup>**

**1101 E. GRAND BL. AT GRATIOT**

Announcement of a Rally of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement,  
a major force in the League of Revolutionary Black Workers

## **Black Cats,White Cats,Wildcats: Auto Workers in Detroit**

by *Martin Glaberman*

Chrysler plant in the late 1960's and early 1970's. Detroit workers have been through many stages. From carriage production to car production to tank and plane production and back to car production. From prosperity to war to depression to war and back to prosperity and depression. From open shop to union shop; from democratic union to bureaucratic union.

Modern mass production is most closely associated with the introduction of the moving assembly line by Ford before World War I. The combination of relatively high wages combined with the most intense exploitation is also associated with the auto industry and Ford's famous 'five-dollar day.'

Ford also provides the crucial turning point in the modern history of Detroit. In 1941, the year that Ford was organized, the transition was made from the organizing days to the period of stability and legality. After 1941 what was left to be organized was accomplished either by government fiat in the war plants or by NLRB election. The workers were kept out of it.

Just as important was the Ford contract, which was also intended to keep the workers out of it. Everyone was amazed that Ford, who had resisted the union to the bitter end, had granted concessions to the union far beyond what had been won at GM and Chrysler. Full time for union committeemen and the dues check-off were the keys to the Ford contract. What it achieved was the incorporation of the union in the management of the plant.

The earlier contracts were simple documents which left the workers free to fight with any weapon they chose.

### **NEW WORKERS**

During the war years there was a tremendous influx of new workers into the auto plants. They were Southerners, black and white, and women, The demands of the war and the shortage of labor combined to give workers substantial weapons in their struggles. Black Workers fought for upgrading into production jobs (other than foundries), Women became production workers on a large scale. The union leadership attempted to surrender the bargaining powers of the workers by rushing to give the government a no-strike pledge. Union officials took places on government boards. There began the growing merger of union hierarchy with the political power structure. The resistance of workers to this process began to widen the gap between the rank and file of the union and the officials at the top. It was in Detroit that this resistance reached its high points.

A struggle against the no-strike pledge was carried on in the UAW against the major caucuses in the union, This reached its peak at the 1944 convention of the UAW when the top officials were chastized and embarrassed in front of the government officials they tried to serve by the defeat of resolutions to retain the no-strike pledge.

A curious example of the problem of working-class consciousness came out of that convention. The question of the pledge was referred to a membership referendum. In this vote by mail, the no-strike pledge was accepted by a vote of two to one. However at the same time, in the Detroit area auto-war plants, a majority of autoworkers wildcatted time and time again.

### **REUTHER'S CAREER**

The Reuther regime in the UAW coincides with the major post-war transformation of the auto industry. The centralization of power with the elimination of the smaller auto companies (Kaiser, Hudson, Packard, etc.) was combined with the decentralization of production in the newly automated or modernized plants. Reuther continued the policies begun by old Henry Ford and followed by CM's C. F. Wilson. The five-dollar day was superseded by the cost-of-living allowance as the golden chain that was to bind the workers to the most intense and alienating exploitation to be found anywhere in the industrialized world. No wage increase can compensate for the fact that the operations required of one worker on an auto assembly line never total as much as one minute.

In 1955 auto workers erupted in a wave of wildcat strikes that rejected the policy of fringe benefits combined with increasing speed-up. They made it clear that what was at issue was the inability of the union contract to provide any solution to the day-to-day problems on the plant floor. In some plants, at the expiration of the three-year contract, there are literally thousands of unresolved grievances testifying to the need of workers to manage production in their own name.

Ever since 1955 Reuther has attempted to incorporate the local wildcats into the national negotiations, with very little success. In the 1967 contract negotiations in auto it took one year, one third of the life of the contract, to wear down the workers, local by local.

### **OVERTIME AND PRODUCTIVITY**

From 1958 to 1961 the massive reconstruction of the auto industry led to a major depression in Detroit. It made visible the erosion of working-class power engineered by the auto union. Chrysler workers, some laid off for over a year, picketed Chrysler plants (and UAW headquarters) to prevent overtime work. Chrysler was able to get a court injunction against the picketers on the ground that they were in violation of the no-strike clause of the union contract.

### **BEYOND RANK AND FILE CAUCUS**

In the 1960's, also, the pressure of the black working class was constantly changing the level of employment in those plants that were within the reach of concentrations of black Americans. By the time of the Detroit rebellion of 1967, the majority of auto workers in the Detroit metropolitan area were black. These workers were a combination of older, long-seniority workers who had achieved power and stability in the plants and young militants who took what was there for granted and began the movement toward new forms of organization.

Black workers felt most intensely the exploitation and alienation of autoworkers, and they led the way in newer struggles. The Detroit rebellion of 1967 exposed the vulnerability of the auto corporations to the populations of the inner cities in industrial America. One year later was organized the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, which, with companion organizations in other plants, became part of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

What was crucial about the development was that it went beyond earlier black caucuses which were limited to pressure against management and the union hierarchy. And it went beyond earlier caucuses of all kinds in that it was not an electoral machine that functioned as a loyal opposition within the union. It was a direct, shop-floor organization that was willing and able to call strikes in its own name and fight against both the union and the management in a struggle to assert the power of the working class in production. Tensions between black and white workers have existed in varying degrees since the earliest days in auto. Sometimes they have erupted into open struggle. Sometimes they have been submerged in major battles against the industry. Tensions exist today, especially in relation to the skilled trades, which can easily break out into battles between workers. But that is secondary to the fact that black workers are attempting to assert working-class control on the shop floor.

Detroit, through its black workers, has again taken the lead in showing this nation its future.

## **DRUM: Vanguard of the Black Revolution**

*by Luke Tripp*

A short history of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement, detailing their beginnings as well as their opposition to the United Auto Workers union.

*(from an article by Luke Tripp which appeared in The South End, the student newspaper at Wayne State University, January 23, 1969)*

DRUM is an organization of oppressed and exploited black workers.

It realizes that black workers are the victims of inhumane slavery at the behest of white racist plant managers. It also realizes that black workers compose over 60% of the entire work force at the Hamtramck assembly plant, and therefore hold exclusive power. We members of DRUM had no other alternative but to form an organization and present a platform.

The Union has consistently and systematically failed us time and time again. We have attempted to address our grievances to the UAW's procedure, but all to no avail. The UAW bureaucracy is just as guilty, and its hands are just as bloody, as the white racist management of the Chrysler Corporation. We black workers feel that if skilled trades can negotiate directly with the Company and hold a separate contract, then black workers have even more justification for moving independently of the UAW. While DRUM would appreciate the help of management and the UAW in abolishing the problem of racism that exists, we will put an end to it with or without your help.

Metropolitan Detroit, automobile capital of the world, is the scene of rumblings on the labor front of the black liberation struggle. The many oppressive conditions existing in the auto factories have been steadily increasing since the racist corporations were obliged to open the door to black labor as a result of the labor shortage during World War H. True to the American tradition the racist factory owners relegated the black workers to the heavy and dirty low-paying jobs. Tasks performed by two white workers were assigned to one black worker.

For the past 20 years there has been virtually no vertical movement of black workers in the plants. Not until recently, under the pressure of the civil-rights movement, did the auto firms hire a token number of black men for white-collar positions. And even then most of those positions were static and non-supervisory.

### **Union racist too**

Although the labor union (UAW) claims to be the champion of justice and equality, it did little to check the rampant racism practiced in the factories. As a matter of fact, the union itself was guilty of racism. A casual glance at the officers in the union bureaucracy shows where their equality is at. Thus black workers had to confront both the union and the company. This intolerable situation at Dodge Main led to the development of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM).

On May 2, 1968 a walkout occurred at the Hamtramck assembly plant which stemmed from a gradual speed-up of the production line. The workers set up picket lines around the gates. The company then sent out photographers to take pictures of the pickets. The pictures were used as evidence against some of the pickets and were instrumental in the discharge and disciplining of certain workers who took part in the walkout and picketing. Both black and white pickets were involved. The disciplinary action taken against them and the overall administration of punishment was overwhelmingly applied to black workers.

Black workers were held responsible for the walkout, which was in fact caused by the negative company policy toward working conditions. This was the specific incident that gave rise to the inception of DRUM. Black workers who were either dismissed or penalized then moved to organize the workers at Dodge Main by using a newsletter (DRUM) as an organizing tool. The contents of the Newsletter dealt with very specific cases of both racism and tomism on the job, and stressed the necessity of united action on the part of black workers to abolish the racial aspects of the exploitation and degradation going on at the plant. The reaction of the workers to the first issue of

DRUM was general acceptance. They were somewhat astounded to see the truth in print. Most considered it a move in the right direction.

Naturally the reaction of management was hostile. They were so blinded by their racist stereotype image of the black man that it was hard for them to believe that DRUM was written by black workers. Management couldn't conceive of blacks' initiating and carrying out an intelligent program.

In the second issue of DRUM several toms at the plant were blown.

The brothers really dug it. DRUM had gotten over in a big way. From then on the brothers looked DRUM every week. Amazingly, not one DRUM could be found thrown away or lying around.

After the third week the brothers began to ask about joining DRUM. Members of DRUM working in the plant proselytized and recruited brothers on the job. The strength and influence of DRUM grew vastly.

Around the sixth week the more-militant workers wanted to go for some concrete action against Chrysler and the UA W. At this point the editors of DRUM decided to test their strength. They called for a week boycott of two bars outside the gate that were patronized by a large number of brothers. The bars didn't hire blacks, and practiced racism in other subtle ways. DRUM received about 95% co-operation. This was achieved without the use of pickets or picket signs.

As a further test of strength DRUM called for an extension of the boycott. Again DRUM received solid support, so they decided to get down.

DRUM knew that most workers would be temporarily laid off during the coming week because of the changeover, the production of the '69 models. There was also a bill-out date at which time a certain number of units had to be produced. So DRUM planned to shut down the plant right before the bill-out time and set back the schedule of the change period. Their purpose was to demonstrate their strength and to show Chrysler that DRUM was not bull-jiving or playing.

DRUM started with the first phase of their program They listed 15 demands which dealt with the following conditions at the Hamtramck assembly plant, where about 60% of the work force is black.

(from DRUM, Volume 1, Number 2)

- (1) 95% of all foremen in the plants are white.
- (2) 99% of all general foremen are white.
- (3) 100% of all plant superintendents are white.
- (4) 90% of all skilled tradesmen are white.
- (5) 90% of all apprentices are white.
- (6) Systematically all the easy jobs in the plants are held by whites.
- (7) Whenever whites are put on harder jobs they are given helpers.
- (8) Black workers who miss a day's work need two doctors' excuses.
- (9) Seniority is a racist concept, since black workers systematically were denied employment for years at this plant.

On Thursday of the ninth week, DRUM got down! They held a rally in a parking lot across from the plant. A number of groups from the black community were represented at the rally, including a conga group that provided the sounds.

Several leaders in DRUM ran down their thing. They rapped on the wretched conditions in the plant. The response to the raps was nothing less than inspiring. After the raps about 300 of those attending the rally formed a picket line and marched two blocks to UAW Local 3. DRUM had carefully planned the picketing to coincide with the union executive board meeting. When the workers arrived at the local one union flunky tried to prevent the workers from entering the room where the board was meeting. He ran a thing about signing in, closed meeting, etcetera. But the workers didn't stop to address that jive.

They bogarted their way into the "bourgy" air-conditioned room. The sight of a room full of greasy, hard-looking workers shook up the "button-down" executive board. The contrast was striking. Here you had the workers in their "humping" blue coveralls, and their union "representatives" laid to the bone in their mohair suits.

The panic-stricken executive board promptly canceled their meeting and suggested that a general meeting be held in the auditorium. At the general meeting the DRUM leaders laid down a heavy thing. They ran down how the union worked hand-in-glove with the fat corporation, the union's failure to address the workers' grievances, et cetera. Coming behind the irrefutable facts laid down by DRUM, Ed Liska, president of UAW Local 3, tried to defend the union using a weak pro-capitalist line. He ran a foul thing on how Chrysler provides a job for the workers and the powerful position of the company.

Charles Brooks, vice president of Local 3 and an Uncle Tom of long standing, tried to back up his boss by playing out of a "brother" bag.

Seeing that the meeting was futile, DRUM served notice that they were going to fight the UA Wand close up the plant. They then upped and split.

Friday, the next day, at five o'clock in the morning, DRUM and its supporting groups turned black workers away at the gate. No attempt was made to interfere with white workers.

The first few workers to arrive were met by a handful of pickets without signs. The workers were not hip to the shut-down date. After the pickets ran it to them, one worker replied: "Shutting down this motherfucker, whatever the reason, is cool as far as I'm concerned."

An hour later practically all the black workers on the six o'clock shift were milling around the gate listening to the drums and spying the few Toms who went into the plant.

Most of the white workers reported to work after they saw that it was safe for them to go through the gate. Those who stayed out did so for various reasons. Some believed in honoring picket lines, and a few were sympathetic. Still others didn't want to work that day anyway.

Before noon six DRUM members went to the local and met with Ed Liska, the president; a few other bigots; and a smattering of Toms.

In this meeting DRUM again voiced its grievances and stated that racism must be erased both at Chrysler and in the UAW. DRUM let it be known that they were doing the UAW a favor by coming to the local with their grievances.

Liska said he would take the grievances and demands to the local plant manager and international union board. DRUM stated that they came to negotiate from a position of strength and power. They pointed out that there were over 3,000 angry black workers standing outside the gate because they were resolutely opposed to the racist policy of Chrysler and the oppressive conditions in the plant. Production almost stood still that day. Thus the value of their labor was clearly shown.

Before the DRUM members hatted up they ran a thing to Liska that if he didn't get positive results from the meeting with the international board or Chrysler, the only honorable thing left for him and his jive time staff to do would be to respectfully step down. DRUM then split.

The DRUM members then returned to the area at which the black workers were massed. They reported what went down in the meeting with the UA W officials. The demands were read amid roaring applause.

About this time Polish pigs in blue were massing opposite the black workers. After putting on tear-gas masks and tightening their grips on their clubs, the pigs stood at the ready. A Tom detective then came up and ordered the workers to disperse.

DRUM then began to skillfully organize the workers. Car pools were set up to take at least 250 black workers to Chrysler's headquarters in the city of Highland Park, about five miles away.



When the black workers and supporting community groups, including many dressed in African attire, fell on the scene in front of Chrysler headquarters, all paper-shuffling within the building ceased. The loud thump of the drums and the vibration created by brothers and sisters brought every Honky in the building to the windows. The expression on their faces was the same as the expression on the faces of the cavalry in Custer's last stand.

The sisters in their bubas and the brothers dashikied to the bone went for their thing.

Headquarters paranoia came down, and they called for the protection of their property by the Highland Park pigs, who soon showed at the scene armed to the teeth. When they pulled out their gas-warfare gear the brothers were ready. They had come prepared with their surplus army gas masks. During the confrontation a group of representatives of DRUM went into the building and demanded to see the policy makers. The policy makers refused to meet, so DRUM said later. They went back to the demonstration and ran down what had happened. Afterward the demonstration broke up and the pigs fell away. So far DRUM had pursued all their immediate objectives by peaceful means. But DRUM takes the any-means-necessary position in regard to goals.

The militant demonstration jolted both the company and the union. Chrysler's newly-created community-relations department promptly got on the case. The union also reacted. DRUM was cordially invited to attend the Sunday session of the Detroit black caucus of the UAW, which is supposed to be a citywide caucus of black representatives of every UAW local in town.

The leaders of DRUM went to the meeting expecting to find a group of militant black men. Instead they found the caucus to be made up of four old wrinkled-up kneegrows and two young brothers. DRUM's 12 hard black workers dominated the meeting.

One old Uncle Remus from Local 7 rapped about irrelevant things. He talked about what he did "way back then". Another fossil continued the nonsense with a rap on Nineteenth Century unionism and a spot of reminiscence on a first kneegrow theme. The only positive thing to be achieved was an agreement by all to support DRUM in its fight against racism at Chrysler.

On Monday, the following day, DRUM once again demonstrated at the plant. Chrysler officials on top of the factories were using telescopes, binoculars, and cameras to try to discern who was participating in the demonstration. A few Chrysler flunkies had the audacity to try serving injunctions against the demonstration.

When they tried to hand the John Doe injunctions to individuals, the demonstrators slapped them from their hands, tore them up, and threw the pieces over the fence around the plant.

The pigs in blue showed up and began to break up the perfectly-legal demonstration. The plant was partially shut down that day. And it can be added that they would have been backed up with guns instead of with picket signs.

In the weeks following the demonstration, DRUM has received wide support from the various church groups and other organizations in the black community. They have also won the respect of practically all the black workers not only at Dodge Main, but also at other local plants.

In their efforts to slander and discredit DRUM the UAW has branded DRUM a racist, illegitimate, hate-mongering communist organization. The UAW - with its long practice of racism from its very inception which is reflected by the fact that blacks pay about a fourth of the dues in the UAW, but there are only 72 black International Representatives out of a total of almost 1100.

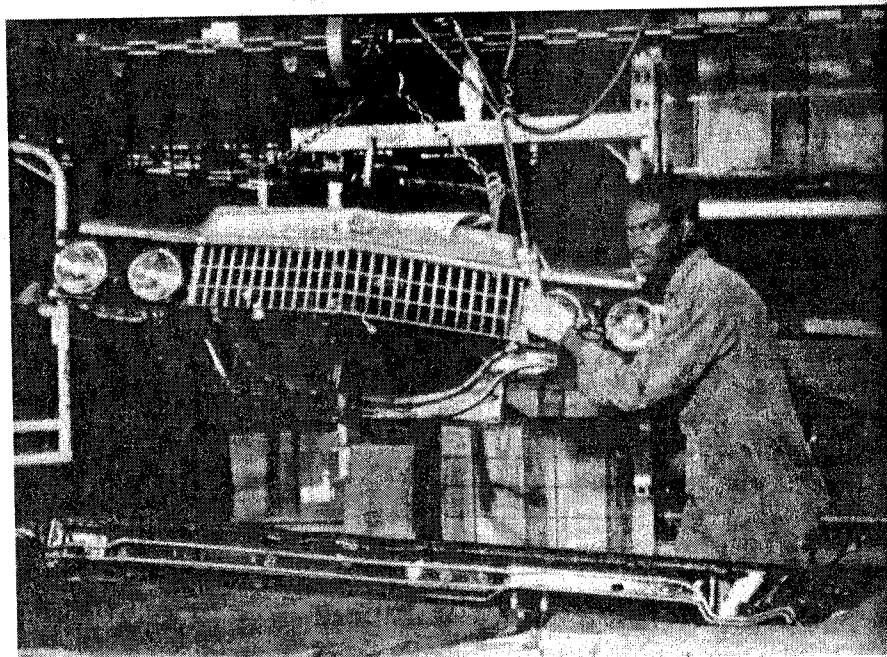
The UAW can call DRUM illegitimate, when its own "legitimacy" is granted by the company and supported by the courts rather than by the super-exploited black workers.

The UAW calls DRUM a hate organization when it is crystal clear to all that it is the black workers who are the victims of hate.

Playing on the brainwashed psyche of the masses, the UAW is going for its red-baiting thing by branding DRUM a communist organization. If DRUM were truly a communist organization, they would have listed 15 ultimatums instead of 15 reformist demands.

The brothers at the plants are hip to the jive the UAW is trying to run. They can try to use these tactics to stop DRUM if they want to. But such counter-revolutionary activity will only heighten the workers' revolutionary focus and sharpen the contradiction between the UAW and the rank and file. The UAW has messed over the workers for too long. By continually doing so, the only thing they will get in the end is a good ass-kicking.

## Dying From the Inside: The Decline of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers



*Photo by Bill Fibbens/Liberation News Service.*

In July of 1967, years of pent-up frustration and rage exploded in the city of Detroit. Crowds of angry Black people filled the streets, looting the stores that siphoned their money out of the community, burning the slums to which economic exploitation and housing discrimination confined them, and fighting the police force which harassed and often brutalized them. Lyndon Johnson insisted this "lawlessness" had "nothing to do with civil rights" and fanned the flames by sending in the army. By the time the rebellion was over, at least forty-one people had been killed and 3800 arrested; 1300 buildings had been burned, and 2700 businesses looted.

Widespread unemployment among Blacks in the Motor City was certainly a major cause of the rebellion. When, afterward, companies announced small increases in hiring as a token gesture, thousands lined up at the personnel offices. But it wasn't only the unemployed members of the working class who had spilled into the streets in July. Blacks and even whites who put in their days and nights on the automobile assembly lines of Chrysler, Ford, and GM were seen taking part in the "shopping for free," getting back some of what was theirs.

The following May, their anger took a new form. Four thousand workers shut down the Dodge Main assembly plant in the first wildcat strike to hit that factory in fourteen years. The issue was the incessant, nerve-destroying, and accident-causing speed-up of the line. A key element in making the

strike happen was a group of radical Black workers who called themselves DRUM—the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement.

Black workers had been kept out of many auto plants entirely until the Second World War; now they were the holders of the lowest-paying, most dangerous jobs, and they had the least seniority and job security. In the old, unsafe, and overheated Detroit plants, the auto companies kept up the pressure to produce more cars with fewer people. Black workers, especially, paid the price; they called this process “niggermentation.” The United Auto Workers, dominated by an overwhelmingly white officialdom interested in negotiating primarily for pay increases, not better conditions, offered little help.

DRUM set out to attack all these issues—discrimination in the plant, discrimination in the union, and the power of the auto companies to dictate working conditions. Within a few months DRUM had dramatized its seriousness to both the company and the union by publicly calling another illegal strike which was honored by 3000 Black workers and some whites; demonstrating at union and company headquarters; and putting forward a DRUM candidate, Ron March, who pulled out the largest number of votes in the first round of the union election.

Company and union officials responded with injunctions, arrests, firings, and vote-tampering. Still, the model was imitated in other plants. The most successful new attempt was ELRUM, in Chrysler’s Eldon Avenue gear and axle plant; others included FRUM (in Ford’s River Rouge plant), CADRUM (at Cadillac), and UPRUM and HRUM (among United Parcel workers and health workers). In an effort to keep up the momentum and marshal a strong enough force in the plants and the community to defend the RUMs against growing repression, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was formed.

The League was initiated by a seven-member Executive Board of local Black revolutionaries from working class backgrounds. This group, associated with a newspaper formed shortly after the 1967 rebellion called the *Inner City Voice*, had been working and studying together for some years, and had been instrumental in organizing and supporting DRUM. One of its members, General Baker, had been working at Dodge Main at the time of the first wildcat and had been fired by Chrysler as a result.

The history of the RUMs and the League—their successes and failures and the continuing role of the League activists in later political activity in Detroit—has been chronicled in a number of books and articles listed in the Appendix. Unlike the preceding chapters on the Civil Rights Movement and Black Panther Party, the following essay by Ernie Allen is not intended to tell the organization’s history, or to capture the flavor of participation in rank-and-file workplace activism. It takes a more limited and negative focus, but an important one. It seeks to isolate the internal structural and political weaknesses that caused the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, like many of the later New Left groups, to come apart two and a half years after its founding.

In general, the effectiveness of New Left groups in attracting support and carrying out action and education was not matched by an ability to create stable organizations. Particularly in the later years, splits and splinters multiplied as rapidly as they ever have on the left. This essay examines a number of dilemmas and failings in the League which were common to many other groups. Among them are:

- A temptation (already noted by Reggie Schell) to seek coalitions and expanded organizations which look impressive in their formal structures—which allow more people to have some kind of contact with the organization and its politics—but which are often much less solid than they appear.
- A related tendency for leaders to lose contact with their

base, and to see what is happening only in terms of their own ideas about what is needed.

- A lack of structures to encourage democracy and full participation by members.

- A lack of clarity or agreement about strategies and goals.

In dealing with these issues, the essay delves into the internal conflicts and factions of the organization, and it embodies the author's personal judgement about the roles played by specific individuals, including himself. The readings which he suggests in the Appendix offer other points of view. In this chapter, the footnotes are the author's.

## Ernie Allen

*Ernie Allen was active in the Civil Rights and Black Power movements on the West Coast during the 1960s. He joined the League of Revolutionary Black Workers in 1970 and served as its Director of Political Education. He is currently a Corresponding Associate of the Journal of Ethnic Studies and teaches history in the W.E.B. DuBois Department of Afro-American Studies at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst.*

The founding of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (LRBW) in the late 1960s proved to be one of the more significant manifestations of Afroamerican political maturity since World War II. Though only a short-lived organization, the League, by virtue of competent leadership and the right conditions, and despite opposition from both company and union, was able to mobilize hundreds of black American workers in the factory—where the material wealth of the country is produced.

The LRBW's approach differed in several ways from those of other black organizations seeking civil and social rights. Rather than place primary emphasis on combating the awesome *effects* of Afroamerican oppression, it directed its efforts toward organizing that specific sector, which as a result of its strategic position within the economy, harbored the greatest potential for effecting ultimate political and social change. Rather than view the local police as the *principle* enemy of the black community, the practical implications of which would lead other, less sophisticated black organizations into fruitless and bloody encounters, the League, while taking concrete steps to combat police oppression, continued to view that phenomenon as only one important aspect of *class rule*. Rather than attempt to resolve the social problems of blacks in piecemeal fashion, as had the majority of Afroamerican reformist organizations, the League envisioned the creation of a socialist society in the United States in which all forms of exploitation of human beings by one another would be eliminated forever.

The LRBW was an organized outgrowth of the 1967 black urban rebellion of Detroit. Beginning in May 1968 with the creation of the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM), by early 1969 the more or less autonomous formation of additional Revolutionary Union Movements underwent partial consolidation as the League. With a centralized leadership in command and important material resources at its disposal, the LRBW quickly embarked on a program of expansion into community organizing, film production, and legal defense, as well as the establishment of a small printing plant and a bookstore.

Outwardly, the League operation was extremely impressive. Even those with prior political experience could not help but be moved by the seriousness, dedication, and camaraderie of League members who followed impossible schedules to get the job done. The print shop was always especially busy: a

computerized typesetter was pushed to frequent breakdown (not a particularly difficult task), presses ran at all hours, and the continual going and coming of people to drop off "copy," pick up completed work, or contribute labor was a striking phenomenon.

Striking, too, was the activity around the workers' center in Highland Park, despite some of its internal problems. At all hours of the day and night, black workers facing specific difficulties on the job knew they could stop by to discuss their problems. Organizers on their way to meet the morning shifts would often assemble there before dawn to pick up leaflets and other materials. Regular visits from community people wishing to talk over problems of drug abuse, police harassment, or even personal crises, could always be anticipated.

In short, the League—particularly in its earlier days—was both highly visible and highly respected in the Detroit metropolitan area, in the community as well as at the plant gates. At a time when New Left and Black Power organizations were in the process of decline, League membership gave one the distinct feeling of being part of a "winning" organization. But by mid-1970, when the League began to attract considerable attention nationally as well as internationally, cracks had already appeared in its organizational foundation. The following year witnessed the ultimate crumbling of the edifice: the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was no more.

Today, in 1978, as we "prepare" for further cutbacks in social services, lower standards of living, and increased political repression which invariably oozes from the seams of a deteriorating social situation, it is essential that we avoid, where possible, the more salient "movement" errors of the late 1960s and early 1970s—not to mention earlier periods.

In examining the development of the League from an "inside" perspective it shall become quite apparent that its demise, like that of too many other progressive organizations of that period, was due more to *internal* than external pres-

ures. With that experience behind us, and with adequate reflection, we *can* do better. At the very least, we must attempt to understand how organizations such as the League, which held so much political promise for so many people, were unable to surmount their internal contradictions. If the following study does no more than aid that process of understanding, it will have accomplished its purpose.

### The Problem With Structure

By 1969—the year the League was founded—the spontaneously formed RUM groups were declining in influence in the plants. Whereas the larger RUMs had often been able to attract hundreds of workers to their meetings in 1968, the following year they were fortunate to pull out a handful.

Several factors account for this decline. The wave of popular discontent unleashed in the 1967 rebellion—upon which the Revolutionary Union Movement had built itself—had now subsided. It might be more accurate to say that it had been engulfed by increasingly violent gang activity and street crime—often drug-related—within the black community. Moreover, by 1970 Chrysler Corporation had visibly increased the number of black foremen on some of its assembly lines, thus robbing the RUM groups of one of their most pressing issues.

RUM activists, meanwhile, had been identified and were constantly surveilled. Even those who had been fortunate or skillful enough to survive the purges by plant management felt a sense of isolation and ineffectiveness. And RUM leadership had furthered its isolation from a large strata of potential constituents by launching indiscriminate verbal attacks on older workers for their "conservatism," as well as tasteless commentaries on the personal lives of numerous union "mis-leaders."

In the face of these problems, one of the intended

functions of the League was to overcome the isolation of the RUM groups by coordinating their activities and linking the plant struggles with wide, community-based support. There were also several other pressing problems which the formation of a consolidated organization was supposed to deal with. Due to the refusal of local printers to handle the *Inner City Voice*, concrete means had to be found to fill the movement's publishing needs. Also facilities had to be secured to provide a permanent home for the organizations, as well as to alleviate problems which had fallen on particular activists' families. General Baker's family, for instance, had to contend with a literal "army of unemployed" organizers and leafleters who, having no other place to go, bivouacked nightly on their living room floor. And, overall, the haunting problem of scarce financial resources had to be resolved if the movement was to survive over the long run.

The formation of the League was a creative response to these difficulties: but it proved to be as ominous as it was creative. The drive by the top leadership to provide a supportive apparatus for black workers' struggles paradoxically ended in its abandoning them. The League did not succeed in confronting the problems of declining mass revolutionary sentiment, tactical maneuvers by management, and tactical errors by RUM leadership which were curtailing the in-plant revolt. But in 1969 and 1970 such *political failures* were masked by a false sense of organizational successes in other areas: the creation of the League film "Finally Got the News," the proliferation of LRBW offices in the Detroit area, participation in a book-discussion project which had enrolled hundreds of liberal whites, as well as the growing media attention which the League was attracting nationwide. How did such a situation come about?

The reorganization of the existing RUMs into the League was accomplished by the Executive Board from the top down. This was made possible by money which the EB succeeded in

raising from outside sources—the Black Economic Development Conference in particular.<sup>1</sup> As a direct consequence, decisions concerning specific allocations of funds (and, more importantly, decisions about what activities the League would become involved in) could and did occur without the participation, or even the knowledge at times, of the rank-and-file.<sup>2</sup>

Due to a lack of participatory democracy or even of adequate communication in the new organization, many of those who remained active in the RUMs were not even aware that they had "joined" the League.

With reorganization also arrived a qualitative shift from in-plant organizing to activities nominally supporting that goal: the gathering of resources, development of printing, publishing, and film-making operations, participation in struggles around control of the schools, etc. An unintended but direct consequence was an influx of political and technical personnel who staffed these new projects—and whose personal loyalties generally went to individual EB members heading such operations. (The fact that some harbored "middle class" outlooks also had a bearing on the changing character of the organization.)

Two other factors prevented an open recognition of the League's drift away from its original base. First, the money

1. The National Black Economic Development Conference—later shortened to BECD—first convened in April 1969 at Wayne State University in Detroit. Sponsored by the Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), BEDC was not originally intended as an independent organization, which it later became, but as a means of bringing "together a broad spectrum of black leaders to explore strategies for more rapid black-directed community development." However, after adopting a "Black Manifesto" under the leadership of James Forman, BEDC began pressuring religious organizations to provide "reparations" to the black community. At least several hundred thousand dollars were raised in this manner, with a significant portion going to the League. For further information, see Robert S. Lecky and H. Eliot Wright (eds.), *Black*

from BEDC served to lubricate the sharpest edges of personal or political dissatisfaction both among RUM members and inside the EB. Second, eminently aware that it was the talented members of the EB alone who had secured necessary legal and material resources for the organization, until mid-1971 the politically inexperienced rank-and-file tended to follow a strict policy of "deference" in regard to top leadership, despite private criticisms which they occasionally voiced.

On the positive side, then, the formation of the LRBW in early 1969 led to organizational consolidation at several levels: a centralized leadership was constituted—albeit not in the most democratic of terms; material resources were secured, and in turn funneled to the RUM groups as well as other projects; and various offices and facilities were established. On the questionable to negative side, the transition to a more complex structure and its associated activities placed the Executive Board largely out of touch with the rank-and-file—the plant workers in particular. There arose a problem of organizational democracy, by which I mean the absence of any *structural* possibilities for the general membership to impose its collective will on either the overall political direction of the League or its internal affairs. And, finally, League energies

*Manifesto: Religion, Racism, and Reparations* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969).

2. Notwithstanding the fact that BEDC funds underwrote a number of League activities which, under other circumstances, might not have been immediately feasible, had *political* emphasis been placed instead on a dues-paying apparatus financed by membership, a more structurally sound organization might have resulted. This approach is to be distinguished from implementation of the League-proposed International Black Appeal through company "checkoff" procedures (by which money for the United Fund or union dues is secured), but rather through a more direct means of collection—certainly not the *most expedient* means at hand, but an important process if *political organizing* in itself.

were poured into a number of diverse activities—some of which proved absolutely necessary—while consolidation and further expansion of the RUM groups was virtually neglected.

To understand this process as it unfolded, concretely, in the League, we must look at its social and political make-up, at its seven-member Executive Board, and at the EB's decisions (or lack of them) about organizational discipline, relations with the membership, and political education. Then we can look at the specific internal conflict around these issues that was the immediate cause of the break-up of the League.

### Social Make-Up

Who was the LRBW? Large numbers of people participated at one time or another in the RUMs or in League-sponsored campaigns, demonstrations, or discussions. But active members in the League itself usually totalled about sixty.

In the early stages of the League's formation, the plant workers made up the majority of the membership, but by late 1970 they found themselves outnumbered by other elements. A second important group who joined the ranks of the LRBW were the high school students who had organized themselves as the Black Student Union Front, a league affiliate. The majority of the workers earned their livelihood by toiling in the auto plants, of course, while the high school students still relied on their parents to provide them with the basic necessities.

From time to time, however, the LRBW has to provide shelter and money for both workers and students, who, as a direct result of their participation in LRBW activities, experienced personal crises: job firings, expulsion from home by politically conservative parents, etc. This situation created a third type of League member, whose dependence on LRBW resources could last indefinitely. Also in this third category were "free-floating" elements, or "hangers-on," who might



enroll at Wayne State University or a local community college for a semester or two, work at the Eldon Avenue axle plant for a few months, and then quit or be fired. Either way, the members of this third group had the "free time" which allowed them to provide the League with indispensable services: the printing and distribution of plant leaflets and other organizational literature, office and transportation maintenance, security details, etc. At the same time, this sector also provided the League with some of its greatest disciplinary problems.

Finally, a fourth group of people provided the LRBW with services and political leadership. Its members often drew salaries from League components, but unlike the third group they tended to assume *permanent* responsibilities within the LRBW. They usually possessed political-intellectual, administrative, or technical skills as well. Here would be classified people who, for example, managed LRBW operations such as Black Star Printing or the bookstore, who oversaw the technical aspects of the printing operation, who orchestrated legal-defense strategies, who furnished typing or clerical services, or who conducted political education classes. With the expansion of the RUM groups into the League in early 1969, it was this strata which increased in absolute numbers, while the number of workers decreased.

### Political Make-Up

The RUM groups attracted primarily people who had never become involved in politics before. Caught up in the militant spirit of the urban rebellions and Black Power demands, the hard-hitting, "tell-it-like-it-is" approach of RUM leaflets captured the imagination of these younger workers. (But as others have stressed, the tone of such leaflets also tended to alienate older workers as well as white workers in general.)

Of the two most important worker components, DRUM and ELRUM, DRUM's leadership was by far the most stable, experienced, and politically sophisticated. Ron March of DRUM, for example, had accumulated considerable prior experience working within the UAW black caucus, including political interaction between white and black workers. Such was not generally typical of ELRUM cadre, who became largely dependent on DRUM leadership for direction.

In this period, national consciousness on the part of younger black industrial workers far outweighed any manifestations of class consciousness, though the latter was by no means completely absent.<sup>3</sup> For the most part this nationalism was expressed as anti-racist sentiment, but the negative experiences of black workers within the plant and union also led to anti-white attitudes in general.

Nationalism was hardly limited to the "non-intellectual" strata, as one writer recently asserted. Whether at a sophisticated or elementary level, it manifested itself in varying degrees among most LRBW members. It was the principal motive force behind the Black Student United Front, and it surfaced in a more sophisticated form among those Executive Board members who advocated a "black-led Marxist vanguard party." By far the least progressive manifestations of national consciousness came from the "free-floating" elements within the LRBW—the least disciplined of all.

3. An important issue facing any group like the League of Revolutionary Black Workers is how much to focus on the way black workers are treated because of being *workers* and how much to focus on the way they are treated because of being *black*. Are the members of organizations banding together primarily because of their common class, or their common nationality? In a note at the end of this chapter, the author explains his use of the terms "class consciousness" and "national consciousness," and some of the political and historical issues connected with this question.—ed.

Until mid-1970 the main political divisions inside the League rested mainly within the Executive Board. These divisions were basically two-fold. At the level of direct political ideology, there was a struggle between one section of leadership putting forward a general Marxist orientation who proved to be more amenable to working with white (mostly middle class) allies, and more nationalistically oriented individuals who tended to oppose such alliances. Mike Hamlin, Ken Cockrel, John Watson, Luke Tripp, and John Williams belonged to the first tendency, while the second was characterized by General Baker and Chuck Wooten. At the same time both Wooten and Baker nominally subscribed to Marxist principles as well.<sup>4</sup>

The second division on the EB represented a clash over immediate tactics as well as long-range strategies. Nominally, all EB members agreed that the principle political task of the League was the organizing of black workers; however, a number of the other activities in which the League was engaged from 1969 onward tended to become ends in themselves. A highly pragmatic section of the leadership advocated expanding League activities into many spheres at the same time, both locally and nationally. Another group favored a more coordinated expansion but also concerned themselves with the consolidation of existing organizational ventures. Finally, there were more people who tended to resist involvement in any activities that were not immediately connected with the direct organization of black workers in Detroit. On these sets of issues Hamlin, Cockrel, and Watson were identified with

4. One cannot become a Marxist in the sense that one becomes a Christian. The latter requires that one believe; the former should require some degree of study, and the translation of that study into practice. It is difficult to distinguish, among all the EB members, between those who were *consequent* Marxists—that is, whose

the first tendency; Tripp and Williams with the second; and Wooten and Baker with the third.

The two-fold political division on the EB was to produce curious alignments and realignments among its members, depending on the specific issues involved. In the case of gross violations of organizational discipline by rank-and-file members, the necessity to enter specific support activities, as well as in confronting the issue of narrow nationalism, Williams and Tripp tended to align with the Hamlin/Cockrel/Watson faction. When it came to the question of the League's overextending its limited financial and human resources, the two generally—but not always—sided with Baker and Wooten.

Practically speaking, then, it became difficult if not impossible for any one of the factions within the top leadership to win a clear-cut victory. This, plus the fact that each group needed, or thought it needed, the particular skills cultivated by the others, stalemated any clear-cut direction of the League from the very beginning. As funds began flowing into the LRBW in early 1969, the shifting alignments within the Executive Board resulted in the establishing of three different "headquarters" for the organization; Baker and Wooten oversaw the Highland Park office, main center for worker organizing; Tripp and Williams were associated with the Linwood office, from which were coordinated the public school decentralization and control struggles of 1969-1970 as well as a fundraising project called the International Black Appeal; Hamlin headed the Black Star Publishing operation. (Cockrel and Watson, due to their involvement in legal and film work, respectively, tended to be the least visible of all.) Political division had become physical division as well.

concrete political practice was logically and consistently informed by Marxist theory—and more pragmatic, but capable people whose knowledge of Marxism failed to extend beyond the reciting of key phrases or principles.

### Rank-and-File Nationalism and the EB

Initially, the EB as a whole tended to recognize the virtues of the mass-based nationalism which had brought the League itself into being. A long-standing history of white, working class racism in Detroit had created a fierce climate of mistrust among black workers regarding "black and white, unite" slogans. Moreover, in an apparent projection of Detroit conditions onto the rest of the country, the majority of the EB subscribed to the dubious proposition that black workers *by themselves* had the power to shut down the strategic centers of U.S. heavy industry. In consequence, even those among the top leadership who were the most adamant concerning the need for black and white labor unity were led to advocate, or at least tolerate, certain tactics. An example is the League's refusal to distribute plant leaflets to white laborers, in order to avoid losing credibility with blacks.

In time, however, due to numerous internal problems which surfaced within the organization, some of the more Marxist-oriented members of the EB developed an extreme aversion to Afroamerican nationalism in general, thereby jettisoning its positive sides along with the negative. Undoubtedly the most delicate and volatile issue concerned "sniping" by rank-and-file (and sometimes EB) members in regard to interracial personal relationships engaged in by a number of these leaders.

This "white woman question" was complicated by male chauvinism at all organizational levels. In particular, a double standard allowed League males to seek relationships outside the organization even where "competing" political groups were concerned; similar action on the part of League females was often viewed as a "security risk." In response, the women would frequently raise hell over the white woman question.<sup>5</sup>

5. Parallels can be found in the experiences of black women within

For some male leaders, anxious to squelch this personal criticism, nationalism itself became a major enemy.

### The Problem With Leadership

Generally speaking, the individuals comprising the Executive Board—the top leadership strata of the League—were eminently capable and creative. Some were even congenial. Without the presence of those particular individuals in Detroit, it is doubtful that an organization such as the LRBW would have emerged when it did. But a measured, political evaluation of that same strata must draw some harsher conclusions, as well: many of the internal organization problems of which EB members chronically complained were the immediate or delayed result of decisions which they themselves made, or failed to make at the appropriate time.

Among the numerous, interrelated difficulties facing the League from the beginning was that of an extremely lax organizational discipline. Most of the earlier members of the LRBW had been swept into the organizational fold as a result of their involvement in earlier RUM struggles. By the time of the first general meeting of the LRBW in July 1970, when wholesale recruitment occurred, the EB either was or should have been keenly apprised of the strengths and weaknesses of individual rank-and-file members.

At that point, those who had posed constant disciplinary problems could have been placed on probationary status or eliminated from the ranks altogether. Although the League might have lost some of its best leafleters in the process, instances of equipment abuse and, on a lesser scale, petty theft,

the Communist Party during the 1930s and 1940s. See, for example, Claudia Jones, "An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!," *Political Affairs* (June 1949).

might also have been curtailed. Instead, nearly everyone who had worked informally for the LRBW in the past was drafted into the organization. And no organizational code of conduct was adopted to be binding on all League members.

Moreover, extremely poor choices were made by the EB in matters of "security" personnel. Rather than security forces being comprised of the most disciplined and emotionally stable members of the LRBW, volunteers were sought; the result was that the members most anxious to carry weapons became the security force—and fights which could have been avoided sometimes occurred between these "revolutionary" versions of Starsky & Hutch and rank-and-file members.

A deeper problem, though, was that in many ways the Executive Board conducted itself almost as an autonomous organization. Its relatively "hermetic" (sealed off) nature, made worse by the proliferation of LRBW activities from early 1969 onward, resulted in a relative *lack of visible or responsive leadership* for the organization as a whole. Perhaps the best illustration of this particular state of affairs can be found in the fact that the LRBW's first general meeting did not take place until almost a year and a half after its founding. A large number of individuals who had more or less informally participated in League activities until then, were not even aware of their own formal membership until receiving letters from the EB requesting their attendance at that first meeting in July 1970. The mail, rather than face-to-face discussion, tended to be a primary form of communication between the EB and general membership from then on—even though the League was comprised of roughly sixty members.

The term "lack of visible leadership" should not be taken in the crude sense that individual EB members were never seen by the membership. Due to the priorities which they assigned to plant organizing, General Baker and Chuck Wooten, for example, were among those most accessible to the rank-and-file on a day-to-day basis; other EB members could usually be

located at the various League offices which they supervised. (Though there were some who spent almost as much time in Europe as they did in Detroit, or whose job responsibilities or personal temperaments tended to prohibit regular interaction with general membership.)

But even where leadership was highly visible, it was not always responsive. There was a very acute problem (to be discussed shortly) of members not getting any guidance as to how they should carry out assigned tasks. Even in matters of ideology or information about the League, different EB members had different positions and it was not clear to members what "the League's position" was on a number of important issues: Was the LRBW a mass organization seeking to organize the greatest number of people around general issues, with a hope of eventually becoming a more selective group of "professional revolutionaries?" Or was it already in fact that more selective group with a strategy for taking political power? What would be the League's eventual relationship to white workers or to other people of color within the United States? Would it become an "integrated" revolutionary political party, or was there envisioned some sort of federation which would seek to unite all nationalities around revolutionary issues? Such questions had as many answers as there were EB members.

Finally, the problems of leadership were reflected in the inability of the organization to coherently resolve day-to-day difficulties which regularly surfaced in financial or disciplinary areas: numerous problems either went unresolved or received partial and unsatisfactory solutions because there was no visible chain of command within the leadership structure to which aggrieved parties might appeal.

The closed quality of the EB manifested itself as well in the failure of political education among the membership—here, not so much in the sense of formal classes as in the general lack of internal political discussion: the *collective reflection* of the

rank-and-file on their own political activities. For example, the political development of the Executive Board itself had been nurtured by the experiences of its individual members prior to the RUM and LRBW formations, the sharing of these experiences in regular EB sessions, as well as the collective reflection of this body on League tactics and strategies in progress.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, although open, political discussions among the general membership sometimes occurred, such were left to the "laws" of chance: no *structure* existed whereby leadership could communicate its concrete political experiences to the rank-and-file, nor was any formal mechanism developed in order that the organization might collectively and systematically analyze itself.

Formal political education fared little better. The fundamental problem here, I believe, was a failure on the part of instructors to relate the subject matter to the existing political level and needs of those attending classes. For example, the principle staples of League internal education were the philosophical essays of Mao Tse-Tung ("On Practice" and "On Contradiction," among others). For those living outside China, one difficulty in teaching from these works lies in Mao's exclusive use of Chinese historical references for illustrative purposes. Black workers who possessed meager historical background in regard to their own struggles, whose political sophistication was only beginning to develop, and who had

6. It should be noted, however, that the internal discussions and debates within the EB tended to center around *pragmatic* questions bearing on strategies and tactics rather than the more basic political-ideological underpinnings of the former. Given the fragile unity of the EB from the very beginning, such political discussions might very well have resulted in a miscarriage of the LRBW at its moment of conception. But that remains an academic matter: fundamental political divisions resulted in the eventual fracturing of the EB anyway.

little time to devote to studies in the first place, simply could not maintain an interest in material which seemed so remote from their own needs. Later efforts were made to correct some of the most glaring deficiencies of the internal education program, but basic difficulties remained.

Similar to its allowing internal political education to seek its own level was the general failure of the EB to provide *particular guidance* to members in the carrying out of organizational tasks. An example is the LRBW newspaper, the *Inner City Voice*. The EB had actually come together around the paper, which began publication after the 1967 rebellion. Once the *ICV* became the official voice of the League, it should have been accorded their greatest attention. But the EB concentrated on other projects and essentially abandoned the newspaper by turning it over to a new, committed, but untrained staff.

It is true that formal journalism classes ended in failure partly because of the narrow nationalistic attitudes on the part of the incoming staff. But the fact that they regarded the classes as futile exercises in "white journalism" and that they received little guidance in the actual gathering and writing of news in the field, also suggests that insufficient efforts were made to relate such training to League members' actual needs and political outlooks.

Another example occurred after the first general meeting of the LRBW in mid-1970, when several plant workers were assigned the tasks of organizing Detroit's east- and west-side black communities. Though lacking prior experience, the two workers, after having been assigned funds and told to look for office space, were simply instructed by the EB to "organize." With neither guidance nor prior experience to draw upon, projects such as these were destined to fail. (Fewer difficulties existed with training of a purely technical nature, such as the development of printing and typesetting skills among the membership.

The "hermetic" nature of the EB was manifested in its

relative self-dependency and its monopoly of organizational skills, information, and political expertise. All this, contrasted to the behavior of a number of undisciplined, politically unsophisticated personnel whom EB itself recruited into the LRBW, eventually tended to create in the minds of many upper-ranking leaders the idea that the EB alone constituted the League. This apparent self-deception contributed to attitudes of arrogance and contempt which some EB members exhibited at times in regard to the rank-and-file.

The flow of discussion from the floor during organizational meetings, for example, was effectively curtailed not only because of a basic lack of political self-confidence among the general membership, but also by a justifiable fear on their part of being subjected to ideological terrorism. They risked stepping into scenes like courtroom proceedings, with the EB "prosecution" fervidly attempting to unnerve a "hostile witness." Given the shortcomings of political education and the very real lack of coordinated political discussion within the organization as a whole, the fact that political sophistication remained the "property" of the EB while the general membership remained in relative political ignorance, should come as no surprise.

The result was that at the very top level, the League was nominally a "Marxist-Leninist" organization; middle to lower echelons assumed the character of mass organization which generally deferred to the EB in matters of Left politics, but whose cohesiveness for the most part derived from a shared nationalist sentiment and within that context, a specific commitment to the struggles of black workers.

### Evolution and Decline of the Central Staff

An attempt to rectify some of the organizational problems and create a "second-line" leadership beneath that of the EB was the "expanded Central Staff." First discussed in

November 1969, the Central Staff idea was written into the 1970 League program. In contrast with the Executive Board, which had the responsibility of formulating policy, the Central Staff (CS) was to function mainly as the "implementation arm" of the LRBW. It was to consist of the "heads of committees and representatives of lower organizations."

The CS first convened on August 22, 1970. Save for the EB, not one of the thirty or so persons present at this meeting had asked to be there: they had simply received letters stating that their attendance was required. Further, though the CS was to represent the "implementation arm" of the League, and though some did play leading roles in the plant, community, and publishing components, its members apparently had not been chosen with any political criterion in mind. CS members were no more politically experienced or aware than most League rank-and-file. Consequently, this first CS gathering was a poor one indeed. If the CS was to be the place where "second-line" leadership was to emerge, it was clear at that point that the League was in trouble.

A second meeting was called some three months later, and then only after one of the more politically conscious CS members began pressuring for it. Because there were so many issues to be discussed, it was decided that a CS "retreat" should be held December 19-20, with reports to be submitted by various persons. (The sole EB member to volunteer for the "retreat" planning committee attended not a single one of its meetings.)

The December "retreat" opened with a report by EB member Mike Hamlin, who attempted to place the principal contradiction within the LRBW on a *quantitative* footing. There existed two trends within the League, according to Hamlin. Certain people, who wanted to proceed at a rapid pace, advocated continual expansion and involvement in more activities and struggles; others desired to proceed more slowly, concentrating on one aspect of the struggle at a time.

Hamlin affirmed that he was one of those who represented the first tendency; espousing the need for 24-hour-a-day struggles, he felt that individual black revolutionaries should, for example, be completely "interchangeable" with their Vietnamese counterparts then battling against U.S. imperialism. Hamlin, moreover, was pained to think that the LRBW had to take time away from life-and-death struggles in order to discuss organizational problems. He indicated that if the League were involved in continuous struggle against the enemy, organizational difficulties would cease to exist.

Shola Akintolaya and myself, on the other hand, viewed the LRBW's main contradiction as that existing between the *concrete political tasks* which the League had mandated itself to carry out, and the *actual organizational structure* which in our estimation, stifled the effective completion of such tasks.<sup>7</sup> We viewed the *central political task* of the LRBW as the organizing of black workers in general, and the developing of working-class political cadre in particular; second, we saw the *central organizational task* as the reconstruction of the Central Staff in order to lay the basis for working-class leadership and control of the League. The numerous organizational problems, we reasoned, either resulted from or were reinforced by the existing structure.

Even the unimplemented paper structure in the program was rooted in an anti-Marxist division of tasks which would effectively relegate the practice of mental labor to the EB,

7. Akintolaya and I had first met one another, as well as General Baker and Luke Tripp, on a student trip to Cuba in 1964. We renewed our friendship in 1969 when both of us were living in New York City. En route to a UAW convention in Atlantic City in early 1970, General Baker recruited us into the LRBW. Initially we were unaware of the existence of factions among League leadership; as the drama of League internal politics unfolded in our minds, we lent our political support to the Baker-Wooten forces, whom we believed to be correct in their stressing of plant organizing activities. By late fall

manual labor to the CS. In other words, the proposed structure called for a division between those who would conceptualize League policy, and those who would carry it out. Second, there were members of the EB itself who possessed no concrete, spelled-out responsibilities; their activities, rather, were more or less spontaneously determined according to circumstances. (Which is not to say that many EB members were "non-functional," but that their activities were neither integrated, coordinated, nor channeled *structurally* in accordance with the role that a leading body of this sort must play within a revolutionary organization.) Third, the unimplemented structure contained no effective guarantee for workers' control of a workers' organization. Most importantly, we argued, the League, in its own pragmatic way, was attempting to appropriate the structure of both a vanguard party and a mass organization *at the same time*.<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, the LRBW had failed to show itself to be a true "cadre" organization (seen as a formative stage of a Leninist vanguard party). Without an effective political education program, there was no way in which the League could ever become a formation of "professional revolutionaries." Moreover, "democratic centralism," the organizing principle behind the Leninist concept of revolutionary party, was haphazardly imposed by the EB—and then only from the "centralist" side.

On the other hand, the hierarchical structure of the League had actually robbed the organization of some of the

of 1970, when it had become clear that the EB was hopelessly deadlocked, we suggested to Baker and Wooten that they continue to struggle for this policy within the EB, while we would mount pressure from without. But we had no agreement or discussion with them about the form that our pressure would take.

8. See note at end of chapter for a discussion of the dilemma that these forms—mass organization and vanguard party—are attempts to deal with, and of their meaning in the Leninist tradition.—ed.

most positive attributes of a mass organization: internal democracy, spontaneity, and the consequent ability to efficiently resolve organizational problems. Finally, workers and students, according to the League program, were not able to join the LRBW merely on the basis of their demonstrated willingness to struggle around concrete social issues, but were first required to commit themselves ideologically to Marxism. Such a measure could only hinder future mass organizing efforts by the League.

Thus within the revolutionary political forest of 1970, the LRBW could be counted as neither flora nor fauna, although it had begun to exhibit remarkable vegetative characteristics!

In concluding, we called for: the reconstitution of the LRBW into two structures—a cadre (pre-party) formation on the one hand, mass organizations (RUM groups, Black Student United Front, Parents and Students for Community Control, the community organization UNICOM, etc.) on the other hand; dissolution of the Executive Board; and reconstitution of the Central Staff on the basis of concrete participation of its members in LRBW mass organizations. Admittance to the League's mass organizations would require only demonstrated willingness to struggle against prevailing social and political conditions; such mass organizations would project no strict doctrinal line. On the other hand, admission to the League's inner cadre would be much more stringent, based upon one's practice as well as effective mastery of Marxist theory. The highest body of the League, according to this plan, was to be a conference of the entire membership of the cadre organization; it was to meet every six months with the power to review decisions made by the CS during each interim period.

Not unexpectedly, the CS "retreat" was thereby plunged into a rather sharp ideological battle which lasted some twelve hours the first day, and four hours the next.

Despite the inordinate amount of time consumed in the wake of this presentation, the response of the EB proved to be quite limited. The *real* problem, reiterated the more vocal members of this body, Ken Cockrel and John Watson, time and time again, was that "people weren't doing what they were supposed to be doing," and that whatever internal difficulties the League harbored could be resolved if such people would only "implement the program." (No matter that even the best political program cannot tell one how to function on a day-to-day basis: it cannot tell one what to do when faced with a specific problem, nor how to react in a specific situation.)<sup>9</sup>

The overt response of the main body of the Central Staff to the proposed restructuring of the League, as well as the criticisms of the EB, was one of silence. Privately, many expressed solidarity with the critique; in open discussion, the same persons became tongue-tied. Ultimately, however, after the proposal had been "much cussed and much discussed," the CS as a whole voted to make itself "functional" within the existing League structure.

### Things Fall Apart

A follow-up meeting to the December "retreat" was scheduled to take place January 16, 1971. CS members were to have reported the proceedings of the December gathering to

9. This lack of response to the specific criticisms and suggestions caused an impasse, in which further discussion was impossible. Cockrel responded to the expressed need for particular guidance in daily work only by saying he "didn't have time to be holding motherfuckers' (people's) hands." Watson explained that the League had to call itself "Marxist-Leninist" to distinguish itself from existing black reformist organizations. In regard to restructuring, he said the EB "was not about to turn over resources which it had spent years collecting."



their respective components, engaged all members of these components in collective discussions, and then reported their conclusions back to the CS. But on the eve of January 16 the EB cancelled the scheduled meeting. Believing that the EB's decision to stay the Central Staff gathering was based on a fear of criticism by the membership, several CS members decided to act by holding the scheduled meeting anyway.<sup>10</sup>

The meeting was held, but under confusing circumstances: some CS members, hearing only of the cancellation, did not attend; others participated only because they were unaware of the EB's decision; and still others attended in open defiance of what they considered to be an arbitrary and damaging decision on the part of the leading body. Chuck Wooten, the only EB member to participate, excused himself halfway through the proceedings with the remark that he would "fight out any differences he had with the EB, within the EB itself."

The week which followed was one of uncertainty. A "reprimand" meeting of the CS was held January 23, where the communications secretary was castigated by the EB for refusing to notify CS members of the cancellation, and CS members in general were put on alert that further actions of this sort "would not be tolerated."<sup>11</sup> The once-lively internal political discussions which had been sparked by the December

10. Chuck Wooten initially agreed with this assessment of the reason for the cancellation. Both he and Baker were absent from the EB meeting which had made the decision—Baker was out of town, and Wooten could not be contacted in time. The EB's stated reasons for cancellation were not all convincing to some CS members who viewed its failure to set a new convening date as an ominous sign.

11. Apparently as a balance to the harsh tone of the meeting, John Williams announced an "incentives" plan which would single out for recognition members who had accomplished exemplary work. But his comparison of this program to the toilet training of infants, where

CS meeting now came to an end, replaced by less stimulating rumors of possible splits as well as membership decisions to side with whatever faction controlled the most League real estate.

Splitting the League was the very thing that its small handful of "reformers" wanted to avoid at all costs. We pushed for radical structural changes within the organization in order to establish some degree of workers' political control internally and thereby return the League to its stated interim task of plant organizing. But we did so on the assumption that the organization would be able to tolerate principled political dissent within its ranks. We did not agitate among the membership for support for our action, sensing that any attempt along these lines would result in the fracturing of the League.

Meanwhile, the EB had decided on its own plan for restructuring the LRBW. Rather than convene a general meeting to openly thrash out the issues point by point, the leading body sought instead to gauge membership loyalty by means of what one irreverent soul termed a "revolutionary Gallup poll." On February 11 a mimeographed questionnaire was sent by the EB to all League members requesting "confidential" information: "state your commitment to the League from the standpoint of priority, i.e., does it rank first or fifth, in relation to other priorities, i.e., job, family, school, or other aspirations and commitments." And so on ... only a few members chose to respond to this "dialogue."

In March, a general meeting was held in which some EB members spoke of the "disrespect for leadership and authority" in the CS, and others directed their remarks mainly to upcoming organizational activities; none addressed the role of the Central Staff or organizational structure in general. Shortly thereafter, and despite the fact that there had been no

rewards are given by parents for appropriate "potty behavior" provoked further anger.

political “unrest” within the LRBW for several months, the EB unanimously voted to expel seven members from its ranks, of whom only four had really been active in attempting to change the organization’s structure: several, Akintolaya and myself included, were specifically charged with “insubordination;” spouses were purged because they constituted “security risks.”

The “Easter purges” and the events leading to them produced an effect on the LRBW which no one could have anticipated. Principled criticisms of the organization, as well as measures designed to address its fundamental problems, had been offered; the only “counter” which the EB could find in its political repertoire was that of “hard-line” policy. The effects of that policy on the rank-and-file as well as on the EB itself constituted the *immediate* causes leading to the break-up of the LRBW.

### We Will Take the Hard Line

While the majority of the League rank-and-file loyally supported the EB in all organizational matters—including the expulsions—within a period of only two months following the latter event, that support had fully evaporated. From April through mid-June, 1971, the League met in a full body at least every two weeks, and sometimes weekly—an unprecedented event. Prior to this time, the leadership was not always accessible to the general membership; now the strengths and weaknesses of the EB could be regularly viewed by all. And with the EB’s “hard line” in effect, the rank-and-file began to sense more and more that they had little control indeed over the affairs of the organization. Moreover, they were forced to see the extreme arrogance and verbal pomposity of several EB members, which only heaped insult upon injury. The result was that workers and students within the organization met during the second week in June to formulate demands for greater worker representation on the Executive Board—one

of the very proposals which had surfaced in the December CS meeting.

On yet another front, the “hard line” was having its effect on relations within the EB as well, with Wooten and Baker—the EB members closest to the in-plant organizing—singled out for attack. Their base, the Cortland Street Office in Highland Park, was indeed often in filthy condition and the scene of abusive treatment of women and generally uncomradely behavior. But to place matters in a slightly different perspective, it should be noted that those who had been previously expelled from the League for their internal political activities had also been Baker supporters. (Baker backed these expulsions out of a desire to “preserve the unity” of the EB.) Outvoted on the issue of new expulsions for disciplinary reasons (which were necessary, but which would have cut even more into their constituency) as well as a decision to close down the Cortland Street office, Baker and Wooten resigned from the League on June 11, the day before the next scheduled general meeting. In order not to undermine rank-and-file political momentum, Baker and Wooten did not broadcast the fact of their resignation.

Meanwhile, anticipating strong opposition from the EB, the workers and students who were preparing to make demands for greater representation practiced their debating skills, one by one, far into the next morning; onlookers, intending that such skills be properly tempered, hooted them down with derisive shouts. Ultimately, the charges of the rank-and-file against the EB were registered on a tape recorder.

But at the general meeting of LRBW on June 12 (which must have appeared rather surreal to participants) League protagonists unfortunately lost the will to speak and instead confronted the remaining EB members with the *previously taped* demands for three workers’ “slots” on the leading body. Following a brief intermission, John Watson returned from his caucusing with Hamlin and Cockrel to inform the organi-

zation that workers could have not only three seats, but *all* of them—Hamlin, Cockrel, and Watson were leaving the LRBW. To the tune of a few tears and numerous jeers, thus effectively ended the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

That August the Black Workers' Congress—originally conceived as a national body in which the League would play a leading role—became an independent organization with Cockrel, Watson, Hamlin, and James Forman at the helm. The BWC replicated many of the errors of the League. The initial unity of its leadership was forged in the final battles with League members; as such, it proved to be a very fragile one. Moreover, without the mass upsurge which had initially brought the League into being, it was but a matter of time before the BWC itself would experience a number of purges, resignations, and ultimate collapse.

The remaining and greatest portion of the League at first toyed with the idea of reconstituting itself along more nationalistic lines as a mass organization.<sup>12</sup> But in September it decided instead to fuse with a pre-party organization called the Communist League, whose initial base was in southern California. That organization is now the Communist Labor Party.

The collapse of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was more than just another knot in a long string of political disappointments over the past decade; happily, it has

12. Meanwhile, Baker and Wooten rejoined the League, and the victims of the "Easter purge" were invited back—by mail, of course—into the organizational fold. At a meeting held partly for this latter purpose, the "purgees" expressed a desire to return, but only on condition that the body entertain a full discussion of the events which led to the ousters. Although some LRBW members—Luke Tripp, John Williams, and General Baker among them—strongly supported that provision, the measure was voted down in a heated debate.

left a certain positive legacy for the present. Most importantly, small groups of black workers throughout the country, impressed by the League's example of organization and political direction (though largely unmindful of details), persist in seeking solutions to the problems of economic exploitation in general as well as domination by existing union leadership.

In Detroit itself, "wildcat" strikes led by black workers have continued. And in Michigan's electoral arena where, as elsewhere, personalities tend to predominate over concrete issues, two former LRBW leaders have attempted to inject more profound debates into the formal political process. Recently, General Baker ran for the office of state representative from a district including Highland Park, which he lost. Somewhat more successful in his own political career, Ken Cockrel is presently a Detroit City Councilman. It is perhaps too soon to tell what kinds of differences—if any—successful candidacies will make in regard to the overall process of political change.

### What Can Be Done

In the latter 1960s activist-oriented New Left and Black Power organizations worshipped at the twin shrines of anti-intellectual tradition in the United States: *historical amnesia* and *pragmatism*. Pragmatism, of course, has had a long-standing past in this country; on the other hand, the present historical rupture in both black and white progressive tradition is rooted mainly in the abrupt decline of the left in the World War II and immediate post-war eras. Now, as a recipient of the radical, working-class milieu which began in Detroit during the 1930s, the League of Revolutionary Black Workers—its leadership, at least—had a much better sense of its historical antecedents and of its role in history than many. By way of contrast, it was the consummate pragmatism of the

League which I consider to have been the greatest short-coming in its practice.

In 1967 the people who were to eventually comprise the dominant leadership of the LRBW came together for the practical purpose of organizing the popular, insurrectionary sentiment of Detroit's black working-class. Some of these people had, from time to time, worked together politically since the early 1960s; sharp ideological disputes had split them before. But in 1967 such divisions *seemed* tiny compared to the vast wave of popular upheaval which had to be given coherent form. By 1969 some of these same disputes would surface again, to the detriment of the LRBW in particular, and the movement in general: score "one" for pragmatism.

With the formation of the League in early 1969 came the arrival of funds from the Black Economic Development Conference, and the resulting proliferation of LRBW offices and activities. BEDC (along with funding from private sources) proved to be the "windfall" which made expansion of the League possible. The immediate availability of monies, however, tended to stifle plans for securing long-range financial backing from the constituency the League purported to represent; the only plan to surface in this regard—the International Black Appeal—was based on the expediency of company "checkoff" procedures rather than direct solicitation. Similarly, financial arrangements between various LRBW enterprises operated on the principle of "robbing Peter to pay Paul," with predictably chaotic consequences. Expansion of League activities and facilities followed no coherent, overall plan, but tended to mirror the ideological divisions on the Executive Board as well as the purely personal inclinations of leading individuals. Pragmatism triumphant! And, finally, the selection of "bodies" by leadership for the purpose of their carrying out specific assignments was also of a highly pragmatic nature.

To be sure, League leadership can hardly be held responsible for every political misstep within the organization. Nor can the source of the LRBW's internal difficulties always be traced to the altar of pragmatic spontaneity. Problems of structure became so thoroughly intertwined with those of negative personal behavior on the part of leaders and followers alike, as to make it quite difficult to determine which was the greater culprit. But with a structure properly attuned to the tasks at hand, at least some of the more glaring deficiencies of behavior could have been checked. Had that been accomplished, the League would have been in much better shape to deal with larger political questions. Since that was not done, the organization was ultimately faced with the spectacle of workers attempting to gain control over their very own organization—a situation which had to appear all the more ironic, since it was that very same situation in the established unions which had initially led them to join in the founding of the Revolutionary Union Movement.

The collapse of the Black Power and New Left movements in the late 1960s and early 1970s left a number of bitter recollections in the minds of many participants. Those who were psychologically geared to resist anticipated government repression were far less prepared to accept the human failings of the organizations to which they belonged: the innumerable splits, petty maneuvers, and poor judgments which, in retrospect, might have been avoided. Rather than reflect more deeply on these failings in order to avoid their repetition in future upheavals, far too many political "refugees" of the period, it seems, either cast their lot with self-assuring, sectarian political organizations, or withdrew altogether into personal cocoons—not to mention "born-again" Christendom. But escape in whatever form is a diversion most of us can ill afford today. With little but long-term social stagnation in sight among the advanced capitalist nations, our situation

appears ominous indeed. The preceding account of the decline of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, though highly critical and fraught with negative examples, may nonetheless end on a optimistic chord: with adequate reflection and study in the process of improving the quality of our lives, we *can* and must do better.

## Notes

### 1. Class and National Consciousness

Without dwelling on all the essential nuances at this point, let me define *class consciousness* as the *collective* consciousness of a given social class in regard to its objective interests, as well as an understanding of the historical role which that class must exercise in order that its interests might properly safeguarded. In a parallel manner, *national consciousness* is here defined as in the above, with the substitution of "nation" or "national minority" for "social class." The ensemble of human relations which defines the social structure of the United States, gives rise *simultaneously* to elements of both national consciousness and proletarian class consciousness among black laborers. The two tendencies are far from being mutually exclusive in all aspects—e.g., black workers in differing locales and at different periods have certainly been conscious not only of their interests as workers, but as *black* workers. Nevertheless, one or the other tendency appears to predominate at any given time depending on regional or national conditions.

Historically conditioned by racist oppression—the most visible aspect of a social formation, as Frantz Fanon once noted—and cutting across class lines within the national black community, Afroamerican nationalism in the United States has come to acquire a distinctly "racial" character. The phenomenon may be contrasted to the predominance of language and cultural questions within French-Canadian nationalism, for example, or to religious forms of nationalist expression among Irish Catholics in their divided homeland. The positive aspects of Afroamerican nationalism—as that of the nationalism of any oppressed people—resides in its celebration of national pride (not to be confused with chauvinism) in its motion

towards political self-determination. Generally speaking, such nationalism remains a formidable weapon in the struggle against exploitation and domination.

But not *all* expressions of nationalism on the part of the oppressed are necessarily helpful. Under the leadership of the black "middle class," for example, popular manifestations of nationalism have, on numerous occasion, been diverted into escapist channels or utilized as a mechanism for mass support of private black business enterprise. But an even more critical tendency—since its manifestation undercuts the possibility for uniting the U.S. working class as a whole—is that of nationalist distrust of all whites: a situation difficult for even black workers to avoid when faced with trenchant, racist attitudes and practices on the part of white laborers themselves. Here the *main* (but not the sole) burden for eradicating such divisions necessarily lies with the whites.

Historically, then, from at least the late 19th Century until today, there has existed a recurring tension between national consciousness and a more fleeting working-class consciousness on the part of black laborers. In part, the degree to which white workers have been willing to demonstrate, in concrete ways, their support for the demands of black labor—demands, incidently, which represent the cutting edge of U.S. working-class interests as a whole—appears to be an important factor in the predominance of either nationalist or class consciousness among black workers at any given time. (Though far from constituting the only factors involved, might there be some correlation between the following historical phenomena?: the exclusion of black labor from craft unions, eruption of race riots, and the rise of mass-based nationalist organizations such as Marcus Garvey's UNIA during the World War I era; the efforts expended to organize blacks into the CIO during the latter 1930s, on the one hand, and the rise of working-class consciousness and parallel decline of nationalism among that same strata, on the other; the collapse of white working-class support in regard to the struggles of black labor during World War II, and the re-emergence of mass-based, Afroamerican nationalism epitomized by the growth of A. Philip Randolph's March on Washington Movement; and, finally, the hostility or relative indifference of most white laborers to the Civil Rights demands of blacks in the Fifties and Sixties, and the unprecedented burgeoning of popular expressions of black nationalism in that latter decade.)

## 2. Mass Organization and Vanguard Party

In order to effect fundamental social change, one must be able to draw upon the broadest possible range of mass political experiences. A revolutionary organization must therefore be able to provide room for spontaneous and creative political experimentation on the part of its mass following. Aimless and non-reflective experimentation leads nowhere, however, and for that reason, as well as for its own sake, the greatest expression of participatory democracy on the part of the basic masses must be encouraged. On the other hand, faced with the immense resources and power of organization which an oppressive ruling strata has in its control over the state apparatus, a tightly structured and centralized organization is also indispensable to the revolutionary political tasks at hand. Thus, in the present epoch, one of the most critical organizational problems for revolutionaries lies in fusing the practical necessities of internal democracy with the equally necessary qualities of centralism.

In attempting to tackle this complex problem, New Left groups in the U.S. have, for the most part, blindly followed the dictates of V.I. Lenin's celebrated 1902 essay, "What Is To Be Done." Basing his concept of the "vanguard party" on the highly questionable assumption that revolutionary class consciousness on the part of workers could not derive from the trade-union struggles in which they themselves engaged, Lenin thereby assumed that such consciousness had to be "imported" from the outside by professional revolutionaries. Briefly put, the party, to be comprised of a tightly knit group of revolutionary intellectuals, is to embody the principle of "democratic centralism." Political decisions are to be exercised democratically, but once made are to be absolutely binding on all party members.

Within the Leninist framework the contradiction between centralism and democracy is to be resolved thusly: mass organizations (trade unions and the like) are to be organized around the principle of democracy; in order to assure maximum political effectiveness, the vanguard party is to be organized around that of democratic centralism. In "normal" times, the principle of democracy would override that of centralism; in times of crisis, the roles would reverse themselves, with centralist tendencies held at a premium.

In the absence of a strong and independent workers' movement, however—as our own New Left experience clearly demonstrated—

self-anointed "vanguards" have a tendency to degenerate into highly centralized, bureaucratic, sectarian organizations. (Moreover, New Leftists exhibit a tendency to incorrectly apply the principle of democratic centralism—with centralism generally administered in heavy doses—to *all* types of organizational structures, not just the party.) In light of the continuing failure of the Leninist party to effectively function in advanced capitalist societies, the concept itself has recently come under considerable attack. See, for example, Antonio Carlo, "Lenin on the Party," *Telos*, 17 (Fall 1973), 2-40; and Lucio Magri, "Problems of the Marxist Theory of the Revolutionary Party," *New Left Review*, 60 (March-April 1970), 97-128.

## **"Workers have to deal with their own reality and that transforms them"**

*by Martin Glaberman*

During Marty Glaberman's twenty years as an automobile worker in Detroit, he was associated with the West Indian Marxist intellectual, C. L. R. James. The group around James developed a sweeping critique of conventional trade unions. In a pamphlet entitled *Punching Out*, published in 1952, Marty argued that in a workplace where there is a collective bargaining agreement with a no-strike clause, the union representative - whether officer, full-time committeeman, or even shop steward - tends to become a cop for the boss.

In the late 1960s, Marty Glaberman conducted a class on Marxism for the executive committee of the Detroit-based League of Revolutionary Black Workers. He believes that workers will develop new organizational forms through which to express their militant solidarity and their ability to run the economy themselves. He finds examples in the Russian soviets of 1905 and 1917, the workers' councils in Hungary in 1956, and the occupation of factories by ten million French workers in 1968.

Since his retirement from industrial work Marty Glaberman has taught at Wayne State University. He has written a book on the wildcat strike movement in the automobile industry during World War II, and edited *Marxism for Our Times: C. L. R. James on Revolutionary Organization* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1999). He has also co-authored, with Seymour Faber, *Working for Wages: The Roots of Insurgency* (available from Bewick Editions, P.O. Box 14140, Detroit MI 48214).

This account is based on an interview in November 1997; a talk at a conference on "workers' self-activity" in Youngstown, Ohio, in June 1997; and an unpublished oral history.

### **C. L. R. James**

I belonged to a group around C. L. R. James. James pioneered the idea of working-class self-activity. He rejected the concept of a vanguard party and the imposition of a party line on any mass movement.

Together with many others in the group, I moved to Detroit in the early 1940s. But moving to Detroit didn't tell us what our relation to the working class should be. Without the working class, you can't do anything. Whether the working class does it, or you do it as their leaders, was ambiguous.

Bunches of middle-class kids went into factories. What did they see? They saw dumb workers. I think it was James who gave us eyes to see different things. We believed in the revolutionary capacity of the working class even though nothing was visible.

In 1956 in Hungary we were absolutely confirmed. You had a totalitarian dictatorship for ten years and then the thing blew. The whole working class, without any prior organization whatsoever, made a revolution. The same thing was true in France in 1968. Whatever organizations of the working class existed were opposed to what the workers were doing. The Socialist Party, the Communist Party, the trade unions, were all saying, "Keep this a traditional strike. Walk back and forth in front of the plant." And ten million French workers occupied their factories.

### **The Steward's Dilemma**

When I moved to Detroit, I shared the common view of radicals working in industry that we should try to become union representatives. That was why we were here, right? To become big shots in the union. So you had to go to union meetings, you had to run for union office when you got the chance.

My colleagues and I came to question these notions. I had some personal experiences.

I was a committeeman at Fruehauf in 1946. It was a relatively small plant so you didn't get off work full-time. What you got was all the time you needed for a grievance, but you had to indicate that you were working on a grievance, either researching or negotiating. I would go talk to the superintendent, and then, when we were done, he would say, "Well, you know, stay here." And he would go off to do his managing. It was clearly a bribe. I didn't have to go back

to work. I could sit in this comfortable office. But I was goddamned if I was going to do that, and have everybody looking at me. So I just went back to work.

In 1953 I was hired in the Detroit Transmission Division of General Motors. I did a very simple operation on an engine lathe. The last day of my probationary period was a Saturday in the summer. I often quit before lunch and went to the lunch room maybe five minutes early. On this day, I was called in by the foreman to be told that I was fired. I asked for my committeeman (whom I had never seen in 89 days of work) and then became witness to a remarkable exchange. I tried to tell the committeeman my side of the story, but he didn't want to hear it and simply assumed that all of the foreman's charges were valid. He and the foreman went off into the plant and I was left sitting in air-conditioned comfort, wondering what my fate was to be. They were gone an hour. Then they came back, and the committeeman informed me that if I promised not to violate the rules any more, the foreman would not fire me.

What most impressed me about this experience was the fundamental argument used by the committeeman to win my case. He said, "We (that is, plant management and the union) had a meeting a few months ago, and we agreed we couldn't run the plant without each other. What's the idea of firing this guy and then I got to come in and defend him? What you should have done, if you see him going wrong, is call me in and I put my arm around him and say, 'Hey, buddy, we don't work like that here.' I straighten him out, and you don't have a problem, and I don't have a problem."

This incident gave me some insight into my own experience as a steward and a committeeman. Suppose I entered the toilet and found a worker asleep. I could ignore him, or I could tap him on the shoulder and tell him that if he were caught there was no way I could protect his job. How was this fundamentally different from the role of a conservative union representative? I am enforcing the contract and enforcing the company rules.

### **Johnny Zupan, UAW Committeeman**

My experience with Johnny Zupan was important in shaping my views. I had a lot of respect for the guy. In fact I recruited him to the movement, and spoke at his funeral.

Zupan had come to Detroit from a town in Pennsylvania, where he worked at a zinc smelter. He had got his training and education from the chairman of his local. It was a relatively small international union and the chairman was an old Spanish anarchist. He would do things like follow the industry press. And if at any point the price of zinc went up, say, a penny a pound, the chairman would be knocking on management's door the next day asking for a comparable wage increase. He also began to organize people in the local, including Johnny, to run for political office in the town.

I think Johnny left Pennsylvania because he wanted to get into a larger milieu. He came to Detroit during the war, got a job at Ford's Willow Run plant, and very quickly became a steward and a committeeman. When Willow Run shut down at the end of the war, he was transferred to Ford Highland Park, where, again, he was active in the union and became a committeeman.

Stewards represented relatively small groups of workers, worked alongside them, and tended to be responsive to their needs. The steward represented fifty to a hundred workers whereas the committeeman represented several hundred.

The separation between worker and union official, which Zupan experienced almost from the start of his working life, but never understood, was intensified at Ford. Ford was the last of the Big Three in auto to recognize the union. When the settlement was announced it was claimed as the biggest victory of all. Ford gave the union (not the workers) all sorts of concessions to establish the union bureaucracy as a special caste in the plant. Ford was the first to establish the full-time committeeman.

The committeemen at Ford don't work. They're full time on union business. Each committeeman represents between 200 and 500 workers. The committeeman's only work is to service and administer the differences between the company's demands and the workers' resistance. Aside from that, they do nothing but sit in the committee room and have long discussions on the "backwardness" of the workers. Every time a worker goes in there, that's the atmosphere he finds. The committeeman's job is talk. Many workers refer to them as lawyers.



An ordinary lawyer will try to do the best for his client under the law. That is not the case with the committeeman. He is more a cop than a lawyer. He enforces the law. Workers have often said that what they want to know from the committeeman is what they can do, not what they can't do. But what they get is a running lecture on what the contract doesn't allow. The committeeman is the key to enforcing the contract and maintaining discipline in the plants.

Committeemen can and do leave the plant during working hours, with the company guards looking the other way. They also get the top overtime that any worker in their district gets, because a union representative has to be present if just one worker is working. Full-time status for the union committeeman, which began as a means of freeing the union representative from the pressures of management, became a means of freeing the representative from the pressure of the workers.

In the case of Johnny Zupan, there was no self-aggrandizement. There was none of this business of, "I've got to get off this machine so I'm going to run for office." Zupan was militant. He was willing to take on the establishment, willing to take on the company. It was not a question of good or bad about Johnny Zupan, but that, if you become a committeeman you have an objective role, and no matter who you are, you are an alternative bureaucrat. There's a certain objective reality to enforcing the contract that separates union officials from the rank and file. The role creates the person and how you have to function.

### **Leading from Below**

Our group made no formal decision about whether or not to run for full-time union office. I suspect the feeling would have been, there was no problem about running for union office if you were in that kind of situation, but that wasn't your object, and if you didn't run for office it didn't matter. Nobody said, "You've been there a year, how come you're not running for steward?"

I remember that we had some people in Morgantown, West Virginia. There was a big issue nationally, and John L. Lewis simply said, "We have to accept it." What this guy of ours did was to start a discussion which led to sending people to neighboring mines, and ended up in a national wild-cat. We felt proud that we could play a role in getting a massive undertaking like that under way. Our concept was not that we weren't going to be activists or we weren't going to be leaders, but it didn't have to be formal leadership.

I had an experience at Buick. There was a packed union meeting (it must have been contract time). I'm a minor figure in the opposition caucus. The president of the local, who was chairing the meeting, made a ruling from the chair. If he had his way, there was no way that opposition to the contract could be expressed. I turned to a classic union goon who was my buddy, and one of the leaders of our caucus, and said, "Look, you gotta appeal that." He didn't see why, and he let it go.

I'm sitting there, and I finally decide, "To hell with it. I'm going to do it." I appealed the ruling of the chair. The president had a couple of minutes to explain his point of view. I got up and explained my point of view. And by God, the chair gets defeated!

This kind of experience makes you feel that you are invaluable to the working class, that the workers wouldn't have done this by themselves. You have an independent power. You feel that without you, stuff wasn't likely to happen, or didn't always happen. That can be corrupting. Wow! Next thing I know I can be running for president of the goddamned local, because I beat the president in a vote of confidence on the union floor. You have to have a sense that holds you back.

There are always these narrow lines you have to walk. How do you get elected by saying, "If I get elected nothing too much is going to change"? Can you tell the voters, "I'll give you honest representation. But I'm not going to make your work pleasant. I'm not going to be able to change the contract"? That's hard to do.

My first contact with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers was through George Rawick. He was teaching at Monteith College of Wayne State University in the late 1960s. Johnny Watson and perhaps one or two other leaders of the League took classes with him. This was before DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement) was organized. Through Rawick I met these League people, and eventually I taught a class on Marxism that included the

entire executive committee of the League. There were about half a dozen people in it, all black. This was 1968 or 1969.

The members of DRUM and other groups founded by the League were alternative unionists, although they also extended their reach into the community. Their strength was that they were not a loyal opposition committed to obeying contracts and union constitutions. For the most part they did not run for office to replace the bureaucrats. They called strikes in their own name. The League's biggest successes were at Dodge Main. A decade earlier; because of the introduction of automation, there had been a wave of strikes at Dodge Main. In fact there was a joke in Hamtramck, where the plant was located, that an optimist is a Dodge worker who brings his lunch box to work. Day after day, some department would wildcat, and by the middle of the day the plant was shut down.

A little-known fact is that the first strike the League was involved in at Dodge Main was started by white women. The women were pissed off and stood at the gate to keep people out. These black dudes came by and said, "Yeah, that's cool," and they joined them and shut the plant down.

The League's attack on whites was not directed at their fellow workers. It had to do with the fact that Hamtramck is overwhelmingly Polish, and originally, the personnel in Dodge Main was overwhelmingly Polish.

The Ford Rouge in Dearborn, Dodge Main, and Buick in Flint were the three plants with foundries and heat treat. This meant that they always had a certain core of black workers, because blacks were hired (as in steel) to do the hardest, dirtiest, and most unhealthy jobs. By the late 1960s, there was probably a black majority at Dodge Main. But the executive board of the local union was still overwhelmingly Polish.

It didn't affect in-plant jobs like committeeman, because retirees couldn't vote for committeemen. But retirees could vote for president of the local. The union would send buses to bring them to the polls and outvote the people working in the plant.

DRUM ran against the UAW-backed administration at Dodge Main and lost. However, they forced the national union to take stock. The UAW wasn't going to be able to keep people in check, and stop wildcat strikes, and maintain a Polish leadership in a plant with a black majority. Within a year there was a black president of that local, but he was an administration president. They made no concessions whatever to the League.

Dodge Main was one of the multi-storied plants from the early 1900s that simply didn't work any more with automated technology. Eventually the outdated plants disappeared. I have a picture of the old Dodge Main with the caption, "Remember the Main." There's a huge square block just east of Chrysler Jefferson which is basically a parking lot. That was Hudson Motors. On Grand Boulevard, on the East Side, you come across a plant that's on both sides of the street with a walkway between. That was Packard.

In 1981 or thereabouts I went to Japan and spoke to dissident unionists in Osaka. This was when the talk was that the Japanese were wiping out the American automobile industry. I said that the problem was not Japanese competition. Packard disappeared, Hudson disappeared, Studebaker disappeared, long before there were Japanese imports. The problem was that these companies didn't have enough capital to participate in the next wave of technological change. They went down the drain.

One of the most intriguing things the League did was to take over the Wayne State University newspaper. The year before, some hippie - I think his name was Johnson - became editor of the paper and changed its name from The Collegian or some such traditional title to The South End. The "South End" meant the south end of Wayne State, which was the Cass corridor; working-class, the place where new immigrants to the city came from the South. The following year Johnny Watson became editor for two years. Johnny went to one class, which made him technically a student while working in a plant.

What they did was to print about 20,000 copies. They'd give out a thousand on campus and give the rest out at plants, and use it as an organizing tool. It was fun. I remember a masthead, "One Class-Conscious Worker Is Worth A Thousand Students." Finally the administration cracked down. Ever since, the editorial board has been restricted in what it could do, and who could be picked was restricted as well. It became a lousy paper.

The League ended in a peculiar way. They had a national convention which was no longer just auto workers. There was a demand for reparations from white churches. After that, the leadership scattered. Johnny Watson, for example, went underground. By the middle 1970s the thing was falling apart.

What forms are available to the working class? The union movement is not a force for revolutionary change. I do not think it can be transformed. Mostly workers boycott and ignore unions: they do not go to meetings, they do not vote in union elections. Occasionally they will vote a contract down. They will occasionally, but rarely, participate in opposition caucuses. Whether the workers become revolutionary or not does not depend on what the union leadership does.

This means that the course of future developments in the workplace has to be sought outside the unions. Caucuses and factions will still be built and, here and there, will have temporary and minor successes. But the explosions that are still to come are likely to have the appearance of new revolutionary forms, organizations that are not simply organs of struggle but organs of control of production.

My understanding of Marxism is that it is based on the reality of the working class. Practical tactics, whether we like it or not, have to come from that.

If I work in a GM brake plant in Dayton, Ohio I have a certain amount of power and therefore a certain amount of militancy. I go out on strike and within two or three weeks I have two-thirds of General Motors shut down. But if I work in a plant making nuts and bolts, and there are ten other plants making nuts and bolts, I'm not going to be very militant. I could shut the place down, and stay out forever; and starve to death. This little company I work for is not going to make any concessions because if they did, they could not compete.

We have to respect that. Some people say, "Oh, these workers are backward." They're not backward: they understand what's going on in the world. The point is, theory is important but it can't be imposed on workers or on particular situations.

I think self-activity is the response of working people to the nature of their lives and work. Sometimes it's good, sometimes it's bad, sometimes it's quiet. Part of the reality is that we're going through a considerable technological revolution, which means that experiences, even jobs, that people depended on and know about, begin to disappear. To expect workers to say, "Yesterday, they automated my factory; today, I know exactly what to do about it," is utopian. It takes a while. It takes a generation. Workers will learn.

And the one thing that I think is an absolute given: workers will resist, because work sucks. Until someone can tell me that work has become real nice under capitalism, whether in the United States or anywhere else, I say that is the fundamental basis of our theory and our practice. Work sucks. And sooner or later workers are going to resist it in whatever way they can.

One of the things George Rawick said is, "Unions don't organize workers. Workers organize unions." (2) Workers' self-activity does create organizations, create unions and other institutions, which may become bureaucratized and turn against the worker. Unions are not a secret plot designed to fool the workers. Workers organize them and then they get out of control.

Marx believed that the conditions of life and work of the proletariat would force the working class to behave in ways that would ultimately transform society. In other words, what Marx said was: We're not talking about going door-to-door and making workers into ideal socialists. You've got to take workers as they are, with all their contradictions, with all their nonsense. But the fact that society forces them to struggle begins to transform the working class. If white workers realize they can't organize steel unless they organize black workers, that doesn't mean they're not racist. It means that they have to deal with their own reality, and that transforms them. Who were the workers who made the Russian Revolution? Sexists, nationalists, half of them illiterate. Who were the workers in Polish Solidarity? Anti-Semitic, whatever. That kind of struggle begins to transform people.